



SOLE TO THE  
**CIRCUS**

WALL STREET JOURNAL AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**LANI LYNN VALE**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Sold to the Circus](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Other titles by Lani Lynn Vale](#)

[Blurb](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

**Chapter 21**

**Chapter 22**

**Chapter 23**

**Chapter 24**

**Epilogue**



WALL STREET JOURNAL AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LANI LYNN VALE

**Sold to the Circus**

**Val & Felix**

**By Lani Lynn Vale™**

**Text copyright © 2023 Lani Lynn Vale™**

**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 permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.

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

When I say that my mother literally does everything for me, that would be an understatement. She washes my clothes when we're out of town. She edits my books. She does the tedious parts that I literally can't stand. She makes doctors' appointments for me because I'm still a kid who doesn't like calling people. She makes my kids dinner when I don't want to. She is my sounding board. And one of my greatest friends. I wouldn't be here without her, and you wouldn't be reading this, either.

# Acknowledgments

Golden Czermak—Photographer

Karin Enders & Ink It Out Editing—My editors

Alyssa Garcia—My PA

My mom—Thank you for reading this book eight million six hundred twenty-three times.

My betas. Seriously, I don't know what I would do without you.

## **Other titles by Lani Lynn Vale**

### **The Freebirds**

Boomtown

Highway Don't Care

Another One Bites the Dust

Last Day of My Life

Texas Tornado

I Don't Dance

### **The Heroes of The Dixie Wardens MC**

Lights To My Siren

Halligan To My Axe

Kevlar To My Vest

Keys To My Cuffs

Life To My Flight

Charge To My Line

Counter To My Intelligence

Right To My Wrong

### **Code 11- KPD SWAT**

Center Mass

Double Tap

Bang Switch

Execution Style

Charlie Foxtrot

Kill Shot

Coup De Grace

### **The Uncertain Saints**

Whiskey Neat



Jack & Coke

Vodka On The Rocks

Bad Apple

Dirty Mother

Rusty Nail

**The Kilgore Fire Series**

Shock Advised

Flash Point

Oxygen Deprived

Controlled Burn

Put Out

**I Like Big Dragons Series**

I Like Big Dragons and I Cannot Lie

Dragons Need Love, Too

Oh, My Dragon

**The Dixie Warden Rejects**

Beard Mode

Fear the Beard

Son of a Beard

I'm Only Here for the Beard

The Beard Made Me Do It

Beard Up

For the Love of Beard

Law & Beard

**There's No Crying in Baseball**

Pitch Please

Quit Your Pitchin'

Listen, Pitch

### **The Hail Raisers**

Hail No

Go to Hail

Burn in Hail

What the Hail

The Hail You Say

Hail Mary

### **The Simple Man Series**

Kinda Don't Care

Maybe Don't Wanna

Get You Some

Ain't Doin' It

Too Bad So Sad

### **Bear Bottom Guardians MC**

Mess Me Up

Talkin' Trash

How About No

My Bad

One Chance, Fancy

It Happens

Keep It Classy

Snitches Get Stitches

F-Bomb

### **The Southern Gentleman Series**

Hissy Fit

Lord Have Mercy

### **KPD Motorcycle Patrol**

Hide Your Crazy

It Wasn't Me  
I'd Rather Not  
Make Me  
Sinners are Winners  
If You Say So  
**SWAT 2.0**  
Just Kidding  
Fries Before Guys  
Maybe Swearing Will Help  
Ask Me If I Care  
May Contain Wine  
Joke's on You  
Join the Club  
Any Day Now  
Say it Ain't So  
Officially Over It  
Nobody Knows  
Depends Who's Asking  
**Valentine Boys**  
Herd That  
Crazy Heifer  
Chute Yeah  
Get Bucked  
**Souls Chapel Revenants**  
Repeat Offender  
Conjugal Visits  
Jailbait  
Doin' A Dime

Kitty, Kitty

Gen Pop

Inmate of the Month

**Madd CrossFit Series**

No Rep

Jerk It

Chalk Dirty to Me

**Battle Crows MC**

Always Someone's Monster

Make Me Your Villain

Rattle Some Cages

Not A Role Model

Get Tragic

Strange and Unusual

Never Trust The Living

**Gator Bait MC**

Nobody Cares Unless You're Pretty

Good Trouble

Cute But Psycho

Annoyed At First Sight

The Voices Are Back

Special Kind of Twisted

I'll Just Date Myself

**Clown World**

Fun House

Freak Show

Show Off

Clown Motel

Sold To The Circus

Killing Booth

The Fool

## Blurb

AITA: Am I the asshole?

Five years ago when she left, she broke my heart. No warning. No hey, this isn't working out. No nothing. Just poof. One day she's there, in my bed, and we're talking about our futures. The next, she's gone.

So when she shows up five years later and acts like she didn't leave me with a broken heart, I get angry. So. Freakin'. Angry.

Of course, this is where I spiral. When we went through medical school together, we were on equal footing. Not anymore. Now I'm her attending, and I've made it my personal mission to make her life hell.

She wants to finish up her residency and finally become a doctor? Well, she'll have to go through every single bad thing I can throw at her, first.

Seeping, maggot-infested, pus-filled bed sore? Yep, that's hers to take care of. Man shitting every three seconds uncontrollably? That's also hers. Man and woman having a baby while also in the throes of a divorce? You guessed it. Hers.

If I can make her leave after what she put me through, I'll feel accomplished.

Only problem is, I forgot how determined Valhalla Singh was. Guess she'll be reminding me.

Because Valhalla wasn't named that for nothing.

# CHAPTER 1

*My pain is chronic, but my ass is iconic.  
-text from Simi to Val*

## VAL

As the eldest female Singh—although a Singh no longer after coming to the realization that our father was a child predator running a circus—now Valhalla Drew, I rarely ever got to be coddled.

But my sisters were coddling me.

“I’m fine!” I cried out, throwing my hands in the air.

My sisters, all of them—Hades, Crimson, Tony, Simi, and Zip—stared at me with knowing looks.

I blew out a breath. “Okay, I’m not fine.”

Hades laughed. “We know. That’s why you dyed your hair again.”

I did dye my hair when I was having issues. It was my form of therapy.

When I’d moved back to the circus, the first thing to go was my natural white-blonde hair. In its place was black. I’d even gotten a spray tan to even out my new appearance, started wearing makeup that accentuated my eyes, and said ‘fuck you’ to everything my ex-boyfriend left behind.

Upon learning about my dad, I’d stopped tanning, changed my hair back to its original color, and stopped wearing makeup.

It was just how I was.

I glared. Hades’s husband was rubbing off on her. No longer the quiet one of the bunch, she boldly stated her opinion, and I loved it.

Simi, one of her daughters strapped to her chest in the baby wearing contraption I’d purchased for her that I’d seen on a new mother last month at my preceptor appointment, looked at me with a speculative eye. “Are you wearing those scrubs?”

I looked down at them.



“What’s wrong with them?” I asked. “I have to wear them per hospital regulations.”

She scrunched up her nose. “Nobody said you had to wear the baggiest ones you could find. I got you those new Figs brand last week.”

She had.

They were tighter than the pants I wore to workout in.

They were cute, though.

Especially paired with the top, which was almost a tucked in number that made me look like I was wearing a bodysuit.

“Go change,” Simi ordered.

“But...”

I started to argue, but it was Zip who said, “Absolutely not, Val. Go change. We’ll get your shoes.”

I grudgingly went to my room and changed, knowing I could only wear the set of clothes once this week seeing as I only had the one pair.

When I changed, I tucked my shirt in, which actually hooked to a button inside the pants to stay in place, and headed right back out.

I’d just gotten back to the living room when Tony pointed at me. “Absolutely not. Your hair is coming out of that bun.”

I threw my hands up in the air. “I’m not putting my hair down! I’m a goddamn doctor. I’m working in the godforsaken ER. I can’t have my hair down getting in stuff that is gonna mess it up!”

Nor did I want any blood, guts, pus, piss, or shit in it.

I did okay with almost all things medicine, but getting stuff on me I couldn’t wash off wasn’t one of them.

“Okay, well get it out of the bun, then,” she compromised.

I sighed and did just that.

“You’re the prettiest of us all, you know.” Hades sighed. “Your skin, and hair, and face. It’s all so pretty and perfect that you really could go in wearing those baggy ass scrubs—which are going in the trash when you leave, FYI—and get away with it.”

“You can’t throw them away,” I said. “I just bought them.”

“You bought them from a woman who’d lost a significant amount of weight and was getting rid of them at a song,” My brother, Keene, said. “Go buy some more of what you’re wearing.”

I squinted at him. “What are you doing here?”

He gestured toward the donuts on the counter. “Heard there were going to be donuts.”

My sisters, knowing how nervous I was to go back, had planned an intervention that was supposed to relax me before I went into my first shift as an ER doctor.

I had exactly three to seven years—once I picked my specialty—before I became what I’d truly always wanted to be—despite my father’s almost blind promise that I wouldn’t accomplish it.

The day he’d died, it was like he’d set his plans into motion, and I couldn’t break free of them.

But sometime last year, when we’d decided that the circus life wasn’t what we all wanted to do for the rest of our lives, I’d finally started to consider something more than just being a fortune teller in the circus.

I could be what I wanted to be.

*You can do anything you want to do, Valhalla. You’re your own worst enemy. Stop living life for others, and live life for yourself.*

The words of an ex-boyfriend, one that I still very much loved with all my heart, felt like a cold hard slap in the face each time I considered how I’d left things with him.

It'd been years, and the heartache I felt in my chest when I thought of him felt like someone had rammed a fire poker deep into my chest and twisted it.

If there was one person in this world who I loved with my whole heart, more than each of my sisters and brother, more than anything in the world, it was Felix Kent.

Now Dr. Felix Kent.

He was the light to my dark, the sunrise and the sunset. The best damn thing that'd ever happened to me, that my dad helped me throw away.

“Are you lost, sweets?”

I looked up to see Keene staring at me with a look of sadness on his face.

Keene was the lone person who knew what I'd left behind when I'd agreed to abandon my medical career. He'd done much the same, leaving behind a military career that he adored, just so we could make this circus thing work.

Yet again, one last fuck you from our father to continue to make our lives a living hell.

Well, he couldn't accomplish that anymore.

Keene and I would no longer let him.

I'd ruined the best thing I'd ever had because of my father; I wouldn't let him take my career away, too.

“These shoes,” Simi said as she came up with a red pair of New Balance shoes with animal print accents. “Good?”

I nodded, then sat down on the couch and slipped into them.

“I'll get you more of these while you're at work today,” Zip called out as she fingered my scrub top. “You look great, Val. You'll love it.”

I hoped so.

I really, really hoped so.

I left with a bag of donut holes in my backpack.

I had no intentions of eating them.

I was too nervous.

Like first day of school, I'm about to have my world shatter right in front of me nervous.

I didn't worry that I wasn't smart enough to finish up my residency so I could become the doctor I always wanted to be.

Truthfully, that had never been my issue—academics.

What had been my issue was social interaction of any kind.

Which was hilarious considering what I did for our family circus.

I was the tarot card, palm reader, and bullshitter extraordinaire.

How did I become that when I was a social interaction avoider, you ask?

My father, the mean bastard that he was, knew every one of his children's weaknesses.

He'd seen mine the moment that I turned eleven and had balked at schmoozing with the crowd of eleven hundred people while they fixed technical issues backstage. From that moment on, he'd gone out of his way to make me as uncomfortable as he could, and that equaled me doing the tarot card reading at first. Then the palm reading, and shortly after, the woo-woo whatever that people just loved to experience.

From that moment on, anything and everything that had to do with the circus had become one of those mandatory jobs that felt like you were in a repetitive car wreck you couldn't ever correct.

Each night after a show, I would leave exhausted and drained.

What extroverted people didn't understand was that introverted people had a meter just like them. Where their

meter went up with social interaction, introverted people's went down. And once we were out, we were mentally and physically exhausted. There would be no coming back once we hit our limit.

I knew today was about to be very hard.

I just didn't understand how hard.

Not until I walked through the doors and went in search of the man who would be my attending for the foreseeable future.

Initially, my entire life goal was to become a pediatric doctor. Felix's had been to become an ER doc.

I'd always given him shit about all the originality he had.

But as I was trying to force myself to come back to this life—being out of the game was terrifying—I'd channeled Felix. Going through medical school, he'd been my ultimate supporter. The one person I could count on no matter what. The person who encouraged me, pushed me, and ultimately let me go because he knew that I would be better off without him.

I'd thought maybe that was what I needed. To be close to him. And what better way to do that than to become an ER doctor like him—I'd followed his life until I couldn't stand crying every hour on the hour anymore and let him go—and maybe a little bit of his confidence and support would reach me vicariously through the ghost of who he used to be to me.

Though, he'd suddenly switched his specialty half-way through his residency, going from neuro to the ER. I was just happy he'd chosen his original path, but that'd been the last time I looked him up.

I stopped on the way to the ER and dropped off five dozen donuts for the nurses and doctors I was about to be working with and headed for my new life.

I'd just breached the door to the room I was supposed to be meeting my attending—along with a few other residents—when I saw it.

Nothing, and I do mean nothing, could've shocked me more than to walk in and see Felix, my ex-boyfriend, standing there with another woman.

## CHAPTER 2

*My living room would look better with a Christmas tree in it.  
-Val's secret thoughts*

## VAL

### *Then*

Introverts don't make friends. Either one of two things happen.

One, they sit in their little bubble by themselves for their whole life or two, an extrovert adopts them.

That was what Felix was to me. An adoptive extrovert.

On day one of medical school, he'd taken one look at me and had all but swept me under his wing like that was where I'd been all along.

"What's your name?" He flashed me a grin.

I'd noticed Felix Kent on the first day of school.

He'd sat in the back like all other social people did, gabbing and carrying on until the teacher had called class to order.

By the time it was finished, I'd taken three front and back notebook sheets of notes and had gained a new friend.

Felix, having seen me taking such good notes, had stopped me out in the hall and asked if he could take a photo of my notes.

I'd agreed, and on that went for about a week before this moment right here.

"You don't know my name, and you've been copying my notes for a week?" I asked, outraged.

I knew everyone's names!

I even knew his middle name. Felix Alexander Kent.

And he had no clue what mine was?

"To be completely honest, I've been calling you Poppet in my head, and I keep thinking of you as that. But then I saw Valhalla written on the sign-in sheet, and I wanted to know your first name," he answered.

Poppet.



I kind of liked that.

“My name is Valhalla,” I answered. “Valhalla Drew Singh.”

He blinked. “Valhalla?”

I nodded. “Valhalla.”

“I... like it.” He flashed me a smirk. “It suits you. All that hair and Viking-esque appearance.”

I got that a lot.

That I resembled the badass woman from the *Vikings* TV show.

I even had the Nordic blue eyes. The one and only trait I was happy about receiving from my mother.

“Thanks,” I said. “It’s kind of permanent.”

He chuckled as he linked his arm with mine. “Are you going out to eat for lunch?”

I couldn’t afford to bring my lunch, let alone go out and eat. But he didn’t need to know that.

Every freakin’ time I went to school, I saw dollar signs adding up in my debt.

I knew I could put my food onto my charge account that would then be rolled onto what I owed for school loans, but that was another one of those things I didn’t see a point in.

I could deal with Ramen noodles and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for a few years.

“Uh, no,” I answered.

“Come on, you can share with me,” he said, almost as if he could sense that I wouldn’t be eating if I didn’t go with him.

I hesitated for a few more seconds, but he pulled me along, and I followed like the obedient girl that I was.

The obedient girl my father had forced me to be.

One day, I’d break free of that girl he’d made me into. But it wouldn’t be today.

•••

Lunch ended up being quite the affair.

After he'd ordered enough food for eight people—even though there were only two of us—he started to ask questions.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

I winced. “I’m not from anywhere. I actually was born in a circus and haven’t left it until about eight weeks ago when I moved up here for school.”

His brows went up. “Which circus?”

I told him about Singh Circus, and he gasped.

“I went there like every time they came to town,” he said. “My favorite act was the high wire. Do you do that?”

I snorted. “I’m too heavy to do that. And uncoordinated. My sister Zip does the tightwire. Sometimes Hades. Other times Simi. It really just depends on who’s available that day, who needs a day off, things like that.”

He nodded and the questions continued.

*Where do I love visiting?* The mountains.

*Who is my favorite actor?* I don’t have one.

*How many siblings do I have?* Six.

On and on and on until I was all talked out.

By the time we finished lunch, I had enough food to pack my fridge for a week.

And I did just that, stopping by my apartment—a little hole in the wall above a bar—to put it in the fridge.

He’d accompanied me and didn’t once say a word about my accommodations.

He did check to make sure the door was locked when we left, though.

And I knew he noticed the way the light was out in the hallway.

I studied him as we walked back to school.

Felix was tall. Like, super tall. Way taller than my five-and-a-half-foot height. If I had to guess, I would put him around six-foot-two and two hundred and ten pounds. But that was only because he was the same size as my brother. Though, that was where the resemblance to my brother ended.

He had tanned skin, black hair, and brown eyes so dark that they were almost considered black, and this feel about him that told me he would protect me no matter what.

His eyes, though, had a life to them that I'd never seen before in anyone else. An exuberance, a love for being here almost resolutely, that felt like he was pure energy. It was like warming my hands on a bonfire, but I knew if I got too close, I'd get burned.

Then again, I tried not to look too many people in the eyes.

It was easier to avoid conversations that way.

He didn't have any visible tattoos, but every once in a while, he would walk just right and the hem of his shirt would shift enough for me to catch a flash of black.

He was wearing a dark gray, almost black Henley with his hospital scrubs. I wasn't sure that was allowed, seeing as we had a strict rule of 'wear royal blue hospital scrubs only' but there he was doing it.

"What are you over there thinking about, Poppet?" he asked after an extended time of silence.

I looked over at him, studying him for a long moment, before saying, "I worked at a circus before I came here."

He blinked, then said, "So you said."

"Yeah," I confirmed.

"And you're bringing that up because..." He waited.

I smiled, and the man walking in front of me winked because he thought I was smiling at him.

I quickly averted my gaze, because I most definitely wouldn't be looking at a man twice my age who had a shirt that said 'check out my dick.'

I would've avoided that one at all costs.

"My job for the circus was—and still is I guess, since my father didn't agree to let me leave for more than it took to do my first semester—to do the whole fortune teller thing," I continued. "I got really good at reading people."

I could feel him looking at me when he said, "Okay."

"There were always these people, ones who sparkled more than the others, who had a way of drawing people into their orbit." I continued.

He was about to say something more, but I kept talking.

"You give off this vibe. Like you're the sun, and all the rest of us are just orbiting around you, drawing off of your energy."

He snorted. "I don't really agree with that."

I looked over at him and let him see the honesty in my words. "I don't think there's a single person in class who wouldn't have been falling over their feet to go eat with you today for lunch. Why me?"

"Ah." He nodded. "Well, I guess I'd have to say that you intrigued me. You came in that first day, took the seat farthest away from everyone. Listened and learned. Walked out like you had something better to do. I guess that's one of my faults. I just want everyone to like me. And every time I talked to you, I felt like maybe you wanted to squash me like a bug."

I offered him a small smile. "More like, you were making everyone pay attention to me, and that's an introvert's worst nightmare."

"Ahh." He nodded again. "I understand."

We kept walking, and we were right around the corner from the school when the first drop of rain fell from the sky.

I stopped and looked up, doing what I'd always done in a rainstorm, and waited for the next drop.

I didn't know why I did it. I just did.

It drove my family insane, because they always had to wait for me to feel that second rain drop before I could leave.

Sometimes it never even happened, and we'd be standing there for forever.

But I waited.

When I finally felt that drop a few seconds later, I started walking again.

But not before I saw the look of awareness and adoration on Felix's face.

Little did I know, he'd be okay with a lot of my quirks.

Little did he know, I'd make him love me, then be forced to leave.

## CHAPTER 3

*If you keep your house at anything higher than 75, don't invite me to your terrarium, you lizard.*

*-Pops to Felix*

## FELIX

*Now*

“What are your plans for tonight, honey?” Tammy, my best friend and charge nurse, asked.

The calmness of the day wouldn't last.

Though we'd had very little in the eyes of emergencies come through the doors, it was January, in the middle of what could be Snowmageddon, and it was only a matter of time before shit hit the fan.

It was possible I wasn't going to be doing anything tonight because we'd be stuck here due to the ice that was supposed to hit sometime midafternoon.

Or nothing at all could happen, and I could be going home to my dog and my grandpa at normal time.

With Texas weather, one never knew.

“As of right now, I don't have any plans,” I admitted, my gaze going toward the door three separate times in that small sentence alone.

Why, you ask, couldn't I keep my gaze on my friend, the polite thing to do while she was talking to me?

Because I knew something Valhalla Drew—she'd changed her name sometime since I'd last seen her—didn't.

I would be her attending.

I would be the one keeping an eye on her.

I would be the one making her life a living hell and enjoying it.

Because she'd done the same to me, I saw no reason there couldn't be fair play.

“You want to grab a burger? Pizza?” she asked, batting her eyes at me.

I ignored her eye batting and once again looked toward the ER doors. She'd be coming through them any second. Unless she was late, which would be par for the course for her.

She was always late.

Late to school. Late to her birthday. Late to the BBQ thrown by the medical students.

But one thing she wasn't ever late for was work.

It didn't matter how many times I tried to get her to skip—because hell, we only had so many days off of school—she was on time, every time. And never missed a day, not even when she was sick.

“No,” I answered honestly. “Pops needs me home.”

Pops was my seventy-eight-year-old grandfather who'd moved in with me a few months ago. My grandmother, Nonna, had died about a year ago, and I'd watched my pops go downhill very slowly, then finally decided if I didn't do something, I'd come by one day to check on him and he'd be gone.

That was why I moved him and my dog that he had been “dog sitting” for me for years, Gee, in with me.

He was very capable of being alone still. But on days like today, where the weather was fucked up and could go bad, I wanted to make sure I could get to him if I needed to. Plus, if I was there when the power went out, I would be the one to start a fire, not him.

Not saying he wasn't fully capable of it, but I hadn't had time to get any firewood inside before I'd had to leave, and that old goat would go out there and bring it inside himself if he needed to.

“Your pops is perfectly capable of taking care of himself,” Tammy pointed out. “Whoa, who's that?”

I turned only my head to see who she was talking about, and my breath froze in my lungs.



I'd seen photos of her since she'd left, of course.

But the years hadn't aged her at all.

In fact, she was even more beautiful now than when she'd left.

And she was wearing a set of scrubs that looked more like workout wear than scrubs. Definitely not her style.

She looked super uncomfortable, and she kept twisting her hair around on her finger like she wasn't used to it being there to do it with. She'd stop, place her hands down at her sides, then go right back to doing it.

A nervous habit, that was for sure.

But fuck, she was beautiful.

It fucking sucked that she was still so pretty.

The least she could've done was age, goddammit.

So I might or might not still be hung up on the woman. And I definitely hadn't told my best friend about her coming.

"That's the new baby doc," I said, acting like I was just as surprised by her appearance as Tammy was.

In all honesty, I'd known she was coming. I'd actually worked with an old friend to get her here, and in my department, under my control.

It might make me a dick, but fuck. Something needed to make her hurt the way she'd made me hurt.

It was only fair that I was the one to do it to her. Return the favor, so to speak.

"She looks like a bitch," Tammy mused.

If she only knew how much of a bitch Val came off as but in actuality wasn't.

Which only made me more annoyed.

It was just plain fuckin' sucky, all the way around.

I'd wanted her in the worst way when she'd left. I'd offered solutions. I'd offered to move with her. I'd offered to come home, then we could come back, and go back to her 'circus' any time she needed to go, just as long as she graduated and became a doctor with me.

But nothing swayed her.

And honestly, I fucking hated that I came second to a circus.

"She looks..." I hesitated, trying to find the right words. Beautiful, breathtaking, heart stopping, scared, lonely, introverted, standoffish. "Like someone who is coming to a job that's unfamiliar to her."

Tammy snorted. "It's in the way she's staring around her, like this place isn't good enough for her.

I didn't correct Tammy's notions, though.

In fact, I encouraged them.

If she wanted to be a bitch to her, well then that fit into my plans for Valhalla 'Drew.'

"She's trying too hard," Tammy muttered, crossing her arms over her chest.

Rose, the second most senior nurse in the ER, grinned wickedly at me and said, "Oh, darlin'. We're gonna get along just fine!"

Val offered a hesitant smile, and I felt it in my heart.

That smile.

Man, what I wouldn't have given to be on the receiving end of that smile two years ago.

Now it was like rubbing my heart against a cheese grater.

I gestured toward the woman who had once meant the world to me, then said to Tammy, "Bring her back to room two when you get a chance."

Then I was gone, heading toward the patient's room I'd been about to go in when Tammy had waylaid me on what I was doing for dinner.

"Aye, aye, captain," Tammy called out.

Seconds later, just before I'd gone back into the patient's room, I heard Tammy snarl.

"You can call me Nurse Wilkes," Tammy snapped.

I could just picture Val blinking at her, a deer caught in the headlights, and a note of sympathy rolled through me.

I immediately squashed it.

No, there would be no sympathy from me.

No, sir-ree-Bob.

"Mr. Fletcher," I said as I walked into the room. "What brings you in today?"

Mr. Fletcher was a sixty-two-year-old farmer who had been brought in via private vehicle by his wife. His wife said that Fletcher'd had issues all morning long and had been ignoring them until he'd fallen off his tractor and had nearly been run over by it.

Only the quick thinking of Fletcher's son had saved him from being maimed by a hay bailer.

"Well," Fletcher said. "It's not really..."

"He was having chest pains." His wife interrupted his downplay of what was happening.

The sound of the door opening behind me made my heart start to pound.

I turned only my head to find Val standing in the room, face white as a sheet, staring at me like she'd seen a ghost.

"Ah, Doctor." I nodded. "Dr. Drew, this is Mr. Fletcher. He's complaining about chest pains. What do you suggest next?"

Val looked terrified but seemed to rein it in with such force that I visibly saw her jerk.

She turned her head to survey Mr. Fletcher.

“Has his blood been taken, and has an EKG been run?” she asked.

“*Nope,*” I said, testing me. “All yours, Dr. *Drew.*”

Val looked at me with blank eyes, and I felt a twinge of remorse for letting her find out I’d be her attending like this. Then I squashed that thought, too.

Because fuck her.

Fuck Valhalla ‘Drew’ and fuck what she made me feel.

The next ten minutes let me know just how bad the torture was going to be over the next few years. That is, of course, if I continued to be her attending physician. I could leave and go back to where I’d come from.

But then Tammy would have to move with me once again. Pops would have to find a new retirement hangout. I’d have to buy another house and sell the one I was in.

“All right, Mr. Fletcher,” Val said quietly. “We’re gonna get these tests put in, and we’ll be in here ASAP.”

I waited until we were out of the room before I said, “We already ran all the tests. Twelve-lead was clean of any issues that we could see. Blood tests should be back any second.”

She stopped with her hand on the knob as she closed the door.

“Then why did you let me talk to him like I was about to do the same thing two times in a row?” she asked.

“I wanted to see what you’d do,” I said simply. “You have been out of the game for years.”

And she had.

She wouldn’t find this to be easy.

She may be a smart cookie—God, tests and studying had just come so easy for her—but you forgot when you didn't practice.

And there was no way she'd kept up with all of that as she should have.

"I'll need to see the results so I can help you with the next step," she said stiffly.

"Actually, he's mine. I'll handle everything that comes up with him. You have a case in room four that you can get started on," I suggested.

She walked away without another word, and I nearly laughed.

She'd fuckin' hate what she was about to find in room four.

"Where'd you send her?" Tammy asked curiously as I made my way back to my seat.

I did a quick check for Fletcher's blood panel but came up empty.

"I sent her to room four." I grinned.

"That's just a dick move," Rose murmured. "First day back and you're giving her that?"

'That' was actually a frequent flyer in the ER.

He was a sixty-one-year-old male who lived on the streets, and when it got too cold like it was today, he'd make up something that was wrong with him and he'd get a free night in the hospital where it was warm.

Today was no different.

He was complaining about back pain and right flank pain, but that was nothing new for him.

We'd done a smorgasbord of tests on him years ago when he first started doing this. At first, we were all convinced that he was hurt in some way—because man, could he come up with some crazy stories—but eventually we just found that he

had nothing wrong. He just wanted a place to stay and a warm meal to eat.

But he was rather... stinky.

As in, took a shit, didn't bother to wipe, hadn't taken a shower in months stinky.

And, since I knew smells *always* got to her, I felt like this was a perfect case for her.

Ten minutes later, my labs were in, and I was walking to Fletcher's room, but not before passing our frequent flyer's room first.

"And do you feel this pain when you're standing, or sitting?" Val asked him, being sure to stay as far away from the dude as possible.

I grinned as I passed, heading to Mr. Fletcher's room.

"Mr. Fletcher," I said as I walked into the room. "Your labs look great."

Fletcher muttered 'told you' to his wife, who was wearing a sour expression on her face.

"Well, almost everything," I said as I took a seat. "Your levels are a bit off. Usually, I only see this in patients who have been outside sweating a lot. But since it's so cold..."

That's when Mr. Fletcher made a groaning, laughing sound in his throat, and Mrs. Fletcher went red as a tomato.

"Uh, um," Mrs. Fletcher said.

But, of course, Mr. Fletcher let me have it with both barrels.

"I got some new fancy pills to make my dick hard," he said. "We've been using the hell out of them. I've been sweating like a pig for three days straight."

And that was that.

Awesome.

I headed out of their room with a promise to send a nurse in with some fluids, and passed the portable X-ray machine

going into FF's room.

I let it be and waited outside the nurses' station for our next guest to arrive.

It didn't happen before the X-ray machine was heading out, and Val was heading for me.

"Mr. Ocea has a broken hip," she said. "Can I put in the orders for his pain meds, or is that something you need to do?"

My jaw must've dropped, because she narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"Oh, we just thought you'd get to go in there and smell him. We didn't think there'd actually be anything wrong," Rose said as she nibbled on a donut. "He's the ER's most favored guest."

"Well, there's actually something wrong with him this time," she said as she turned the screen around for me to stare at the broken hip.

Sure enough, it was well and truly broken.

"What would you give him first?" I asked.

She rattled off what she would give him, then what she would do next, and I waved her on.

Clearly she hadn't forgotten this particular part of her training. "In that case, get started. You have full access to whatever you need."

And on it went, for the next few hours of our shift.

We had a total of six patients the entire time, so it was enough to catch up on everything that was going on in Val's life.

Not that she told me.

She'd told everything—albeit hesitantly—to Rose who didn't stop talking once since she sat down.

By the time Val had given her entire life story, I was thinking that I was ready to pull my hair out—because who

wouldn't want to hear that the person they loved once upon a time had suffered greatly over the last few years—and I needed a fuckin' beer.

What pissed me off the most was that my number hadn't changed.

My number was also one of the easiest numbers that the world had ever been given. So even if, and that was a big if, she lost her phone and didn't have my number anymore, she had my goddamn number memorized.

I gritted my teeth and tried hard to ignore her. It became easier to do just that when Tammy took a seat at my side after her lunch break and started chatting about my dog.

I told her a funny story about what Gee had done this morning when he'd walked outside. How he'd walked to just the very edge of the grass, then said 'nope' before turning around and heading right back inside where it was warm.

But all the while, as I told the story, I was very much aware that I had the attention of the woman I was trying, and failing, to ignore.

"Well how does it feel to be the new girl?" Lori, another OG—original gangster—nurse asked.

"Great..." Val drawled.

"Don't worry. You're only the new girl by two months. Tammy and Dr. Kent moved here not too long ago, too. So y'all will learn the ropes together."

I felt her gaze turn toward me.

"Is that so?" Val muttered.

Luckily, Tammy chose that moment to butt in.

"What do you want to do for dinner tonight?" Tammy repeated.

This was something we repeatedly talked about, over and over again, every single day.



She'd ask to go to dinner. I'd tell her I couldn't. She'd ask again a couple of hours later. On it went.

Sometimes I changed my mind. Other times I didn't.

Each time that we ate out with each other, though, it ended up going much longer than I'd anticipated. So lately, I hadn't been saying yes.

Which only made her try harder.

I looked over at her, about to say 'no' for the second time today, when I happened to see the woman I'd been trying to piss off out of the corner of my eye.

I'd known that Val hadn't much cared for Tammy. She'd dealt with Tammy's constant bombardment of phone calls, text messages, emails and what not. But what Val didn't know was that I'd gone out of my way to keep the two of them separate.

I'd declined quite a few of the invitations to go see Tammy over the time Val and I had been together. But the night that she'd left, I'd said something to Tammy about Val leaving, and low and behold she'd arrived on my door step the moment that Val was gone.

Needless to say, just as I was about to say no, the words 'pizza' came out of my mouth.

I watched Val stiffen across the nurses' station from me.

Good. I was glad that it affected her.

"You about ready to go, darlin'?" Tammy asked. "We could grab it really quick. Then you can get home to your pops."

I watched Val stand up and capture everyone's attention. It was Rose who said, "Time to go, darlin'?"

The shifts at the ER usually lasted twelve hours. Though, somehow Val had gotten special permission not to be here the full time.

I'd wondered why, of course. But I'd decided not to ask because then it would mean I cared about the answer.

“Yeah, our soft opening is today,” Val said quietly. “I’ll be here full-time tomorrow.”

“How exciting.” Rose smiled. “Have a safe trip home, Valhalla Drew. I’m very glad you’re with us.”

Rose was always so goddamn nice.

Couldn’t she just hate her with me?

No.

Because Rose was a sweetheart and instinctively liked everyone.

It wasn’t a bad thing.

But it wasn’t working in my favor at that moment in time.

“Y’all have a good one,” Val called to the group.

Then she was striding down the length of the hall toward the doctors’ lounge where she’d stowed her stuff.

Where I’d had to show her where to stow her stuff.

And, almost on autopilot, I got up and followed her. “Gotta use the facilities,” I muttered to whomever needed to know my whereabouts.

Tammy snorted before saying, “It’s getting about that time for your nightly shit. Just call it what it is.”

It wasn’t my nightly shit.

It was my nightly Snickers break. But none of them needed to know that. If they knew, they might try to join me on it, and there was no one on this Earth I’d share my Snickers with. Well, no one anymore, anyway. The last time I’d shared one of my Snickers had been the night she’d left me. And let’s just say sharing wasn’t ever going to happen again.

And tonight, I had a different break in mind.

One that looked like trouble, sounded like confrontation, and smelled like I was about to do something stupid.

Val had just pushed past the supply closet where all the linens were stored when I caught her by the wrist and all but yanked her inside.

She squeaked, surprised that she was being pulled backwards, but didn't fight me at all when she saw who it was doing the pulling.

"Why are you leaving like that?" I asked, angry that she would care what I did and didn't do. Knowing that was really the reason she was leaving.

I wasn't stupid.

I'd known when the soft opening was—I'd done my research thanks to a friend I'd met while I was doing my own resident journey. She also just so happened to be very good friends with Val and thought that we could make up and life would be all better.

Folsom, our friend—though Val didn't know that Folsom was my friend—probably wouldn't speak to me after this was all said and done. But it'd be worth it.

"Why am I leaving like what?" she feigned ignorance.

I narrowed my eyes. "Being cute won't fix this."

She narrowed her eyes. "I'm not trying to be cute, *Dr. Kent*. I'm trying to leave, which I already worked out with the hospital coordinator. If you have a problem with that, bring it to your boss."

*Dr. Kent.*

Well that fucking burned more than it should have.

"I don't have a problem with that," I lied. I did have a problem with that. But instead of voicing that information to her, I said, "What's your issue with Tammy?"

I wasn't dumb. I knew what the issue with Tammy was. Val couldn't stand her.

Tammy and I had moved here not too long ago, actually. And when I was asked—though I'd hoped I would be—to be

the attending for the ER, I'd chosen to say yes. Because that worked with my plans.

Tammy had tagged along, though she hadn't known why I wanted to make the move.

Val crossed her arms over her chest when I finally let her wrist go, tapping away with her foot and narrowing her eyes into slits so thin I wouldn't be surprised if she couldn't even see.

"Tell me," I ordered, taunting her. "Or are you too chicken?"

I knew that'd get her going.

She'd always hated being called a chicken.

Apparently, it was something her dad used to say to her when she hadn't wanted to be social and he'd been forcing her.

"You don't think it's fucking weird that the woman suddenly goes and gets her nursing degree when you announce to your friends and family that you got into medical school?" Val asked curiously. "Because it's a very strange coincidence to me..."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "The last time I checked, your concerns with Tammy and I, as well as our friendship, ended the day you walked out of my apartment and didn't look back."

"Felix, I don't know..." She trailed off when I pushed her into the wall, my anger a hard ten.

"How about you stay the fuck out of my business, Valhalla," I growled.

Okay, so I was being a dick. I'd invited this conversation, yet there I was taunting her with my ire.

Val stiffened. "It wasn't me who chose to come here. I talked to Rose. She said you've only been here for two months." She pointed at my chest. "Which conveniently happens to be right when I applied."

Okay, so she wasn't stupid.

"Coincidences," I lied.

She snorted, and I broke.

I hated when she snorted. Mostly because she was always right when she made that sound.

Like right now.

It wasn't a coincidence that I was here.

It also wasn't a coincidence that she was here.

It was all a very clever ploy to get her exactly where I wanted her.

"I have to go," she said, making my chest ache as I remembered when she uttered those words to me the last time.

She saw the blow hit and softened.

"I have to go," she said as she looked away. "I have to be at the circus for opening day."

The circus.

I hated that fucking place. It took her away from me, and I hated that I'd never have her back because of it.

And God, those words.

She'd said them to me on repeat the day she'd left.

*I have to go.*

*There's no other choice.*

*My family deserves this.*

*My sisters will never forgive me.*

Everyone but herself and her own mental health was on the table for her to worry about.

"Then leave," I snarled.

She flinched, and I relished that.

# CHAPTER 4

*It's about to get real basic in here.  
-Val to Felix right before she orders a pumpkin spice latte*

## VAL

I saw the words hit him.

*I have to go.*

The last words I'd ever said to him.

The last words he allowed me to say.

I tried, and failed, not to react.

But the memory hit like a freight train despite my attempts.

•••

*Then*

*"I have to go."*

*For the hundredth time, Felix tried to plead with me.*

*"I can't let you go," he said. "What about school? What about me? What about our cat?"*

*Our 'cat' wasn't actually our cat.*

*It was a stray cat that we'd been feeding. But, like clockwork, I fed that damn cat and made sure it always had food. He waited for me every morning, and every night when I went to bed, he curled up under the window at my apartment complex.*

*And, yet again, the pang of wrongness zipped through me.*

*He was right.*

*I was leaving a lot behind.*

*"I have to." My voice cracked. "If I don't, we could lose everything."*

*He was already shaking his head. "You hate that place, Poppet. You freakin' hate it."*

*He was right.*

*I did.*

*I hated it so much that I hadn't once thought about it since I'd left.*

*My sisters? Yes.*

*My brother? Yes.*

*The life we shared at that circus? Hell no.*

*"Felix," I breathed. "If I don't go, every single bullshit thing we went through when we were younger would be for nothing." I shook my head. "We have to do this."*

*"But you're almost there, Poppet," he tried again. "You have at most three years. We could graduate and do all this together!"*

*He was right.*

*I was on the back end of becoming a medical doctor.*

*But the thought of my sisters and brother losing the circus because I refused to come back? That was just something I couldn't live with.*

*The worst part was, I knew what I had to do.*

*I had to end this, or he would never let me go. He would keep coming back. He would follow me.*

*"Babe." He could see the resolve in my eyes.*

*"Felix," I breathed. "It's done. This is done. I'm not coming back until this is over with."*

*He looked ready to argue some more, but I held up my hand. "You have to let me breathe, Felix. This is one of those times where you're not going to be able to convince me to stay. This is important to me."*

*"More important than us?" he asked.*

*I didn't stop to think when I said, "Yes."*

*That's when I could tell he understood.*

*I was going. Without him.*



*This was something I had to do on my own.*

*“I gotta go.”*

•••

*Now*

I flinched at his acerbic words.

*Then leave.*

Which pissed me off. I hated acting like I was afraid.

I wasn't afraid.

I was freakin' pissed!

I leaned forward and poked him in the chest, my anger at his obvious deviousness shining bright, and said, “I fucking will.”

And that touch sealed our fate.

We'd done really well, staying far enough away throughout the day that we didn't once touch.

He'd stayed on his side; I'd stayed on mine.

And even when my hands practically itched to reach out and stroke his forearm, I'd kept them to myself.

But freakin' Felix had always known just what to say or do to get a reaction out of me. And he'd definitely gotten the reaction he'd been striving for.

My anger was damn near palpable as I got in his face, my frustration with the whole situation evident.

I'd tried for months to get ahold of him. I'd texted. Called. Emailed. Hell, I'd even driven to his apartment to find that he'd freakin' moved.

I'd searched for him in almost every available hospital directory in the area and came up with freakin' nothing.

And he was acting like the injured party here?

No.

*Fuck* no.

I poked him again when he didn't react, and that was all it took.

One second, I was poking him in the chest, my finger right over the black heart I knew was beating there, and the next I was slammed up against the wall.

I gasped, surprised by the movement.

Never in our relationship had he ever manhandled me in such a way.

He'd always been sweet and demure, moving slowly at my pace.

But this wasn't the man I used to know.

This one was angrier, more jaded. He narrowed his eyes at me a lot, and frowned when I was only used to smiles.

No, this man was not that man.

But saying that, the thrill that went through me at the manhandling sent a shock of excitement and desire through my veins.

The breath that left me kept freakin' leaving when his mouth slammed down on mine in a punishing kiss.

His anger and frustration poured out of his mouth and into mine.

Years of pent-up frustration poured out of me, and my hands moved on their own to lock at the back of his neck, pulling him impossibly closer.

The kiss wasn't a kiss.

It was a statement.

One that said we were both really freakin' mad, and that we agreed this was going to stay what it was.

Mad sex.

I wouldn't say hate, though.

Because I didn't hate him. There was no way I could hate the man I loved.

No matter if he broke my heart over and over for years straight.

My fingers caught the loose curls at his nape and fisted.

He growled against my mouth at the hurt but didn't stop or pull away in the least.

In fact, I would say he pressed forward more.

And damn, he'd gotten some muscle on him since we'd last seen each other.

I'd been so surprised this morning at the sight of him that all I could do was stare for a long minute.

Felix Alexander Kent had always been sexy.

Tall with black hair, he was the ultimate poster child for Abercrombie when we'd met.

He'd been well built in all the right places, but even when I'd left him, he wasn't like this.

It was as if he'd spent the last few years in the gym, focusing on creating the most perfect body he could just to rub it in my face.

Now he was all man. All rugged good looks, beard that I hadn't even realized I liked, and smoky dark eyes that felt like they were digging straight into my soul.

All those muscles pressed up against me felt like a wet dream I hadn't realized I'd even wanted to have.

And then there was that one other appendage that I'd tried very hard to forget about since I'd had it last.

But the moment I felt it, all those memories came back.

Neither Felix nor I had been a virgin when we'd met.

Though we had been rather... inexperienced. We'd learned with each other, and over time, found exactly what the other liked.

Like I knew if I kissed his neck, right underneath his chin, it would make him groan.

So when I pulled away and did just that, he fisted his hand in my scrubs and all but yanked me away from him with a groan.

"Don't," he snarled.

I still had hold of his hair, so I fisted it even tighter and pulled him back.

He hissed as he moved, his eyes narrowing on me as he slammed back into me with his mouth.

Then we were all kisses, teeth, and anger.

The kiss was a kiss I'd never forget, and by the end of it, we were both grasping for each other's drawstrings so we could yank each other's pants down.

Then I had my pants around my ankles, he had his dick out, and he was shoving me over the closest object, which happened to be a damn vacuum.

I held onto the handle with both hands, moaning when he didn't waste time with foreplay and shoved straight inside.

I screamed, which happened to be into his hand, when he quickly covered my mouth as he thrust hard inside.

I saw stars.

Literal stars.

My eyes squeezed tightly shut as I tried to adjust to his size.

I'd forgotten.

How had I forgotten?

His size had always been something that surprised me, no matter how much we made love.

He was rather large, and there was always a lot of foreplay to get me as open and ready as I could be before he penetrated my pussy.

But this time, there was no preparation. No leading up to it. No nothing.

One second, he was on the outside, and the next I was so full I felt like I was about to split right in half.

But the weird thing was, it was a good feeling.

A great feeling, actually.

One of those moments in your life when you knew that this should be a bad thing, that you might have pain from it later, yet you did it anyway because it felt so right.

Then he started pumping, forcing his fat cock into me with such deep strokes that I couldn't help but let out a small scream each time he entered me.

He cursed and curled over me, his mouth right next to my ear as he grunted with each slam of his hips.

I was coming then, unable to stop myself.

It'd been so long.

And he felt so right.

No buildup. No signs whatsoever.

Just one second, I was fine and the next I was breaking apart with him inside of me.

The feel of him so deep made the orgasm that rocketed through me feel like a life-altering moment.

I'd felt great orgasms before.

He'd been the one to give them to me.

But feeling them when you're ready, and feeling them when you're not, are two altogether different things.

My breasts had an iron band surrounding them, and then I was finding it hard to breathe.

I didn't know if it was due to the way he was holding me, the way my orgasm had hit me so hard, or because there was very little oxygen in a supply closet with two heavily breathing people.

Whatever it was, I knew that I wouldn't be okay after this.

He'd broken me, yet again, and I was kind of happy about it.

He grunted, and I felt the warm splash of his cum paint the inside of my pussy.

That's when I realized that we'd gone ungloved and unprotected, but the thoughts went through my brain like wings of a butterfly.

One second, they were there, the next they were gone, an altogether different emotion—one even stronger than the thought of STDs or pregnancy—filled me.

Longing.

I missed this. Missed him. Missed the way he made me feel.

Then he had to go and ruin everything.

“God, I fucking hate you,” he breathed against my neck.

The instant feeling of sickness raced through my veins at his words.

We'd just had, arguably, the best sex of our entire time together, and he ended it with that?

I pushed him away, feeling him slip out of my sex, and instantly felt the ire rise in my veins.

There were only eight people in this entire world—alive anyway—that could make me get angry like that. And he was one of them.

“Nobody told you to fuck me, Felix Alexander Kent!” I all but spat. “Next time you feel your frustration with me get too

much, how about you go fuck your best friend who is in love with you.”

Felix blinked, surprised to hear those words come out of my mouth.

“She’s not in love with me,” he replied, tucking himself back inside his scrub pants.

Was he stupid? Did he not see?

Hell, he didn’t even have to see. He just had to pay attention.

I snorted. “So we can now add asshole and delusional to your list of attributes.”

I yanked my pants up, uncaring of the wetness that I could feel seeping out from between my legs, and roughly tied the stupid drawstring so they didn’t fall off when I made my run for it.

“What are you doing?” he asked, sounding surprised that I was leaving.

What, did he expect me to stay after that display of affection?

What a fucking joke.

I glared at him. “What do you care?”

He opened his mouth, then swiftly closed it, unsure what to say.

Well, he didn’t need to say anything. He’d said enough in the last ten minutes with just five words than he’d said for our entire relationship.

Well, joke was on him, because this was exactly what I needed.

Him telling me how he really felt.

And fuck my life, but the next three years were going to suck.

As might be expected, when I yanked open the door to the supply closet—of course it had to be a supply closet, how cliché could we be?—I ran straight into Tammy.

She took one look at me, one look at the man behind me, and I knew.

This was about to get even uglier.

God. Dammit.

She crossed her arms over her ample chest—she really was pretty when she wasn't scowling—and said, “Well isn't this just typical. Why do you always do this, Felix?”

I felt my stomach burn at those words.

Why do you always do this, Felix?

As if he'd done it multiple times with multiple other people.

Great.

Just freakin' great.

Mentally, I added a note to my ongoing checklist to never, ever sleep with Felix Alexander Kent again. Oh, and to never look into his eyes.

Leaving with my tail tucked between my legs, I headed home at a sprint.



# CHAPTER 5

*She's a ten, but so is her anxiety.  
-Val's secret thoughts*

## VAL

I was dripping.

Utterly, and truly dripping.

And not because it was raining out.

Because Felix had been inside me, we hadn't used a condom, and I was now running like my life depended on it.

The sprint to the car took ten minutes. The drive took fifteen. The run into the building took another five.

By the time I arrived at my post—the table where I'd be doing tarot card readings for the next few hours—I was spent.

My brain was just... *done*.

That had to be why I wasn't paying attention to what was going on around me. It took everything I had to keep my focus on the young teens who were giggling as I was 'reading' one of the obviously popular boy's palm.

"And you're in love," I said, using my powers of observation.

He kept looking back at one girl in particular, who was not in the middle of the group, but on the outside, almost as if she was trying really hard to fit in but wasn't accomplishing it.

"Uhhh," he hesitated.

"Ahh, so you haven't declared your love for the brown-eyed beauty with glasses," I said as I continued to fake read his palm. "Would you like your tarot read?"

He nodded eagerly, and so I did just that for him, pulling him the lovers card, the hermit card, and the Four of Wands.

"Four of wands," someone called out. "Isn't it cool that we have four wands to give you ladies?"

I nearly rolled my eyes at the kid's crude joke.

"It's not what you think," I said softly as I explained. "The hermit card is indicative of solitude, or needing time alone.

Taking a break from others.” I looked pointedly at the group at his back. “Maybe finding one person in particular to focus on would be good for you.”

The boy’s eyes went wide, as if he completely understood my meaning.

“The Four of Wands is marriage, home building, or aligning with your path and purpose. Possibly connecting with the right person or people and having a sense of belonging matching the path you want to take in life.”

He swallowed, and I knew I had him.

“The lovers card is, well, the love card,” I said softly. “Lovers stands for the utmost connection, harmony, love and attraction.”

He finally looked toward the girl who had disassociated herself even more from the group, almost as if she was ready to run.

“You might want to go catch her before she bolts,” I said.

He got up and left, just as the girl took off.

The group of asshole teens left, and there was a lull for the first time in a long time.

Long enough it should give me time to go to the bathroom and empty out my bladder that probably should’ve been taken care of over an hour ago.

I’d just gotten back and was surprised to find not a single person in the area waiting for their turn.

In fact, there wasn’t anyone, period, anywhere around me.

I finally allowed my mind to wander, my gaze going to the stupid crystal ball on my table.

It was just a prop.

I’d never been woo-woo enough to go that far into character. But it was pretty and...

A commotion in the area behind the tent I was in startled me from my ‘concentration’ on the crystal ball. I looked behind me just as what sounded like gunshots filled the air.

***Bang.***

The tent around me started to collapse from within.

People started running, but I was still in my seat when the fabric collapsed on top of me.

People were screaming, and I didn’t blame them.

Terrified myself as to what was going on, I fought my way out of the fabric, having done this enough times to know that panicking when the damn thing collapsed on you was not only unnecessary, but would hinder you even more if you fought it.

As I made my way through the yards and yards of fabric tent, I finally emerged on the other side into chaos.

My sisters were screaming.

A man—Winston Osborn—was on his knees on the ground bent over...

“Crimson!” I cried out.

I moved until I was on my knees, surrounded by my freaking out sisters, and kneeling in the blood of my sister.

“Let me see,” I ordered, pushing at Winston’s hand.

He didn’t move it.

And as I took in the blood spurting out around his fingers, I didn’t make him.

No. The gunshot wound had affected her artery in some way, and pressure was the only thing at this point that was saving her from bleeding out.

I did assess the rest of her, and then started issuing orders.

She had a beam across her left upper thigh and hip. A heavy one.

And by the way that her leg looked as I palpated around it, it was very likely that she'd broken the hip and the femur.

The sound of an approaching helicopter had me pointing at a few people, directing them on what would happen once it landed.

The flight medics arrived, and then things moved fast.

I went with them, my baby sister now under my care until we got her to the hospital.

And I wished to hell that I hadn't had to experience it.

Never in my life would I forget having to work a code on my sister and watch her die before my eyes.

Never.

•••

## FELIX

I felt awful.

I shouldn't have allowed things to get out of hand as they did.

Sure, originally, that'd been my goal—to piss her off and let her know how I felt when she left us behind.

But seeing the look on her face as she all but ran out of the hospital? That would haunt me forever.

My phone rang, and Tammy gave it a disgusted look.

I answered it in seconds.

“Kent,” I murmured as I dipped a fry into the ketchup.

“We have a code four coming in via life flight. Gunshot wound to the neck. Possible broken femur and hip,” Jessica, the night nurse, said. “Can you come back?”

I looked at my pizza I'd just gotten delivered to my table by a disgruntled night employee who looked like she'd rather be anywhere but at work when it was this damn cold.

“Sure,” I said. “How far out are they?”

“Not far,” Jessica said. “Like maybe five minutes. Dr. Drew said to page you.”

“Who?” I asked, confused for all of two seconds before understanding slapped me across the face. “Val?”

“Oh, yes. Her. Sorry. I forget that y'all are on a first-name basis.” Jessica snickered.

Of course, pissy and hell bent on making my life hell after catching me in a closet with the new intern, Tammy had told everyone and their brother what she'd seen. Except, she'd only guessed, which had pissed me off because she'd made both of us look bad.

And that wasn't something that I wanted for Val.

Val, despite her leaving me, deserved to become a doctor. That didn't mean I wouldn't make it hard for her, though.

“What's Val doing with this patient?” I asked.

“She didn't say,” Jessica said, back to business.

I pulled my wallet out and threw a twenty on the table for my half of the pizza.

“Gotta go,” I said as I took two slices off the pizza and double-fisted my way out the door.

I arrived at the hospital in three minutes—thankful that the pizza place we'd agreed to head to was so close—and arrived just in time to see Val burst through the door covered in blood.

My heart literally sank.

Then I saw where her hand was at.

She was holding a female's hand, talking quickly and quietly to her.

She let go when I arrived and backed away as the flight medic gave me a recap on what happened.

Gunshot wound to the throat. Possible clipped artery. Broken femur and likely hip.

There were also contusions and a few other random hurts, but ultimately that was the bulk of it.

They took the woman into the trauma room, and I stuck behind only long enough to say, “Are you okay?”

Val swallowed and nodded before saying, “Save my sister, Felix.”

Her sister.

Fucking shit.

•••

Three hours later, scrubbed clean of blood, I took a seat on the chair in the OR waiting room.

“Any news?” I asked carefully.

She looked like she’d break at the first sign of more trouble.

Something I wouldn’t be responsible for.

“No,” she answered quietly.

Too quietly.

She sounded like the ghost of herself.

“I’ll go check,” I said as I went to do just that.

I came back ten minutes later with news.

“She’s doing fine. But they’re having to pretty much give her a new hip,” I said. “It’s shattered. Neck wound is fixed for now. But they might have to repair it later once they get her hip fixed up. It was a quick and dirty job because they had to get to the hip. Bone shards pierced the artery that...”

She nodded as I recited everything, her face a mask of pain.

“Her man was hurt, too,” she said softly. “His name is Winston, and he’s a billionaire.”

I blinked. “As in Winston Osborn?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“He’s a big-time dude,” I said.

She nodded. “He is.”

We sat in awkward silence after that.

I was unsure of my welcome, and she was quiet.

Then her family arrived.

All of them at once.

Four sisters, their husbands, a set of twins, her brother, and an older girl who was holding onto Slone Day, who might very well be just as famous as Winston Osborn.

Holy shit.

“Val, anything?” Val’s sister asked.



She was bobbing up and down as the infant child in her arms started to fuss at the stop in motion from its carrier.

The man who was behind her looked at me with annoyance, as if he didn't want me here, but I didn't move.

“Here, hold her.”

I blinked when the baby was thrust into my arms.

A very small baby that had the man already glaring at me go from annoyed to murderous.

I curled the baby expertly in my hands.

I'd delivered enough babies with my round in OB—obstetrics—and held enough friends' babies to know how to handle them. That didn't mean I knew how to hold a baby of a man who looked like he wanted to now rip my head off.

The baby started to gurgle, and I looked down into blue eyes that looked a lot like the woman sitting next to me.

And not the one who'd been holding the baby.

“Who are you?” angry dad asked.

I opened my mouth to tell him who I was when Val said, “He's the man who saved Crimson's life.”

Silence.

Utter and complete silence.

The look changed from murderous to only slightly murderous.

“Did you really?”

Another large man who looked like he could murder me, too.

“Uh,” I said.

“Yes,” Val murmured almost too quietly to hear, voice thick with unshed tears. “If it wasn't for him, Crimson would've passed away in the ER. We have him to thank for his quick thinking and expert skill. He was able to do a quick and dirty

stitch up of the artery in her neck. Then he got her stabilized and filled back up with blood. He was amazing.”

That made me feel like I was ten feet tall.

But also like I was a piece of shit, because when she’d come here earlier in the day, I hadn’t realized just how bad her life had been since I’d last seen her. I’d only been thinking about my own selfish issues.

Sure, she’d been my issue. Not having her where I wanted her—in my arms—had been the main reason I did so well over the last couple years. I’d become single-mindedly focused on work to the point where I was doing nothing else but that. And when I wasn’t doing that, I was obsessing over why the hell I couldn’t find her.

I mean, I knew her damn name. I knew the damn circus she worked for. I knew her sisters’ and brother’s names. I knew everything that there was to know about her. Everything but where the hell to find her.

It was like she was hiding from me.

And maybe she had been.

But based solely off what her life was looking like right now, that might’ve been the reason why she’d stayed hidden.

Shit.

“Thank you,” Keene said, holding out his hand.

I gave the baby I was holding to the man who was still glaring at me, and he took her gladly.

Then backed away like he thought I might jump up and try to take her back.

I wouldn’t, but the way he was acting made me want to make a go for it just to see what he would do.

I took the brother’s hand instead.

For four years, I’d heard all that I could hear about Val’s family.

I knew what their likes and dislikes were. I knew their first and middle names. I'd heard almost everything.

So I felt like I knew Keene as I said, "It's nice to finally meet you, Keene."

Keene frowned and looked at his sister.

"This is him," she murmured quietly.

Understanding dawned, and then a look of anger replaced the understanding, replaced just as quickly by a blank face.

"Wait, you're the guy who ignored every one of her phone calls, texts, and emails after she left to come be with us?" one of the sisters asked.

"He didn't deserve to hold my baby," the man holding the twins said.

I opened my mouth to say something—*because what the hell were they talking about?*—but the doors to the OR opened and a man stepped out.

I knew that man, and I stood up and walked toward him.

"What is it?" I asked worriedly.

"She's having issues with bleeding. I was hoping to bleed you of a few pints," Mackson murmured quietly as not to alert the family that was behind me, likely trying to hear every word.

Mackson was the head of the OR. He was the most senior person in the hospital, and we'd hit it off very well my first day here when we'd been stuck in an elevator together for over two hours.

We'd gone out more for beers than I'd been out with my best friend.

I liked him a lot, and he had a lot of knowledge to share.

And he also knew that I was the universal blood type and could share with anyone who needed it because we'd worked a

blood drive together about two months ago where we'd found out that we were both the same.

I looked down at his arm to see that he'd already donated.

If it was that serious that he was coming out here and asking for it after he'd donated, then I was worried.

"Sure thing," I said. "I'll head back with you."

I didn't bother to tell the family what I was doing.

A: they didn't need to worry unnecessarily, and B: they'd offer to donate themselves, and without having their blood tested first, they'd feel horrible when we told them it wasn't possible.

Mackson put me on tap himself, and I bled two pints worth of blood which he promptly left to deliver.

I cleaned myself up and was just pulling the needle out of my vein when she found me.

"Oh," Val said. "It's bad, isn't it?"

I looked up to see her standing in the door.

She'd changed.

She looked much more vulnerable in black leggings and a...

She was wearing my sweatshirt.

My. Sweatshirt.

Something weird in my stomach started to bloom.

I wasn't sure what this feeling was, but I wasn't entirely ready to acknowledge it, so I didn't point out that she was wearing my anything.

Or how freakin' cute she looked in it.

Yeah, there was no way that she was thinking straight, or she wouldn't have put it on. Not to mention, her siblings must've packed her the bag, because she wouldn't have chosen to wear something like that up here on her own.

“It’s not bad,” I lied. “They just needed more blood, and since I’m a universal donor, they asked me to donate.”

“You never were a good liar,” she mused as she came farther into the room, almost hunched in on herself. “I really appreciate you helping her, Felix.”

“It’s my job,” I pointed out.

She flinched, but then her eyes narrowed as she said, “Yeah, but I’ll bet you don’t usually donate blood for your job.”

True.

“Well,” I shrugged, “I didn’t want you to worry.”

She deflated even more, and it felt like my heart was breaking all the more as she stood so close to me with her sad eyes and her heartbreaking body language.

“I’m going to worry regardless,” she pointed out. “I don’t think I could’ve done that today.”

“You could’ve,” I agreed. “From what I hear, you did do it at the scene, and in the helicopter ride over.”

She nodded, then walked toward me, her fingers going to the bandage that was on the table for me to wrap my elbow.

She held it up as if to offer, and I nodded. “Sure.”

She wrapped my elbow with Coban and then patted it to get the bandage to stick well to itself before backing away.

Before she could take three steps, I hauled her back into my arms and hugged her.

“Why are you hugging me?” she asked, shivering in my arms.

“Because you need a hug,” I said, unable to stop myself from inhaling her scent. “We can go back to hating each other tomorrow.”

She sniffled before saying, “I never hated you, Felix. And I never will. There’s nothing you can do to change that.”

With that, she pulled away and didn't look back.

I didn't go back out to the lobby with them.

I stayed outside the OR and waited for news.

It took four more hours, but eventually it came.

Crimson made it through surgery, but she would have a very long road ahead of her.

The man who'd come in at some point to get his own artery repaired as well, would make it, too.

That made me happy enough that I chose to sleep.

Tomorrow would come, and in it, another day of trying to find a way to make it without Val being in my life where she belonged.

# CHAPTER 6

*Live weird. Fake your death.*  
*-T-shirt*

## VAL

One good thing about having my sister in the hospital? I no longer had to eat my lunch alone.

I could go to her room and eat with her, instead of sitting in the break room by myself while people ate around me, had fun, laughed, and treated me like I didn't even exist.

Though, Rose, the one good thing about this entire place, was one who would talk to me. But she wasn't here this week due to her daughter having a baby.

Which left me with the regulars—about seven women who took their cue from Tammy—who went out of their way to pretend I didn't exist.

That did work out in my favor, because if they did end up talking to me, it was asking if I did that kind of thing with doctors before.

Which only pissed me off, so I chose to ignore them all, eat my lunch, and wonder if it was bad to wish away three years.

I couldn't find a different hospital to work at, either, because this was the only teaching hospital in the area that had room for me.

Meaning, I was stuck.

But working at Dallas Christus wasn't bad. Or not all bad.

I had great hours, the ER was fully staffed, and I got to see Felix.

Not that we'd talked more than a 'hey' or 'good morning' or 'how's it going' since we saw each other last.

I'd take anything, though.

I was like an addict getting her fix.

It'd been what felt like thousands of days since he'd hurt me. But, unlike what my sisters told me to do—and that was a very vocal 'don't get anywhere near him'—I couldn't stay



away. Couldn't stop looking at him. Couldn't even breathe right without seeing him first thing in the morning.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"No," I murmured. "I'm thinking about my life."

Crimson's brows rose. "What about it?"

"It's like no one in this entire place likes me," I murmured to Crimson. "I swear, when I walk in the room, every single person in it looks at me, dismisses me, and leaves if they can. If they can't, then they act like I'm not there."

"You think it's Tammy?" Crimson asked.

I knew it was Tammy.

But it was also likely Felix as well.

"Probably," I grumbled. "Well, more than probably. I know it's her."

I knew it was her the moment it happened.

"You should talk to your supervisor." She eyed my fries. "Are you going to eat all of those?"

I pushed the box toward her.

No. No, I wasn't.

Mostly because I couldn't stomach the damn things after the discussion we'd just started.

"I'm not going to talk to my supervisor," I said as I watched her eat the rest of my chicken nuggets.

I'd stopped at the McDonald's that was down the block from the hospital and had brought us both lunch up to her room. She'd eaten all of her food and had been eyeing mine so long that I was worried if she was getting fed at all.

Just as I had that thought, Winston walked in with a box of Crumbl Cookies.

"Oh, you are so getting laid tonight." Crimson groaned around a nugget.

Winston flashed a grin at her, his cheeks getting slightly pink. “If that were possible, honey, I would totally do it.”

“Gross,” I muttered as I sat back in my chair.

Winston winked at me, walked up to Crimson, and dropped a kiss to her forehead.

“Did you have anything for me in there?” I asked, eyes hopeful.

I didn’t pass up a chance for a cookie.

And the box was so big that I knew there were probably more than even Crimson could gorge herself on.

The girl could eat.

I wasn’t quite sure where she got the ability to put away thirty-nine chicken nuggets—we’d split a fifty count—a large order of fries, and a milkshake before sparing room for dessert, but I envied it.

It was rather impressive when I thought about it.

“Actually,” he opened the box and showed me what was inside, “that’s the whole reason I came. Crimson said that you were sad.”

I looked at my sister.

Then at Winston.

Then shrugged. “I’ve been better.”

I’d been way better.

But it was also just one of those things.

My life had never been all that great.

I’d had to compete for even a single ounce of attention when I was younger, and when I finally started getting the attention that I craved, it was the kind that harmed.

My dad was a complete and utter piece of shit.

He exploited my weaknesses and used them to his advantage, manipulating me into doing exactly what he

wanted me to do.

And to punish me when I'd gone away to college, he'd refused to pay for my tuition. Then, he'd gone even further, cutting me out of even a measly ounce of income that I was able due with scheduling the shows and coordinating workers and crew, as well as getting permits and other things that were needed to bring a circus to town.

Eventually, I'd cut him off.

I'd been about to tell my sisters and Keene that I was done for good when my 'father' had died, leaving stipulations in his will that pretty much forced me back home where I didn't want to be.

But the hits kept coming after his death, and we experienced one problem after another.

Luckily, a lot of that was behind us now, and the latest—the cleaning up of our circus crew to get rid of any of my dad's past crew—was fixed. Leaving us with brand-new employees who we could trust, and the knowledge that we all got to do what we wanted, when we wanted.

Hell, I'd just talked to Keene last week and he'd informed me he was interested in going back into the military.

We'd all readily agreed that he should go if he wanted to, and he'd said he had to think about it some more.

Leaving just Zip, Simi, Tony, Crimson, and I working at the circus for any length of time.

But even I was starting to let go somewhat.

Everyone was, really.

Simi had the twins and had just enough time during the week right now to offer her two cents and get some business work done for the upcoming grand opening of our permanent circus.

Hades and Tony were newly married and living the good life. Crimson was practically married.

That left Zip, Keene, and me as the outliers. The ones who didn't have a significant other to tie us down to anything just yet.

But mainly, it was just that we were all just... done.

Once the circus became somewhat self-sufficient, I had a feeling all of us would just... back off. Sure, we'd be needed to make certain huge decisions, but the day to day running of the beast would be left for our newest hire.

A man named Autry Bills.

He'd shown tremendous aptitude in being able to handle the randomness that always popped up at any given time on any given day.

He was the hire that'd happened right after all the shit hit the fan with my sister, Hades.

Once we'd known that we were all going to start heading our separate ways, we'd started the hunt for a ringleader for a circus. A man who could direct the show, but also run it behind the scenes.

And so far, he'd done an excellent job.

Even better, he'd handled the incident with Crimson and Winston, fielded all kinds of shit, ranging from calls about partnerships, cancellations of partnerships after learning what our father had been into, and then damage control as well as backing up the date that we would all be calling the official grand opening.

Not the bullshit soft opening that we'd done when Crimson was hurt.

"You don't sound very good, either," Winston mused as he took a seat on the side of my sister's bed and leaned into her.

He looked just as rough, if not rougher, than Crimson.

Yet, he was acting like he was perfectly okay, and hadn't been shot right along with her.

I got up and walked into the hallway, going up to the nurses' station.

Coming to a stop I smiled at the first one who acknowledged me and said, "My sister's husband would like a more comfortable chair to sit in besides the wooden one. Is it possible for me to steal a good one from one of the other rooms?"

Everything had been taken out of the one in Crimson's room when she'd moved in, mostly because the hospital staff pulled it out to allow room for all of Crimson's guests. Which were numerous at times.

But with Winston looking dead on his feet...

"Absolutely," she said. "We just got a new chair in today, actually. Winston's affluence is astounding. We have new chairs coming in for every room. Then there's the private rooms that are set to be renovated very soon. Mostly when your sister's ready to be released."

Which was, hopefully, soon.

Not that I didn't adore visiting with my sister during my lunch break, but I knew she'd be way more comfortable at home.

That was set to happen in just a couple of days if everything continued to stay stable for Crimson.

I had complete faith in her, though.

She had two really great doctors working on her. Ones that I completely trusted with my sister's life.

"I'll help you if you need it?" the nurse asked.

I shook my head and went where she'd directed me, finding a brand-new chair in the room three doors down from the semi-private one that Winston had obtained for Crimson.

Pushing it down the hall proved to be easy, and when I rolled into the room, it was to find Winston kissing the holy hell out of her.

“None of that now,” I teased as I pushed the chair over. “Sit.”

Winston glared, and I shook my head. “You look dead on your feet. You should be staying off of them more than you are, and since I know you’re supposed to be on crutches still, but you refuse, it’s time for you to acknowledge that you’re overdoing it. You’re not going to accomplish anything but setbacks if you can’t listen to your own body.”

Winston sighed, but it was Crimson who said, “Get off my bed and into that chair before I push you off.”

“You could try,” Winston drawled.

Crimson bared her fingers at him and wiggled them.

“So scary,” he teased.

But he did get into the chair.

The sigh he let out made me know that I was right in pushing him.

He was overdoing it.

“I have to go,” I said as I walked to the box of cookies. “Which one is mine?”

“All of them,” Winston said with his eyes half-lidded. “I didn’t know which one you’d like.”

I didn’t take all of them.

I took the cinnamon one then said, “I’ll come back for a snack later. Winston, grab a nap. Crimson, take the pain meds when they come to give you more later.”

With that, I left, biting into my cookie when I did.

I groaned at the explosion of flavor.

There were quite a few things I loved in this world, but cookies were right up there in the top three along with napping and having sex with...

I trailed off, not wanting to think about Felix or his exceptional anatomy.

I took another vicious bite, not paying attention to my surroundings when I did. Otherwise, I would've chosen to go a different way than I had.

But sadly, I hadn't been paying attention, which was how I ended up in an elevator with Tammy.

I ignored her and took another bite of my cookie.

At this rate, it'd be gone before the elevator went down the two floors it took to reach the ER.

I was so focused on not looking at the woman that I missed what she was saying. And that she wasn't paying attention to who was on the elevator with her in the slightest.

She was talking animatedly into the phone, using Facetime to speak.

"...yeah, but he's hung up on someone else. I have to give it time," she said, catching my attention.

I blinked, then turned to look at her.

Her face was downcast, and she was staring at the screen.

On the screen was a woman around her age with brown hair and green eyes.

She looked very similar to Tammy, so I assumed this was her sister.

I shoved the rest of the cookie into my mouth to keep the words 'who are you talking about' out of my mouth.

Instead, I huddled more into myself in the corner of the elevator and listened.

"Babe, you've been saying that for years," Tammy lookalike said. "I think it's time to move on. He'll never see you as more than a friend."

So now I *knew* that we were talking about Felix.

"No, I think all it's going to take is time. He needs to forget about her," Tammy replied.

The elevator dinged and a woman pushing a cart came in between us, hiding me further from Tammy.

Tammy didn't stop talking, though, and neither did her sister.

"Do you really want someone who overlooks you for years, and notices you only when he's finally alone with no one else to distract him?" She paused. "But didn't you also just say that the girl he was with years ago is back? Don't you think it's coincidental that he says he's moving here to Dallas, and all of a sudden the girl's back working with him? That sounds planned to me."

Agreed.

"He wouldn't do that to me," Tammy pointed out.

"He didn't ask you to come. You came on your own," the lookalike Tammy said. "Tammy, I love you to death, but you deserve someone who sees you first, and doesn't settle on you because there's no one else around."

I agreed.

Not that Felix was focusing on me, but that she deserved someone who saw her. Who put her first.

If it hadn't happened before now, it probably wouldn't happen.

I'd never worried that Felix would cheat on me with Tammy.

Honestly, it was just her invasiveness that really annoyed me the most. How she always insinuated herself into our lives, acting like her opinions mattered when it came to where we chose to live, work, or spend our free time.

She just had no clue how annoying she was, and now she was still here, trying to stir shit up.

Though, this time it wasn't like she was trying to insinuate herself into my life. Just Felix's.



And it was apparent that he only saw what he wanted to see when it came to his best friend.

The doors to the elevator opened and there he was, the object of all my thoughts.

“Gotta go,” Tammy said quickly, hanging up before her sibling could reply.

“Hey, you ready for lunch?” Tammy chirped while she sidled up to his side.

“No,” he answered. “I ate earlier on the park bench outside.”

Tammy frowned, her lower lip curving outward in a pout.

I wanted to rip her lip off and feed it to her.

Jesus, there was just something about her that set my teeth on edge.

“Aw, man! I wanted to share my casserole with you. You would’ve liked it.” Tammy frowned.

“I had a burger and fries that would top any casserole you made, babe,” he told her bluntly.

Tammy harrumphed, and I chose that moment to unglue my feet and head out into the hall, too, since they were now turning toward the open bay doors that led outside.

I skirted off to the left, hoping they wouldn’t see me.

And I would’ve made it, too, but the doors crashed open so hard that everyone looked up.

“Babe!” Autry called out the moment he saw me. “This is life or death. We need to talk.”

My heart started to pound.

And, upon seeing the look on my face, he wrapped his thick, muscular arms around me before saying, “Not that kind of life or death. The kind of life or death of a circus. I’m sorry for scaring you.”

The instant relief that hit me was insurmountable.

I deflated in his arms. “Gotcha,” I groaned into his muscular chest. “What happened?”

I loved Autry. He was a big beast of a sexy black man, so tall he could probably compete with Shaq, and had the voice of an angel. Literally, he could probably narrate a dictionary and I could fall asleep to him every night.

He was also former special ops, had a voice that could get louder than thunder, and a heart of gold.

He’d come highly recommended by Coffey, and we adored him. All of us, which was an impossible feat in and of itself.

“Well, I’ve literally tried and failed to get ahold of every single one of your siblings but Crimson and you. But none of them have answered. I got some mail today.” He held it out to me. “I opened it as per our agreement and found some disturbing things that I don’t feel like should be delayed in sharing with y’all.”

A feeling of dread overtook me. I wanted to know what was in this envelope almost as much as I wanted a root canal with no drugs.

As in, zero.

I had zero desire to have even more drama to deal with.

I hesitantly looked it over, frowning. “What is it?”

“It’s a self-addressed envelope to the circus. Like it was sent from us,” he said. “But in it, it has the movements of you and your sisters. Places y’all frequent together regularly, habits, likes, dislikes, interests, etc.”

I opened the envelope and found seven sheets in it. All of them with our first and last name on there as well as every single tiny detail that they found or could uncover.

“Oh,” I breathed. “What the hell?”

I pulled out the one labeled as mine and scanned the contents.

My favorite coffee shop. My favorite brand of t-shirts. My bank account info, what I spent in the last twenty-four hours, as well as a where I'd stopped by every day on the way to the hospital.

“What the fuck?” I asked sharply.

Why did this always happen to us? Was our family cursed or something?

“Exactly,” he said. “I sent all this information to Hannibal, but he hasn't gotten back to me yet. Though he did inform me that he and Hades were going on a hike and would likely be unable to get or make any calls or texts until they got back to their car.”

My sister and her husband had turned into freakin' trail nerds. Every chance they could, they were out in nature, and were also considering a house in the mountains of Wyoming.

The only thing stopping them at this point was lack of time.

Between Hades' job as a photographer and designer, and Hannibal's job in security, and their participation in the circus, they didn't have the time to spare.

Then again, none of us really did at this point.

“Wow,” I said as I stared at the contents of the page. “They even know when I go and run.”

I didn't run fast.

In fact, it was more of a shuffling walk.

I also did CrossFit—and was getting better at it but still wasn't great—to keep in shape.

But the fact that it had both the places I run, and the place I'd been frequenting for workouts, sent a chill down the length of my spine.

*Goddammit.*

Would it ever freakin' end?

“Did the cameras pick when it showed up?” I asked, noting the lack of post mark.

The déjà vu feeling I felt coming from Tony’s—Caristonia’s—incidents with a stalker who liked to send her ‘presents’ in the mail made my stomach hurt.

“No, nothing,” he said. “Though, I think it was dropped off by the postman himself. A package arrived, and he came in today with the package instead of delivering it to the mail room like he normally would.”

Wonderful.

“So maybe it was left in the box, he grabbed the mail that was sitting there after realizing it wouldn’t fit into the compartment and brought it to us,” I mused.

I quickly scanned the other seven, realizing that they were just as detailed as mine, if not more so.

“What would you like me to do?” he asked carefully as he gave me a squeeze and stepped back.

I took a step back from him and lifted my gaze to the windows above the atrium area where we were standing and noticed Felix staring down at me with a blank expression on his face.

I quickly glanced away, not wanting to look at him for too long for fear that I was going to have to explain my reaction to Autry, which he’d definitely notice if given half a chance.

“I guess I’ll hold onto this stuff,” I said as I tucked the papers in my pocket. “I’ll go talk to Winston and Crimson when I get the time, then take it home to Keene. Follow me and I’ll make copies so that you can take a set of copies to Keene in case you see him before I do.”

Autry followed me into the area that would lead us slightly upstairs where the ER was located.

After guiding him in with me, I took off toward the set of copiers and made a few copies, one to leave for Winston and Crimson, before handing everything over to him.

He took the papers, folded them neatly in half, and looked around.

“Nice,” he said as he took it all in. “You work here all day, darlin’?”

I grinned. “Most of the time, yes. It’s decent.”

It was decent, too.

Probably one of the nicer emergency rooms I’d ever been in. But that didn’t negate the fact that there were people here who could make it ugly.

“Don’t look now, but Big Tits McGentry over there can’t stop staring at you,” Autry whispered.

I didn’t need to look at who he was staring at to know who he was talking about.

Tammy.

It was like her tits got even more and more vulgar as the time went on.

I wasn’t aware that you could make your boobs hang out of a scrub top, but damned if she didn’t accomplish it.

“She hates me,” I said as I hooked my arm with his. “And sorry to have to push you out of here, but I was supposed to be on shift five minutes ago.”

“If you’re quite done, Dr. Drew, we have an abscess in room four,” Tammy called.

Fucking. Bitch.

I gave Autrey a knowing look which he returned, and then said, “Love you, Autrey.”

Then I was heading toward patient room four.

When I came out ten minutes later with labs I wanted run, I approached the nurses’ station to relay the information and came out just in time to hear Tammy say, “First I catch her with our Doctor Kent, and the next she’s saying ‘I love you’ to the riff raff.”

I narrowed my eyes and moved forward until I was standing almost directly behind her, catching everyone's attention but Tammy's, and said, very softly, "I'm not quite sure what you mean by 'riff raff' but I'd love to hear you explain it to me."

Everyone froze, but it was Tammy who turned around with a glare and said, "I don't have to explain anything to you."

No, she was right. She didn't.

But that didn't mean I didn't have an attending who should be advocating for me.

I turned and caught Lori's eyes and said, "Patient in room four needs a few labs drawn. I'm putting those in now, but for now, we need to get a CBC ran. Can you handle that for me?"

Lori nodded and headed toward the room, snatching up the blood draw kit before she left.

I went to the computer she'd been sitting in front of, put in my orders and tests, then got up to find Felix.

I found him in room one, working on stitches.

He was standing with his hips leaned against the bed, while he expertly ran a row of stitches down the length of a young child's arm.

He was talking to the kid gently, and when he saw me, he smiled a weak smile and said, "Come on in, Dr. Drew. Hey, kid, this girl right here works at a real circus. They have big snakes and sometimes tigers."

"Sometimes?" the kid asked, sounding hopeful. "Why not all the time?"

I smiled and came farther into the room, noting the tears that were steadily leaking down his face.

I looked into the corner behind the curtain and didn't find a parent there at all.

"Uh," I said as I stood there slightly confused. "Well, the cats, Coco and Melon, are really attached to my sister, Tony.

They don't like performing without her, and my sister has issues that require her to hang out at home a lot. She falls asleep like that."

I snapped my fingers for emphasis.

The kid's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Really," I nodded. "One time, she was walking a tight wire, and she fell and had to get stitches just like you are getting right now. But it looks like possibly you're gonna have a few less than her."

"How many did she get?" he asked.

"Seventy-five," I answered. "She's the reason that I want to be a doctor. I fell in love with the emergency room after I had to take Tony to the ER after it happened. The doctors were all really nice to me, and they helped me so much. But they helped my sister even more."

"Dr. Kent is helping me," the kid chirped. "My momma was in a really bad accident. She had to go have surgery, and all I have to have is stitches in my arm."

Well that explained the no parent thing.

That sucked.

It sucked even more that I was seeing the sweet side of Felix.

I liked to pretend he wasn't the same person, that was why he decided to ditch me.

Sometimes when I lied to myself, I almost believed it.

"He's the reason I made it through medical school," I told the kid, who looked better by the second. "He also saved my sister's life a few weeks ago. You have the best doctor in the hospital putting stitches into your arm right now."

"Dr. Drew," Tammy said sharply. "Your patients need you. I think Dr. Kent can handle it by himself."

I watched Felix's eyebrows lower down and a flash of anger cross his face before he beat it back for the sake of his patient.

Ruh-roh. Felix was not happy with Tammy.

Good.

Because when he was done in here, I needed to talk to him about her attitude.

"Sure thing," I smiled, though it didn't reach my eyes. "I'll just head that way now."

I made eye contact with Felix, telling him without words that we needed to talk, and left.

I didn't hear what he said to the kid, but whatever he said must've been funny because the kid burst out giggling.

I made it to the main open area of the ER and looked toward the nurses' station. Tammy was nowhere to be found.

I did spot Lori and Rose talking, though, and said to each of them, "What's the issue?"

"What are you talking about?" Lori asked.

"Tammy came in busting my balls because I have patients, but last I checked, it was only the dude in room four, and he was taken care of when I left," I grumbled. "Did the tests come back already?"

Lori shook her head. "No. The lab is fast today, but not that fast."

I nodded, anger filling me at Tammy's audacity.

But then another patient came in the door with his arm hanging at an awkward angle and the girlfriend who was with him said, "Help! My boyfriend thinks he might've broken his arm."

There was no might've about it.

Ol' homeboy definitely broke his arm.



“Come right in,” I said as I opened the first room I came to that was free.

Once I got him settled, I took a look at the arm up close and said, “If that’s not broken, I’d be very, very surprised.”

He looked at me miserably and said, “I’m fairly sure I can hear bones crunching together when I move it.”

I winced. “I’ll get an X-ray machine in here. Also, I’ll have Rose get you all checked in.”

I also wondered what the hell had happened with triage.

But I was fairly certain that was Tammy’s job today, so it truly didn’t surprise me much that they’d walked right on past her empty desk.

Rose got started on checking the guy in, and I got the order put in for a portable X-ray.

I then went to Felix again and explained what was going on, telling him what I thought should happen.

He agreed, and allowed me to continue with patient care, and I got started.

Felix came in at some point while I was explaining what was going on inside the poor guy’s body.

He’d broken not one, but two bones in his forearm, to the point where it was very obvious that setting the bone wasn’t possible.

Which equaled surgery for the poor guy.

I was just finishing up, Rose helping me, when I spotted movement out of the corner of my eye.

I turned my head just enough to see Felix leaning against the door jamb of the room, a small smile on his face.

That feeling of rightness spread through me.

This.

This was what we’d always talked about from the first day we’d met.

Working together. Helping people. Living our lives the way we wanted to live them.

For ten years, Felix had lived with his aunt and uncle, and their four kids, after his mother had died. During that time, he'd suffered just as much at their hands as I had with my own dad.

And in that time, Felix had a dream.

That dream was to become a doctor.

I often wondered if that was why he'd stopped talking to me. Because I'd been the one to break our promise and left instead of living the life that I wanted to live.

Regardless of his motives, I turned away, finishing up.

Thinking about old times wouldn't get us anywhere. Well, unless you considered a continuously breaking heart getting anywhere...

# CHAPTER 7

*I may look innocent, but I screenshot a lot.  
-Val to Felix*

## FELIX

“I have never been so happy to have three days off in my life,” I heard Val say.

I quietly agreed.

Since her sister’s accident, I’d tried my darndest to stay away from her.

Sometimes it worked, even though I was miserable, and others it didn’t.

This being one of those times.

She had no clue that I’d been the one behind making sure she got three days off in a row.

When the next few days had come up with the management team, it’d been decided that since we were on call for the last snowpocalypse, a few of the other doctors would be on call for this one. Though, that might or might not have been because I’d encouraged them to think that way.

And since Val was my responsibility, she got to have the same days off.

At least, that was also what I had convinced the management team of.

“It’s weird that we’re all getting these days off, since tomorrow is actually our shift,” Tammy snapped.

It wasn’t weird.

It was contrived.

There was a difference.

“Hey,” Rose said to no one in particular, “y’all want to grab a coffee or something while we wait for the shuttle? It’s getting pretty nippy out here.”

She was right.

It was beyond nippy.

“I still don’t understand why there’s not employee parking on grounds,” Val grumbled to Rose. “I mean, how ridiculous to make us either walk two miles to the employee parking lot or ride a shuttle that takes twenty minutes to get back to you.”

“That’s one of the joys of living in a metropolis,” Tammy snarked.

This had to be the first time I actually wanted to trip her ass.

She was being a jerk, and it hadn’t gone unnoticed that she’d been acting that way since she’d caught Val and I in the utility closet.

Not that she was being mean to me. But to Val? She was definitely being a jerk.

I wondered if it dawned on Tammy that Val Singh and Val Drew were the same people.

She would figure it out soon, and I didn’t doubt that when she learned it, she’d throw the biggest hissy fit in history.

For years, she’d told me to forget about Val and leave the girl alone—that she didn’t want anything to do with me.

And it wasn’t until the end that I’d actually started to believe her and get upset.

But shit.

The way Val was now, was the same Val she used to be when we’d first started. Before she’d left and hadn’t looked back.

Sweet and attentive, I was seriously doubting that she didn’t have a very good reason.

That, or maybe I was just trying to justify her being mean to me and leaving me to move on and try again.

Sadly, I didn’t think I could survive a second break up from her.

“Sure,” Val shivered. “Let’s go inside.”

I resisted the urge to slip my jacket off my shoulders and hand it to her.

At least, I would have if we hadn't gotten to the coffee shop and seen the sign on the door.

*Closed for Snowmageddon. Come back when the roads are safe!*

Preemptively closing was a good thing, I'd give them that.

But it was fucking cold here, and the damn bus stop that would take us to our cars was a half-mile walk from the doors of the ER. So either we sprinted when we saw the shuttle coming, hoping we got there in time before they took off, or we stayed at the shuttle drop off zone and waited.

"Well shit," Rose muttered darkly.

"Rose!" Val gasped. "You just said the S word!"

Rose rolled her eyes at Val, causing me to glance Val's way.

That was when I saw her frantically trying to warm up her arms.

Today had been crazy.

When we'd gotten to work, it'd been in the sixties.

By the time we were walking out the door five minutes ago, the temperature had dropped into the teens.

It was the craziest shift in temperature I'd ever seen.

And had I not been paying attention to the weather when I'd left, I wouldn't have had my own jacket to wear.

But seeing her so cold, shivering in her thin scrubs and white turtleneck that was underneath it, I knew I couldn't let her sit there and freeze.

And, knowing that she would completely balk at taking my jacket, I walked up behind her and said, "This is only for warmth."

Then I wrapped my jacket around her shoulders from behind, bringing her body into mine and enclosing her into my

space.

My jacket was large.

Usually, I used it when I skied, having multiple layers on underneath it.

But this time, it was only the jacket and myself, giving me plenty of room for bringing the woman I couldn't stop thinking about into my body heat and arms.

The feel of her up against me was... everything.

Every single thing I'd been missing since I touched her last.

I'd missed the holy hell out of her, and our short, ten-minute romp in the closet didn't help take off years of deprivation.

"That's a good idea," Rose said. "Come here, Tammy, we'll cuddle up together to keep warm."

Sour-faced, Tammy said, "I'm sorry, but I have to go take a phone call."

"Get in here, Rose," Val urged.

Inwardly I cursed. Outwardly, I held my hands open for her to come forth.

She laughed and said, "Absolutely not. I was just teasing."

Thank God.

I closed my hands and said, "Suit yourself, you stubborn woman."

Rose's eyes twinkled, but before she could reply, my phone rang.

"Can you get that out of my pocket, Val?" I asked.

Val reached into the pocket of my scrub top and pulled out my phone, slowly sifting it up through our bodies.

She pushed it out of the top of my jacket, leaned back, and said, "It says your uncle."

I stiffened.

“Here,” Rose said as she took the phone out of Val’s hand and answered it before putting it on speakerphone.

Nothing I could do about it now, I said ‘Hello’ to the screen that Rose was holding up toward our faces.

“About time you answered the phone. Listen, we need money,” my Uncle Woody said without preamble.

I closed my eyes and wished the ground would swallow me up.

For years, I’d done my level best with this man to keep him out of my business, but it was like he couldn’t take the hint.

He wanted to continue torturing me in my adult life like he had in my child one.

“I can’t talk right now, Uncle,” I said stiffly, looking into Rose’s guilty eyes.

I winked at her, hoping that she would get rid of that feeling bad bullshit.

She was just trying to help.

“You’re going to have to talk right now,” Woody said stiffly. “Because your grandfather is about to freeze to death, and I need to buy him a generator!”

Without thinking, I pulled away from the woman in my arms, yanked my jacket off, wrapped it around her, before taking my phone and all but yelling, “You haven’t seen your own father in a year, Wood. He’s been living at my house. What would you getting him a generator do when he lives in my house?”

Woody scoffed, unable to see the big deal.

Like. Fucking. Always.

“What good it would do is for me to get him over to my house if the power goes out,” he lied.

There would be no getting him there.



Woody and his wife, Merrina, lived in downtown Dallas right off one of the busiest interstates in the state. One that was already said to be closed down. There would be no getting to Pops until whatever this bullshit that was about to hit us passed.

And he knew it.

The only good it would do was to give him power.

And honestly, if they all froze to death, that would be too good of a death for them.

Which was horrible of me to think about.

I mean, I was a doctor, for Christ's sake.

I took the Hippocratic Oath to do no harm.

A doctor shouldn't want his family to freeze to death.

Yet, there I was.

"Sorry, but I can't drop you off a check," I lied.

I wouldn't be dropping him shit off, snow or no snow.

"Venmo!" he tried.

"I don't have, nor will I get, Venmo," I disagreed almost immediately. "I gotta go. Our shuttle is here."

There was no shuttle in sight.

What the fuck was taking so long?

I hit the end call button, then turned it on silent and shoved it in my pocket.

It started ringing immediately.

"What was that about?" Rose asked quietly.

I'm not really sure why I entertained her question, but I was so mad that I didn't stop to think about it before the words were already pouring out of my mouth.

"I've spent years with that man all up in my business," I grumbled darkly, sifting my quickly freezing hands into my

hair. “It’s times like these that I want to block him and never take another one of his calls. But I know he’ll just use someone else’s phone to call me and ask for shit.”

“So what’s the story with your family?” Rose asked, worried now.

That pit in my stomach started to widen.

I hated talking about my home life.

It was depressing, not only for me to explain it, but for people to hear it.

“I...” I trailed off, unable to figure out where to start to even explain.

Surprisingly, Val had my back.

“He was taken in by his uncle and aunt when his mom died. When that happened, they got a substantial check that pretty much paid for their lives. They and their kids got to live off of Felix’s mom, going to private schools, getting their colleges paid for. Meanwhile, Felix got a whole bunch of nothing. He was in the same clothes when he arrived that he was when he left for college.”

She was right.

And she sounded freakin’ angry.

She’d always hated my uncle and aunt, and I’d always loved having her on my side like that. It was nice to be fought for, even if it came years and years too late.

Not even Tammy knew the whole story like Val did.

When Tammy and I met at seventeen, she had no idea that at home, I was miserable.

She only knew that I didn’t get along with my ‘parents.’

Hell, it’d taken me a solid two years to tell her that they weren’t actually my parents, but my aunt and uncle.

“That sounds horrible,” Rose said. “You wouldn’t think that you were raised by demons.”

I snorted out a laugh, unable to stop the sound from escaping my throat.

“Demons is very apt,” I said with a sigh. “My family leaves a lot to be desired. I can’t tell you how many times I thought about filing for emancipation. The only good thing I can say is that I graduated at seventeen, and I was allowed to head to college before my eighteenth birthday.”

Val made a growling sound in the back of her throat, but before I could look at her and tell her how cute she was, the transport bus slid to a stop beside us.

And I do mean slid.

The ground was getting icy, and the bus was already having issues holding traction.

That couldn’t mean good things for later.

The transport took much longer than it should have, and I didn’t once complain.

Why would I when Val’s sweet-smelling body was sitting in the chair next to me—there were a lot of people who’d rolled out of the building that we’d nicely waited for—forcing us into much closer proximity than we’d planned.

When the bus slid to a stop in the lot holding our vehicles, I helped Rose to her car—which her husband had slid snow chains on—and waited for her to get into her car before turning and looking for Val.

When I spotted her, I found her getting into the truck with her brother.

Her brother spotted me, nodded, and left without a backward glance.

I didn’t once think about my jacket until I got to my own car and found it neatly folded up on the hood.

I sighed and took it, trying not to be upset about how she’d returned it when once upon a time I wouldn’t be able to pry that out of her cold, dead hands.

Opening my car, I started it up and waited for the heater to kick into gear.

Once it was blowing as hot as it was going to blow until I started moving for it to work better, I put it in drive and headed out of the lot.

Last year, when I'd gotten the BMW X3, I'd thought for sure I wouldn't need to worry about inclement weather. Hell, I'd even tried to convince my grandfather to make a purchase much like my own. Yet, as I slipped and slid my way home, I realized that the old Ford of my grandfather's was much better suited for icy conditions.

My BMW was great and all, but it would be no match for the huge trucks that were sliding their way around the Texas streets. Streets, might I add, that should've been deserted and weren't.

Seriously, people were fuckin' nuts in Texas.

# CHAPTER 8

*I'm a multitasker. I can listen, ignore, and forget all at once.  
-t-shirt*

## FELIX

The last thing I wanted to do was admit defeat, but it was looking like it was going to happen.

I looked at my grandfather, who was trying to put on a brave face, but was failing.

It was cold in the house we shared.

Very cold.

And the goddamn generator I'd purchased to run our whole home during situations exactly like this—learned the hard way through a Texas summer with rolling blackouts to keep the power grid alive—still sat in its box under my carport because the electrician I'd hired to hook it up had bailed on me no less than five times.

To say I was upset would be an understatement.

We'd lost power three hours ago, and though my house was considered one of the 'newer' ones on the block, it still didn't stand a chance against the weird as fuck weather we had going on.

I mean, what were the odds that Texas would experience negative degree temps twice in my lifetime?

The icing on the cake was when I'd tried to light the fire and the smoke had started billowing into the house instead of up and out the chimney.

"Let's go ride around," I suggested, hoping it would be enough to get my Pops warmed up. "I know we're not supposed to be traveling, but anything is better than sitting here in the stupid freezing cold."

"Waffle House," Pops suggested.

I'd heard that Waffle Houses were open.

But my guess, they'd probably be packed, with people exactly like me who had no power, and hadn't had it for days due to this shit.

“Sure, we can give it a try,” I said as I started gathering blankets, food for Gee, my mixed breed dog, and my phone chargers.

Getting Gee and Pops to the truck proved a lot harder than making the decision to leave.

Gee was old, didn't do well when it was hot, let alone freezing cold, and wanted to turn around and go back inside before we'd even made it two steps out the door.

I'd had to pick him up and walk him to Pops's truck before going back for my grandfather.

My grandfather tried to leave on his own as well and had ended up needing to take a prolonged sit on the front steps leading into the house because that's where he'd ended up when he'd fallen.

Luckily, it'd been a controlled fall.

But now his damn pants were wet, and we needed to get him changed.

By the time we got him back out to the truck—which was surprisingly very warm—another thirty minutes had passed.

The drive to the nearest Waffle House took me another thirty, and when we arrived, there were so many people inside that the parking lot was overflowing to the other two surrounding lots.

The tiny establishment was so packed full that there was standing room only, leaving us with no other choice but to look elsewhere.

But we found nothing.

I'd just about given up hope—because goddamn, didn't it figure that Pops's truck was empty and no gas stations were open—when a sign for Circus House caught my eye.

It was a huge billboard that declared Circus House—formerly Singh Circus—was open.

Which had me thinking about Val and her words.

*The circus must go on.*

She'd said that so many times to me that I couldn't count them.

And that's when the idea hit me.

I'd go to her and ask for a place for Pops to stay.

She'd do it, too.

She would overlook my assholiness to help out my pops.

Pulling up my phone, I sent a text to her and got no reply.

Either she'd changed her phone number, or she'd ignored my call.

Either way, I wasn't too sure by the time I arrived at the circus.

The gates were fully closed down, but there was a man at the gate who was in the guard shack munching away on an apple.

When he saw me, I instantly recognized him as the man from the hospital earlier who'd been hugging Val.

She'd looked so happy to be in his arms that I was sick after I'd turned away from the windows.

The rest of the day, I'd done nothing but replay the look of content on her face as she'd hugged him.

Which was likely why I'd taken the call from my uncle so poorly.

I'd already been in a terrible mood.

"What can I do for ya?" the large man asked, his pearly white teeth shining brightly against his black skin.

He was handsome.

I was man enough to admit it.

"Can you tell me if Val is here?" I asked, voice raw.



I didn't know whether it was due to the cold or the way he'd made Val smile earlier.

Either way, I didn't like it that my voice broke.

"She sure is," the man turned his head to look at a monitor. "Do you want me to call her for you?"

I nodded. "If you don't mind."

He grinned and picked up the phone, saying something quietly into the receiver before nodding at whatever he'd heard.

After hanging up, he flashed me a smile. "She vouched for you. Head on through. You can pull into the garage on the far west side."

I thanked him profusely, then headed toward the parking garage.

"This is your Valhalla?"

I looked over at Pops, who'd muttered those words into the silence, and said, "Yeah."

"Are you sure about this?" he asked.

Pops knew everything there was to know about Val.

He knew all about our relationship, and how she'd left me.

Pops had never hated her for leaving, he'd actually been the one to point out that sometimes family was complicated, and we had to do our best with what we'd been given.

However, I knew he was still wary of her.

Val had hurt me by cutting me off so completely, and that wasn't something Pops took lightly.

"I'm not that cold," Pops said.

"We're about to run out of fuel," I said. "And there's no way in hell that I'm not going to find a way to keep you warm, even if it is by begging my ex-girlfriend who hates me to house you."

Pops didn't say anything after that.

In fact, he was quiet all the way until I parked the truck and got out.

Then he saw Val.

He whistled, causing me to look in the direction his face was pointed.

I spotted Val, and my heart did that stupid stutter step it always did when she showed.

As I got out, Gee followed suit, and nearly took me out at the ankles as he did.

Val, spotting Gee coming, grinned and dropped down to her haunches to greet him.

When he'd been living with Pops, Gee hadn't been a huge part of my life. But I'd taken Val to meet my pops and Gee a few times, so when she saw both with me, I knew that she'd welcome them.

Me, however? That was a completely different story.

"Hey," I said as I watched Val sift her fingers through Gee's soft fur.

Gee was a Cocker Spaniel-Weenie dog mix and was about as cute as a dog could get.

He was hard not to love, and he'd apparently not forgotten Val at all.

"Hey," she frowned. "What's going on?"

"We're out of power," I admitted. "And we were going to try to stick it out at home, but Pops is too cold. We tried to find a few shelters but they were pretty full."

"Oh," she frowned. "Come in."

I looked up to find Pops getting out of the car with his blankets.

I rushed over to help him, and when I turned around it was to find Val looping her arms through Pops's and herding him

toward the metal door.

I followed, listening to them catch up.

We passed a few open office doors, and I could hear talking and laughing coming from a little farther down the long hallway we were in, but before we'd gotten to the group, Val turned right toward another hallway that had one single closed door at the end of it.

When we went inside, I found out why.

The cat from hell was in there.

Right when we'd finished our last semester of school, Val had found a cat by the dumpster outside of our apartment.

The cat had turned into a living cyclone of a cat—aptly named Cyclone—and had hated me with every ounce of his being.

That should've been my first sign that things weren't going to go my way.

“So, you're going to hang with me for a while,” Val said. “I'd like to introduce you to Cyclone then. He's a little pain in the butt at first, but he'll settle down once he gets to know you.”

Lies.

I didn't call her on it, though.

I did snort, which caused her to look at me with narrowed eyes.

I looked away, unable to stop the sardonic smile from lifting my lips.

Val caught it, rolled her eyes at me because she damn well knew she'd just lied—and I really couldn't see the cat getting any better over time based solely on how awful he was when he was younger—and then turned back to Pops.

“Oh, he's a pretty kitty,” Pops said quietly “Who's a good boy?”

Gee wagged his tail, but it was Cyclone who walked right up to Pops and hopped straight into his arms.

Imagine that...

“Wow,” Val exclaimed. “He doesn’t even like my siblings that much.”

My stomach soured.

“Is it okay if they stay?” I asked quickly and quietly.

Val rolled her eyes, then crossed her arms over her chest.

She was wearing sweatpants and a sweatshirt and had fuzzy socks on her feet.

She looked adorable, and I hated her.

I hated her so much for breaking what we had.

Yet... I found it hard to hate her as much the more days passed.

“It’s more than okay,” she nodded. “We have a huge generator that runs everything here, and so much room it’s not even funny.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

I hated that I didn’t know anyone here that well.

Moving to Dallas when I had had been rash. I should’ve stopped to think about logistics first, and what I would do if an emergency arose.

Yet, all I could think about was getting here, and inserting myself into Val’s life.

Making it hard for her to keep ignoring me as she had been for all this time.

“Thanks,” I said roughly. “I’m actually going to head back home then,” I said. “If it’s okay, I’ll bring his clothes and the rest of his blankets inside and then take off.”

Val’s head whipped toward me. “You’re not staying?”

I didn’t think I physically could stay and not want more.

I was past the point of being able to be logical about this situation.

I should've fucking known that by creating this scenario, it'd be just as much of a test for me as it had been for her. I should've known that by being close to her, I'd start to remember all the reasons that I'd wanted her there in the first place.

Years had passed, and the aching in my chest hadn't gotten any better.

In fact, having her this close, but unable to have her like I used to, was like repeatedly stabbing myself in the chest.

The more time went on where I could look but not touch, the more I realized that this was a stupid decision.

I couldn't keep doing this.

"I gotta go," I said as my answer.

"Why didn't you take him to the hospital?" she suggested as she watched Pops from across the room as he hugged her cat.

Her cat.

Years ago when she'd first met me, she wouldn't have been caught dead with a cat.

Her 'there's only room enough for one asshole in my life, and I'm it' response every time I suggested she get an animal to keep her company.

But apparently, like with me, her tastes had changed.

Feeling rather vulnerable now, I shared the other big problem on my plate.

I was already shaking my head. "He can't be there. It's bad enough that I bring home what I do to him. He's..." I sighed. "He's going to die soon. And I'd rather not speed that along."

Her attention focused on me. "What do you mean he's going to die soon?"

I rubbed the back of my neck and was about to find a succinct way to answer her, hopefully by not telling her all of my grandfather's issues, but Pops answered before I could.

"I have asshole cancer," Pops called out, proving it wasn't his ears that were affected. "What Felix is trying to tell you is that I won't walk around with a shit bag attached to me for the rest of my life, and I don't want my asshole removed because of the cancer. Not to mention, I don't want to go through the trouble of having cancer treatments when I've already lived a very full life."

I sighed.

"Pops," I said, sounding... broken.

That's what I was.

Over the last five years, I'd lost a lot of things in my life.

I'd lost my parents. My childhood. The small fortune that my parents left me. I'd accrued massive debts to get through college and had sacrificed a lot of things to make Pops understand that he was wanted by me.

Then there was Val.

She left, and like always, that was just one other thing that broke me and continued to break me.

I could feel Val looking at me, but unable to look at her and acknowledge all that I felt, I turned to Pops and said, "You'll be okay here while I go home and try to get all the issues figured out?"

There were no issues.

I just couldn't be here.

And it was as if he understood that.

"I'll be fine," he said.

And he would.

Val would take care of him.

"Good," I grumbled. "I think I'm gonna go then."

“Don’t wreck my truck,” Pops ordered. “I’m gonna get three more good weeks out of it.”

That made my stomach sink further.

“Yes, Pops.” I was going to throw up.

I couldn’t be here any longer.

“Thanks, Val,” I said as I started for the door. “If you need me, call?”

Val was blank faced as she nodded once.

I fled.

I drove home, slipping and sliding on autopilot.

Then I crawled into bed under six blankets and shivered my way into sleep.

# CHAPTER 9

*This is Bob. Bob has no arms.*

*Knock knock? Who's there. Not bob.*

*-text from Felix to Val with a stick figure drawing.*



## VAL

“What was that all about?” I asked quietly.

I felt like something had just happened right in front of me and I hadn’t been able to comprehend that shit was about to go down until Felix was already gone.

Like a trainwreck.

One that you saw happening yet couldn’t prevent.

Pops took a seat on the couch and extended his legs to rest out in front of him.

He eyed me for a long time before saying, “It’s good to see you again.”

I smiled. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

Pops smiled, though it didn’t reach his eyes.

“A long time,” he agreed. “I always thought you were it for him, you know?”

My stomach sank.

“Felix... he hasn’t ever gotten the easy end of the deal,” he said.

My insides seized. “I...”

“You don’t have to explain or come up with any excuses that you think won’t sting,” he said quietly. “But maybe I should give you more insight into Felix’s life.”

I took a seat on the other side of the couch, then turned my body so that I was facing Pops.

“Okay,” I said quietly.

It was like being told that you were about to be handed the sun.

So freakin’ eager, yet slightly terrified of what was about to happen at the same time.

“How much of Felix’s home life situation did he tell you?” he asked.

I told him what I knew about his aunt and uncle.

Pops nodded, then started to once again sift his fingers through Cyclone’s fur.

The sight made my belly hurt.

Because the only person I’d ever seen pet Cyclone like that had been Felix.

He liked to say that Cyclone was wild, but I still saw all those times where Cyclone and Felix would be cuddled up on the couch together when they thought no one was watching.

“Well, there’s a lot more to it than that,” Pops said.

I waited, and he flashed me a grin that was so much Felix that my heart jolted at the sight.

“My daughter, Linny, became a mother at sixteen.”

I blinked. “That’s news to me.”

Pops nodded. “Linny fell pregnant when she was fifteen because a boy she trusted decided to take what wasn’t freely given.”

Meaning, Linny was raped.

Felix was a product of rape.

Fuck.

“Oh,” I said softly.

“Sometimes, I think she died because she was tired of fighting,” he said. “Felix was the one to find Linny.”

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Linny was driving home from work and drove off into the trees. There were no tire marks showing that she’d avoided something in the road. No obvious signs of any issues. Nothing that would’ve warranted her driving off the road

where she did.” He ran his fingers over the length of Cyclone’s back. “It took us four days to find her. And the only reason we found her when we did was because Felix started to ride the length of Linny’s drive home on his bike. It took him about eight trips to notice the break in the woods.”

Hell.

That hadn’t been something he’d shared with me.

“And then we found out that Linny had a sizeable life insurance policy on herself,” he said. “Almost as if she planned for Felix to always be taken care of.”

But he wasn’t.

“But then my son found out about the life insurance policy, and all of a sudden he wanted something to do with his family again after being estranged from us for eleven years.” He paused. “We believe that Woody, my son, knows who was responsible for whomever took advantage of Linny. Yet, he wouldn’t share that information with us, and when we pushed back, he disappeared from our lives. Until there was money involved, and no way for him to feel guilt by seeing his sister’s devastated face with any regularity.”

Stomach in knots, I said, “That’s... insane.”

“That’s my son.” Pops shrugged. “Not sure where his mother and I went wrong with him, but at some point, he wasn’t the son we raised anymore. He was this person who no one recognized.”

Gee butted my hand with his nose, and I reached down and started to sift my fingers through his silky fur.

“Felix told me that you were too sick to take care of him,” I said softly.

“I was,” he admitted. “I’ve fought off cancer three times in my life. I’m seventy-eight years old now, and the last thing I want to do is have this continue to affect what little life I have left.”

I could understand that.

We'd done a rotation through the cancer ward years ago when I was in college. I knew better than any regular person how much hardship cancer brought to peoples' lives.

"There's nothing wrong with making that decision," I pointed out.

"No," he shrugged. "But by me leaving, I'm just creating another situation that'll put Felix at odds with Woody and Merrina."

I couldn't stand hearing Merrina's name.

Out of the two people who'd practically ruined what was left of his childhood, it'd been Merrina who had relished in making Felix's life hell.

I'd heard enough stories from Felix to know that Merrina had actually taken special pride in thinking up new and inventive ways to make his life hell.

At least Woody only ignored him.

Merrina not so much.

"Felix is older now," I pointed out.

"Felix may be older, but he still has that same heart," he said, his eyes going a bit flinty as he refocused on me. "You left him. Just left and didn't call."

My back immediately straightened. "I most certainly did not."

"He told me that you never answered his texts. Changed your number so he couldn't call. Wouldn't answer his emails," he replied bluntly. "And to be completely honest with you, dear, my grandson doesn't lie. He's blunt. He tells it like it is. And he doesn't beat around the bush. People think he's an asshole. But really, it's just that he's had to deal with so much backstabbing and bullshit that he finds it easier to be very upfront with his feelings, thoughts, and desires. He obviously thinks that you left him, or he wouldn't have shared that information with me."

I instantly deflated, my ire leaving me just as easily as it'd arrived.

"I called him every day for what felt like a lifetime."

His brows went up. "He never got a single call."

"But that doesn't change the fact that I did," I pointed out.

Then I told him exactly what I'd done, when I'd done it, and for how long.

"I gave up last year," I replied quietly. "I got the hint."

That's when Pops leaned forward, displacing Cyclone who hissed at him and jumped off.

Neither one of us paid him any mind as Pops said, "You gave up. Which is what it seems like everyone in his life had done to him so far. Even I'm giving up, Val. Even I'm giving up."

Well, when he put it like that...

"Shit."

"I'm about to be leaving him a two-million-dollar life insurance policy, and a whole lot of headache," Pops said. "It might be nice if Felix had someone to lean on when shit hits the fan."

When he put it like that, how could I say no?

"Are you sure he wants that?" I asked.

Pops smirked. "My grandson has wanted two things in his entire life. One was his mother to not be so sad. And two, it's you. It's been years, and yet I know the reason we moved here was because of you. Even if he hates you, and you hate him, at least he still gets to see you."

I felt an ache continue to build in my chest. "I'll talk to him."

He winked. "I know."

But a day and a half later, when the sun decided to come out and the ice burned off of the road, he didn't come.

In fact, I didn't see him again for almost a week.  
And in that week, a lot of things changed.  
And none of them for the better.

# CHAPTER 10

*Okay, but consider this: Who the fuck asked you?  
-Text from Val to Keene*

## FELIX

Avoidance was key.

That was my new tactic after picking Pops up from the circus.

After giving her pretty much free rein to do whatever she wanted and pawing her off on another doctor who could oversee her—I know, it was stupid of me seeing as I was her attending—I managed to avoid her almost the entire time I was on shift.

The one good thing I could say was that since the hospital we were at was so large, I had no problem pushing her into the minor ER—where all kinds of bullshit things like hangnails, broken toes, small stiches, and such went—and letting her start working her way through things on her own.

In fact, each time I checked in on her, she seemed like she was doing great.

At least, I thought she was, anyway.

Then I ran straight into her as I was on my way to the break room.

Well, more like, the supply closet that was near the break room.

In order to avoid her, I'd had to get creative, and in doing that, it meant that I couldn't eat where everyone else ate anymore.

Sure, there were other places in the hospital that I could eat, but really, when you were a loner like me, you tended to congregate to places where people were not.

Though, I hadn't always been a loner.

Long ago, before I'd had my heart ripped out of my chest by a certain little Viking woman, I'd been outgoing and social. I'd forced myself into that role as I'd moved out of my aunt



and uncle's house and had wanted something different out of my life than what they'd foisted upon me.

And that outgoingness had netted me the hottest thing in the world: Val.

For four short years, I'd been the happiest I'd ever been. Despite the stress of going to medical school, the countless hours of studying, bills that needed paid that we didn't have the money to pay them with, and everything that had gone on with our families, I'd still been so blissfully happy it was amazing.

Then she'd left, and I'd gone back to that person who didn't want anything from anyone. The one who fully expected to be treated like trash, thrown away and discarded.

My mom had done it—even though Pops liked to say he 'didn't know how she died.'

We all knew. My mom had been unhappy with her life here on this planet. To this day, I didn't know why she was so damn unhappy, but I knew it had a lot to do with me. With her brother.

With life in general.

Regardless, she'd left me. Then my Pops couldn't take me, leaving me to the hell on Earth that was my aunt and uncle's house. Then Val had left me.

Honestly, there was no real reason to be outgoing or nice to people, or fucking care in general, when the only thing I ever got out of life was disappointment.

I was so lost in thought, thinking about how nice and quiet the utility room was about to be while I ate the most delicious smelling burger in the world, when I ran smack dab into the woman I'd been dutifully avoiding all week.

Her eyes narrowed as we came to a stop, the burger bag sandwiched between us.

I stepped back and nervously reached into my bag, my fingers undoing the wrapper before I could think about what I

was doing.

“Well look who it is. The avoider,” she mused.

My stomach sank.

“Definitely not avoiding,” I lied as I all but peeled the burger wrapper off and dropped it.

“Then what would you call it?” she asked. “I’ve spent the last week nowhere near you, definitely not being watched over by my supervisor on shift and have been getting the shittiest cases imaginable.”

She was right.

Though, this time it wasn’t per design.

Though, I had a sinking suspicion it did have to do with Tammy, who’d been shooting me dirty glares all week because she’d been stuck in the minor ER with Val, and hadn’t been all too happy about it, either.

It wasn’t my fault that she’d scheduled her shifts weird, and she couldn’t work in the big emergency room with her regular shifts. She was the one who wanted to get on the same shifts as me, but when there was a full roster of nurses who had seniority over her, she got what she got.

That just so happened to mean she got Val.

And I was such an asshole for throwing the two of them together.

To cover up my actual avoidance of her, I had to act like I wasn’t completely fucked in the head whenever she was around and *was* actually avoiding her. To do that, I did what I did best. Came up with shit on the fly.

That was what made a good ER doctor great, right?

“I was actually coming to get you,” I said as I took a full bite of burger so I could think a bit longer.

“Oh, yeah?” she asked.

I nodded, before shoving another bite of food into my mouth.

At least, if it looked like I was in a hurry, and was actually coming to get her, then maybe she wouldn't call me out for avoiding her again.

"Yeah," I said around another bite full of burger.

God, it was good.

Too bad I couldn't savor it like I'd intended to do in the utility closet.

"What is it?" she asked, actually sounding eager.

Which only made me feel more guilty. The fact that she was excited to do something that wasn't stupid and ridiculous made me remember how excited I used to be when I first started as a resident.

"Um," I said around another burger bite. "Follow me."

She did, hustling up to my side as I started to lead her into the main hallway that led between the ER and the minor ER.

Luckily, as if the heavens knew I needed a miracle STAT, the doors to the front of the ER opened and the worst possible scenario entered, facing backwards on a wheelchair.

And her vagina was facing right toward me.

So was her asshole.

Her asshole that was steadily leaking poop, and there was definitely a baby coming out of her vagina.

Awesome.

My worst nightmare.

There weren't a lot of things as an ER doctor that really affected me, but there was just something about births that I really hated.

Maybe it was because of the awkwardness of delivering a baby. Maybe it was because I just didn't like dealing with babies because they were so small and delicate.

Or it was possible because during our maternity rotation, I'd had some of the worst cases imaginable.

Regardless, I didn't like them.

And the woman at my side knew it.

"That's why you came and got me, isn't it?" She laughed then. "Jesus Christ."

So Val knew exactly why I hated births.

I'd had three people die on me during each of the births I'd been a part of.

One being the father, who'd fallen over and hit his head on the corner of a windowsill, stroked out after the baby was born, and died before any of us could figure out what had happened.

The second time I'd assisted in a birth, the mom had suffered a shoulder dystocia, the baby had gotten stuck, and the mother had died during the c-section.

The third time, the baby I'd had to deliver was a still birth.

All three had traumatized me, and I'd gone to great lengths never to have to deal with births again.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said as I stuffed the rest of my burger into the bag and threw it away.

Val went into action and helped the mother into a bed in the trauma room, cleaned the mom up, then helped deliver the baby.

All of it was done in a matter of minutes.

I'd just seen her place the baby on mom's chest when the ambulance bay door popped open, and a couple of firefighters walked in trying to restrain a patient.

The patient was swinging, with one hand only because he was currently cuffed to the gurney, and a cop was walking back a bit trying to cover a busted-up eyebrow that was leaking blood everywhere.

All three—cop and two firefighters—were women.

And they looked harried, as if they hadn't expected the dude to start swinging when he had.

I leapt into action, throwing myself onto the gurney and restraining the guy as he went for another swing at the closest firefighter.

He got a solid punch to my right pec when he did, and I tried not to curse as I slammed him back down to the gurney.

"I need some..." I trailed off as my arm muscles bulged as I tried to keep the dude on the gurney.

But fuck, he was strong.

As in, he was on drugs and didn't know his own strength, strong.

"Hot damn," I heard someone say. "That's freakin' hot."

I half listened as the women gave us a rundown of what had gone down since they'd gotten the man into the back of the ambulance.

The man had been doing drugs. Speed they thought.

He'd been terrorizing a bunch of kids in a park—all teenagers who had done nothing but rile the man up and get him wound tighter and tighter—and had been swinging on them when the police and ambulance arrived.

Meds had been pushed to bring him down from his high, but it was as if he'd received nothing.

I ignored whomever it was saying that and continued to put all my strength in keeping the guy from swinging on me and the women who were now surrounding me.

And every last fuckin' one of them were women.

Now I'm not saying that women can't do what men can do, but I have found that when it comes to combative patients who don't know their own strength, they can be rather destructive.

And the last thing I wanted to happen was for one of them to get hurt on my watch.

Sweat started to slide down the length of my spine, pooled at my forehead and dripped off my face.

A: it was hot as fuck in here thanks to the hospital thinking that we needed to keep it warmer because of the weird as fuck weather we experienced the last month. And B: because it was hard fucking work trying to restrain someone who didn't care if you broke their arm or not in the process.

“Get the meds!” I called out, unable to form the words of the meds with my brain working overtime to keep everyone in the ER right now from getting murdered by this man. “Now!”

That's when I saw Val.

She came around the corner of the gurney, a syringe in her hands, and headed toward the bed with a determined look on her face.

I saw it happening as if in slow motion, but due to the perilous hold I had on the man, I could do nothing to stop it, or the reaction would be even worse.

She stepped forward, syringe extended in one hand, and stabbed it right into the man's shoulder.

She'd gotten half the plunger on the syringe pushed when the man reacted as if he'd been given a burst of even more superhuman strength.

He reared back his head, turned, and launched himself at Val.

It took everything I had, and I do mean everything, to only let him head butt her directly in the face.

Val went down like a sack of bricks, and I used one last burst of strength to hold him down with my body, hooking my legs into the metal bars on the sides of the gurney, and plunged the rest of the damn syringe into his shoulder.

He calmed, but not by much.

“Sit. The fuck. Down!” I growled through gritted teeth, muscles screaming at the strain of trying to keep him in place.

People were all around us now—men who had strength to hold on and not get thrown off—holding the man down. But even their strength was barely enough.

Another woman, this one with a determined look on her face like Val who was now bleeding off to the side of the room, came forward and I stopped her. “You. Get the fuck out. You, too.”

I growled it at Val and the nurse, Hope.

Hope froze, her eyes wide.

“He’ll throw y’all around like fuckin’ dolls right now!” I snapped as the biggest dude in the ER—an orderly who was six-foot-five of muscle and sinew—all but laid himself on top of the dude. “Get the fuck out of this trauma room! All of you!”

They left, and I knew I hadn’t won any points.

I knew that women could do just as much as men could do, but this situation wasn’t one where they’d be proving it to me. If I could keep them out of harm’s way, I’d do it.

Val left with a glare in my direction, and I knew I’d have to kiss her ass later to get back into her good graces.

“Bad move, bro,” I heard Tyrese, the orderly, say. “But smart. Still gonna pay for that later.”

Probably.

But as long as I only had to sew up one woman tonight, I’d live with the consequences.

It took a solid fifteen minutes to get the guy under control enough for us all to trust he’d finally stopped fighting.

Whatever the guy had taken, it’d been enough to give him this insane amount of strength, but now that he was off that high, you could tell he’d just depleted every single reserve he had.

I walked out of the trauma room with a wary set of my shoulders, and looked at the first person who came into sight.

Hope.

She was studiously ignoring me.

“Where’s Val?” I asked. “Is she getting sewn up?”

None of them answered me, and I sighed.

Fuckin’ awesome.

But I had just indoctrinated Val into their ranks.

Not a single one of them would treat her poorly based solely on how badly I’d just treated her.

I nearly rolled my eyes as I walked out of the ER in search of her, picking up supplies as I did.

I didn’t find her in any of her usual hiding spots, and figured she’d gone up to the one place she thought I wouldn’t follow.

Crimson’s room.

And that’s exactly where I found her.

I made it up to the second floor and knew by the look of annoyance on some of the nurses’ faces that they’d already heard what had gone down a floor below.

“I’m sorry, okay?” I asked. “This motherfucker was strong. I didn’t want him hurting any of them.”

One nurse, a rather plump black lady, snickered. “We see by those bruises forming on your arm that you probably saved quite a few of them from getting hurt. That doesn’t mean they’ll forget being yelled at.”

No, no it wouldn’t.

“She here?” I asked.

The woman nodded. “In her sister’s room.”

Her sister who, as of tomorrow, would be going home according to my doctor buddy.



I looked in and found Val with her head resting on the side of Crimson's bed.

Crimson's man, Winston, was looking on in horror.

Mostly because there was blood fucking everywhere.

Head wounds bled.

That didn't mean I liked seeing the blood all over Val.

"You ready to get that stitched up?" I asked, waving the kit in the room.

Crimson, Winston, and Val all looked at me.

The first two with relief, and the last with anger.

"What are you doing here?" she snapped, angry as hell and not hiding it.

"Fixing your head," I admitted. "I'm sorry for yelling at you."

Her eyes went wide.

"I was stressed, seeing you get hit like that made me fucking want to kill him, and the fastest way to get that urge under control was to get y'all out of there," I admitted. "I'm sorry for yelling and undermining you down there. It won't happen again."

Hopefully.

Maybe.

Probably not if that situation ever presented itself again, but she didn't need to know about that indecision.

She deflated. "Oh."

I looked toward Winston with a raised brow, and he shrugged.

"He does have a point, though," Crimson said. "I mean, let's face reality here. All it would've taken was one wrong move, and you could've died. You're lucky that you just hit the ground and need stitches. And what you told us about the

cop, she took a grazing glance of his fist across her temple and was out in the back of the ambulance for a full two minutes. If he hadn't been cuffed to that bed for the majority of the ride, that entire ambulance crew could've died."

Hearing that part of the story was news to me. But Crimson was right.

This could've gone so much worse, and they all knew it.

"Let's just also point out that when we work the games part of the circus, ninety-five percent of men can hit that little punching bag harder than a woman. I'm not saying that you couldn't have taken that hit, but hitting your face, and hitting Felix's face, are so much different." Crimson continued, "And you bruise easily."

I bit my lip, trying to keep the smile veiled.

Crimson was right. Val did bruise easily. As in, the woman couldn't walk around and graze a table with her leg without a bruise the size of the table popping up on her thigh.

"Come over here already and fix it," Crimson said eventually when Val had nothing to add to her sister's words.

I came in, shoved everything to the side on her food tray, and set up the kit.

I got started, and eventually put four very small sutures in the hairline of Val's head.

She didn't say a word the entire time.

But Crimson watched the entire thing with avid fascination.

"You know, I kind of wished they would've recorded my surgery so I could've watched it," Crimson sighed. "This is awesome. Maybe I should be a doctor."

"You hop through life like a goddamn rabbit," Winston supplied from his chair beside the bed that both Crimson and Val were now occupying. "There's no way in the world you're going to be able to take the time it's going to require to become a doctor. You know how much Val had to work. You

straight up told me all about her life after she left a few days ago. Do you honestly think you can hack it?"

Crimson looked at her man.

"Are you saying you don't believe in me, Winston?" She batted her eyelashes at him.

"He's calling you on your bullshit," Hades said as she came in.

Hades was my favorite sister.

I liked her because she had always been able to tell her father to 'go fuck himself' while the rest of them seemed to be inherently wired to always give the selfish fuck exactly what he wanted.

When I heard that he'd continued to dictate their lives, even after death with their stupid two-year working for the circus bullshit, I honestly wanted to throw my hands up in frustration. And every last fuckin' one of them gave the old goat exactly what he'd wanted.

All except for Hades.

She'd fought back, and I admired her for it.

She walked in wearing a slouchy sweater that looked like it was about to fall right off her shoulder, a pair of dirty jeans that looked like they'd been through hell, and a pair of hiking boots.

"Come right off the trail?" I asked her.

"Came right from Colorado where I shot a destination wedding for a philanthropist who had more money than sense," she corrected me. "It's nice to see you again, Felix. You're looking very good."

Crimson snickered. "He does look pretty good, doesn't he? You look like you've been working out."

I ignored them both and added one last stitch before I started to clean Val up.

In my time with Val, I'd had a lot of time to get to know the sisters.

Val couldn't go a single day without talking to at least three of them on the phone.

When I got home, she was on a phone call with at least one of them. When she was in the car, there was another on the phone. At least one or two of them would call during her shift, too.

Needless to say, I'd had plenty of time to get to know them and had even met them all multiple times during our relationship.

It was good to see them again.

"Done," I said right as the phone in my pocket started to vibrate.

I felt my stomach clench.

The home health nurse promised she'd be giving me a call at some point today after her visit with my Pops to give me an update on what our next stage was.

I didn't like how close to the visit that call was coming in.

"I gotta take this," I muttered as I stripped off my gloves and threw them into the nearest trash can as I walked out of the room, completely leaving all my trash behind.

I heard someone say 'uh-oh' but didn't wait around to find out who.

I placed the phone to my ear and said, "Mrs. Vance."

"Call me Vicky," Mrs. Vance sighed. "I have some news."

My stomach clenched.

She said, "Can you come home?"

God. Dammit.

# CHAPTER 11

*Each day brings endless agony.*  
*-t-shirt*

## FELIX

“Assisted suicide.”

I looked at my grandfather. “Pops, that’s not allowed in Texas.”

Pops looked at me like I was a fuckin’ nut.

“You’re a doctor, Felix Alexander Kent. Do you honestly believe that you can’t help me?” Pops asked.

I looked at him like my world had just ended.

“He only has, at best, a week left,” Vicky said softly. “His organs are already starting to shut down. You can see that in the yellowing of his eyes, and his lack of appetite.”

That’d been the reason behind my call this morning.

His lack of enthusiasm when it came to eating.

I wanted him to pick up a damn chocolate bar or something, and not even that interested him.

“What about nutrients through an IV?” I asked.

My grandfather sighed.

“He’s refused any and all intervention,” she replied softly. “We started him on a low dose of morphine today since he can’t keep the pills down any longer.”

That was news to me.

I hadn’t realized that his pain medication wasn’t something he could keep down.

Had I known, I would’ve started him on some IV pain killers when he came home a few days ago when he’d first started to show signs of having issues.

“And since he hasn’t had a bowel movement in over a week, that’s just another sign that this is going to degrade faster rather than slower,” Vicky continued. “Now I can’t help y’all when it comes to assisted suicide. I’m sorry, Mr. Kent. But I can say that I can help make you comfortable in your

final days.” She looked at me, and I followed her out of the room.

When we were in the hallway that led to the front door, she said, “He’s being very hush hush about this, but he’s in a lot of pain. So much so that he’s vomiting. Which is causing him to be dehydrated. Which in turn is only making other things worse.”

“He refused the IV?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

“He did,” she confirmed. “He allowed the pain shot, but that’s not going to help long, either.”

Sick.

I was physically going to be sick.

“What now?” I asked.

“Now, I get the hospital bed delivered,” she said. “I start coming in the morning and the afternoon. And if you have any issues whatsoever, you need to call me. It’s coming, Felix.”

I nodded, heart in my throat.

When I’d met Vicky, it was in the hospital as she was checking on one of her hospice patients.

Loving how she’d gone above and beyond for him in his last days, I’d researched her place of work, and her, when it was time for my own grandfather to be needing services that she provided.

I looked down at my feet. “Ask for the time off, Felix. You have less than a week.” She looked down the hallway where we knew Pops still sat exactly where he’d been left. “If it’s up to him, it’ll be even sooner.”

• • •

*Two days later*

“It’s time,” Pops said.

I looked at him from where he was lying propped up in the hospital bed in the middle of the living room.

“What?” I asked.

He turned his head, smiled, and said, “It’s time.”

My stomach knotted.

That was what I was afraid I’d heard.

“How do you know?” I asked, turning the television we’d both been watching on mute.

Vicky was right.

Pops had decided it was time, and his body was shutting down so fast that my head was spinning.

I’d seen hundreds of people die.

It was par for the course for a doctor.

But seeing my own flesh and blood, the man who had practically raised me, dying before my eyes was the toughest thing I’d ever experienced.

Even worse, he wasn’t letting me tell my uncle that things were bad.

Sure, my uncle knew that Pops had cancer.

But Pops hadn’t allowed me to tell Woody just how bad the cancer was.

It was going to come out of left field for Woody, and he was going to take it out on me.

But I’d do just about anything to keep Pops happy and comfortable in his final days, even brave the wrath of my uncle after the fact.

“I know because there’s this light,” he said as he pointed at the light above him.

I snorted as I got out of my recliner and headed toward him. “How do you really know, Pops?”



He sounded weaker.

As if his voice wasn't as strong.

“Because I feel your grandmother,” he smiled as his eyes closed. “It feels like her hand is right here on my heart. Like she’s telling me to hurry up and come to bed because she wants a snuggle.”

I swallowed hard and placed my hand over his heart.

His heartbeats were slow.

“She misses you,” I said. “You’ve been making her wait a long time.”

Pops’s eyes opened.

The watery blue orbs were intense as he said, “I’m not one to make a dying wish, but I’m going to do it.”

I waited, knowing I wasn’t going to like what I was about to hear.

“Find out what your uncle knows when it comes to your mom’s death,” he ordered. “I want to die knowing that she’s going to have peace.”

“Do you know something, Pops?” I asked.

He nodded. “I know something happened to her. I know that you’re not going to like what you find out. And I know that your life is about to never be the same.”

“It won’t,” I replied.

He lifted his face, and I could swear he was smiling bigger than I’d ever seen him smile.

“Your mom’s here.”

I swallowed hard.

“She was the light of my life, you know. Your grandmother and I, she was the best thing that ever happened to us,” he said.

I sat on the edge of his bed and took his hand in mine. “Will you tell her that I miss her?”

He opened his eyes again and said, “She says that you need to stop being so stubborn and get the girl back.”

I laughed then, my voice choking on a sob. “She says, or you say?”

He closed his eyes as he said, “Same thing, right?”

No. No, it wasn't.

But I'd give him that leeway.

“I love you, Pops. If you're ready, I'm ready,” I lied.

He snorted.

It was such a soft snort that it could almost be considered a short breath of air, barely there.

“Remember what I said,” he ordered, albeit quietly. “And remember that love is there waiting for you, if you only reach out and take it.”

I looked down at our joined hands.

When I next looked up, it was to see his chest rise and then fall one last time. He didn't take another one.

I wouldn't admit it, but I cried.

I cried like a goddamn baby.

# CHAPTER 12

*Sorry for having great tits and correct opinions.  
-Text from Val to Felix*

## VAL

Something told me that I should go check on him.

I was absolutely exhausted, had about seventeen almonds throughout the day, and the very last thing I wanted to do was see Felix and have him remind me that he didn't want me.

Yet, something nagged at me. Something told me that, despite my feelings on the matter, I needed to go check on him.

He'd been gone all week, and I'd sat there and worst-case scenarioed it for the better part of six and a half days. Was he out with Tammy—who was also suspiciously absent? Was he sick? Was his grandfather sick?

My mind reeled, and eventually I admitted defeat.

So that was what I did after grabbing us our Taco Bell order—an order that I still knew by heart all these years later.

I drove up to his house. I'd gotten the information from Folsom—who strangely had it a heck of a lot faster than I thought she probably should have.

The place was dark, not a single light was on inside or outside the house.

I did see Felix's BMW and his grandfather's truck, though, meaning they were home.

I also didn't see a third vehicle that would indicate anyone else's presence.

Pulling up to the curb outside of his house—a beautiful historical home on Swiss Avenue—I couldn't help but stare.

Felix's place wasn't the biggest on the block by any means, but it wasn't the smallest, either.

It was on a corner lot with a very spacious yard, lush green grass, lots of shade trees, and the most gorgeous white house right in the middle of it.

It was my dream home, and I knew without a doubt that the reason behind his purchase of this one in particular was my love for all things old. He'd always been a new build kind of person, and I'd always been a 'old homes have character' kind of gal.

It'd been one of the things we continuously fought about because he liked to point out that for busy people like us, an old home would get time consuming and tedious. Meanwhile, my opinion was solidly on the 'all new homes are cookie cutter and have no character.'

We'd been solidly undecided when I'd gotten the call about my father—the life ruiner—and we'd stay divided on the matter forever.

Swallowing hard at the emotions that started to well up inside me at seeing his acquiescence, giving me what he knew I wanted whether he intended for me to know about it or not, I got out of my car and started up the front walk.

Even the walk was lined with purple flowers, just like I'd wanted.

I got halfway there when I remembered about the Taco Bell in my front seat and had to go back for it.

When I turned around and headed back for the house, it was to find Felix standing in the door... and the man did not look good. In fact, if there was a picture beside 'bad' in the dictionary, his face would definitely fill the space.

He was wearing a black t-shirt, one I recognized as his comfort shirt that he wore when he needed to relax and unwind, a pair of black sweatpants that had just as many holes as the shirt—also a comfort thing—and nothing else.

It was cold as hell out here, and he was standing on his front porch in only those two things—I bet he didn't even have any underwear on, because I knew that when he was wearing those two things, he usually didn't wear any.

I tried not to allow my gaze to slide down the length of him, but who was I kidding? It was a losing battle.

The man drew my attention like no other, and before I knew it, my gaze taking in all the details of his body.

And yes, I had my suspicions about underwear confirmed. He was not wearing them.

I hurried up the walk, my face flushed and my body doing things that it probably shouldn't.

"Felix," I said as I got close. "I just had..."

He interrupted me by saying, "My grandfather just died."

My heart sank.

I hadn't wanted that worst-case scenario to come true, even though I was a logical person and knew it would.

"Oh, Lix," I said quietly. "I'm sorry."

My resorting to nicknames at times of intense emotion made my heart hurt.

"I..." he hesitated, unsure what to say.

I pushed him into the house and closed the door.

The house smelled old.

I loved it.

The entryway was beautiful, and I would study it later in more detail.

But right now, it was all about Felix.

I wrapped him in a hug and squeezed him tight, unable to stop myself.

He caught me up almost desperately in his arms and squeezed me back, not letting go for so long that my breathing was slightly labored.

He released me, and I hated every freakin' second of it.

I pulled back, but only far enough that I could look up into his eyes.

They were wet with unshed tears and my damn stupid heart started to pound all over again.

“Have the hospice people just left?” I asked.

He swallowed hard and shook his head. “I haven’t been able to call them.”

Oh.

Meaning, it’d just happened.

Or maybe, it’d happened a while ago and he still couldn’t work up the courage to call.

“Let me have your phone and I’ll do it,” I said.

I’d left mine in the car in my haste to get here, and I wouldn’t leave his side until the task was done.

He handed it over, and I automatically put in his passcode.

It opened with the knowledge that he still used my birth date as the code to get in.

I shoved down the feelings that were trying to rise to the surface and searched for his recent calls, finding the hospice number, and hit go.

They answered, and then promised to have someone out as soon as possible.

“What are the plans for the services?” I asked. “Did y’all discuss that?”

When we were dating, we’d always talked about direct cremation.

Not wanting to waste money on a funeral, we’d thought to make it easier on our loved ones and ourselves we would skip the funeral home process and ship our bodies straight from where we died to the crematorium.

I wasn’t sure if he’d had the same thoughts in mind still, or at all since it was his grandfather and not him.

“Direct,” he croaked. “He didn’t want anything exciting.”

I looked down at my hands.

“Do you want me to call anyone else?” I asked carefully.

*Please don't say your uncle. Please don't say your uncle.*

“Um, yeah.” He rubbed at his neck. “You can call Tammy and let her know. She'll want to know. But you can tell her not to come over. I don't think I want anyone here right now.”

I felt my stomach sink. “I'll make those phone calls and go then.”

His head snapped up. “That's not what I meant. Please stay.”

My insides felt like warm butter at his words.

“Oh.” I licked my lips nervously, then nodded. I'd stay as long as he wanted me to stay. “I'll just call her then.”

And that was what I did.

Tammy answered in three rings.

“About time,” Tammy said as she answered. “I was about to look up your address and head over there despite you telling me you needed time to unwind.”

So Felix hadn't told her where he lived, or what was going on with his grandfather.

Interesting.

What was more interesting was my reaction to the news.

I was elated that she didn't know.

“Tammy, this is Val,” I said softly. “Felix wanted me to call you to let you know that his grandfather passed away today. He asked me to let you know that he is okay, and would like a little space, but that he'll call you as soon as he's done grieving on his own.”

There was a lengthy pause and then a muted shriek of, “What are *you* doing there?”



I looked up to see if Felix was paying attention to my conversation, but he was sitting on the bottom step of the stairs with his gaze solidly fixed on a point above my shoulder.

He was listening, possibly, but he was letting me handle it.

I looked away from him and said, “Checking on him. He’s okay. He just needs a little bit of time.”

Tammy let out a few choice expletives before saying, “I’ll be there in ten minutes. What’s the address?”

I looked at Felix again, who was now looking at me.

He silently shook his head. He didn’t want her over here. Duly noted.

“Tammy,” I said quietly, “he needs time. He’s still very raw emotionally, and I’m not staying very long, either. I’m just making the phone calls, so he doesn’t have to, and leaving.”

She scoffed.

Then she said, “Well isn’t that fucking nice?” and hung up.

I dropped the phone to lie flat against my leg and caught him still watching me.

“Thanks,” he said quietly. “I know I probably should’ve done that myself, but sometimes Tammy can get emotional, and I just don’t have it in me to talk her down right now.”

I knew she did.

She’d always been one to get riled up easily, and then Felix would have to spend the next half hour talking her back into being a rational human being.

I’d seen him do it twice at work since I’d started there, too.

Sometimes it was exhausting, and I didn’t even have to deal with her.

“It’s not a problem,” I lied. “Are you hungry?”

He nodded. “I can’t eat yet. Not with him in there.”

I understood.

Taking the food, I went to the kitchen and thrust it into the cutest refrigerator ever—a soft, baby pink number that looked old, but I had a feeling it was new.

Once I took a quick glance around the room, I went in search of Pops.

I found him in the living room with the television softly playing *Gun Smoke*.

The next ten minutes as I waited for the people to arrive to help, I started to clean Pops up.

I took out his IV, straightened his clothes, and started to help fold up the blankets that were on the bed covering him up. I got rid of his lines and accessories, moving them into a biohazard bag for the nurse to take care of.

Then I sat with him and waited until a nurse appeared in the doorway.

I hadn't even heard the doorbell ring.

Still no Felix, though.

Knowing that I wouldn't see him again until his grandfather was gone, I helped the nurse finish up, and then we waited for the crematorium people to arrive.

They came with a gurney and an empty black bag.

It was then that a call came in on the phone I still had in my pocket.

Woody.

Fucking. Awesome.

“Mr. Kent,” I said carefully in answer as I moved into the kitchen to be away from the noise the funeral home people were making.

“Who are you?” Woody snarled.

The asshole.

Could he never be nice about anything?

“I’m Felix’s girlfriend,” I lied. “What can I do for you?”

Like hell would I give him to Felix, which was what I knew he wanted.

He didn’t say anything for so long that I thought maybe the good Lord had blessed me with a dropped connection.

No such luck, though.

When I started to shift the phone away from my ear, the snarl that filled the line made me wince.

“Tammy called me and informed me that his grandfather died,” Woody snarled. “Please tell me that information isn’t true.”

That fucking bitch.

“Hospice is here right now,” I said as I watched them zip Pops up into a black bag. “I’ll call with more information once I have it.”

Or never.

The jerk.

And her for calling and knowing that it would stir a pot that didn’t need stirring.

Ever.

“Where is ‘here’?” Woody asked.

Like hell I’d give him that address.

“Sorry,” I feigned static. “You’re breaking up.”

“I am not!” he all but yelled.

I made fake static sounds, half said words, then said, “I’ll have him call you back later!”

Then I hung up.

A chuckle had me turning around to see Felix leaning in the doorway of the kitchen, not quite all the way inside so he couldn’t see what was going on in the living room.

Poor guy.

“Sorry,” I smiled sheepishly. “He was really laying it on thick.”

The phone started to vibrate in my hands, and I glanced down to see the name ‘Merrina’ on the display.

I shoved the phone in my scrub shirt’s front pocket and ignored it.

“I imagine that it’s going to be fun explaining all of this,” he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Pops wanted to die on his terms. He told me over and over again that Woody wanted him to keep fighting the cancer, but Pops was tired. He said he’d been here for a long time, and he was ready to be home with Grandma and my mom. And who am I to contradict him if that’s what he wanted?”

He had a point.

Ultimately, it was each individual person’s choice to decide when their time on earth was finished. Who was I to tell a dying person that they had to keep fighting when they didn’t want to? I wasn’t God.

“It’ll be fun,” I agreed. “Lots and lots of it. Let me know if you want me to be there, because I have lots of pent-up anger inside of me waiting to be released on that man.”

Felix’s head tilted to the side, and he was about to say something when the nurse, Vicky, came into the room.

“All right, Felix,” Vicky said softly. “He’s on his way. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Felix shook his head, his eyes distant.

I walked Vicky out of the house when we all could clearly tell that Felix needed some time.

“The hospital bed,” I said softly. “Can we get that removed soon?”

Vicky nodded in understanding. “Yes. We can get that removed this afternoon. Will you be here?”

Would I?

“If he wants me here,” I admitted. “But if he asks me to leave, I’m not going to force myself on him.”

She nodded, her eyes sad. “What’s your number? I’ll call you first. If you’re still here, we’ll set everything up through you. You are his wife?”

“Girlfriend,” I lied again, then rattled off my number.

“Okay, good.” She smiled sweetly at me. “Take care of him, dear. He’s a sweet one.”

He was.

Which only made our breakup all the harder.

After watching Vicky leave, I went back inside and searched for Felix, finding him in his kitchen searching through the bag of Taco Bell.

“You remembered my order,” he said as he laid everything out.

I smiled sadly at him. “There’s not a single thing about us that I forgot, Felix. I tried.”

His eyes flared.

But, before my eyes, I watched whatever was on the tip of his tongue seemingly melt away.

“I’m not super hungry, but I’ll eat the burrito,” he murmured.

I took a seat across from him, then reached for all my stuff, which he’d separated in a neat little pile.

I started eating, trying really hard not to look at Felix.

Sometimes, it was easier to compose myself when the object of my every waking and sleeping dream wasn’t standing right in front of me looking so sexy, strong, and broken.

We ate in silence, and I was pleasantly surprised when Felix kept eating after the burrito.

He didn't eat much more, only half a quesadilla, but it was better than nothing.

Cleaning up after us, I ignored the elephant in the room and started cleaning his dishes, next.

I'd just reached for a dish towel to dry them when Felix caught me around the hip, turned me around, and placed a very chaste kiss on my lips.

## CHAPTER 13

*I will put you in a trunk and help people look for you. Try me.  
-Text from Val to Tammy*

## FELIX

Having her here meant everything.

Especially today.

I'd been sitting in my chair, staring at my dead grandfather, wondering how I was going to go about the rest of my life, when my phone buzzed.

I'd glanced down at my watch and saw a Ring notification about a person in my front yard.

The moment I saw her, I knew that everything was going to be okay.

Which led me to now.

She'd been cleaning my kitchen for the last ten minutes, looking incredibly nervous and uncomfortable.

And I couldn't stand it any longer.

I needed to hold her.

I needed to feel her against me, her heart beating strong and alive against me.

So, when she was on her second rotation of cleaning the middle island, I caught her by the hips and pulled her to face me. She stopped, looked up at me with wide blue eyes, and waited.

I pressed a kiss to her lips, going for chaste so I could see if she was comfortable with me being so close. And when she didn't so much as flinch or pull away, I deepened the kiss.

She went with it, kissing me back for a few long seconds, before she pushed slightly on my chest.

Panting and wishing that life wasn't so unfair, I pulled back and said, "What?"

She rolled her eyes, the usual mischief that I hadn't seen in so long sparkling in her eyes. "I know it's been a very bad day



for you, but I don't think making another mistake like the one you're aiming for is the best idea right now."

Her thinking that anything we did together sexually was a mistake burned.

"I don't... That's not what I was trying to do," I admitted.

I didn't know what I was trying to do.

But I was just so fucking thankful that she was there.

There was no one else in this entire world who I would've rather had here with me today than her.

"Then what were you trying to do?" she asked, leaning back so that her hips were resting against the counter.

I reached out and curled a lock of her blonde hair around her ear, then dropped my arm when she moved away.

"I was trying to say thank you for helping me today," I said quietly, moving back and giving her space.

Her eyes went soft again, but she didn't move toward me like I'd wanted.

I crossed my arms over my chest as she said, "I had this bad feeling today. All day. I just kept thinking that I should stop by and check on you. I'm glad that I did."

Val and her feelings.

She got those a lot.

Most of the time, they were about something simple like it was going to rain and the weather didn't forecast it. Or that we needed to get more milk, but there being a full half gallon at home, we didn't need it. Then that night, the milk fell and burst all over the kitchen floor when I'd opened the fridge for a bottle of water.

Just simple, silly things like that when it came to Val's feelings.

But sometimes, like when she said something bad was about to happen right before her dad died, it really meant

something huge.

Today had obviously been a big day for her feelings.

“I’m glad you listened to that feeling,” I said softly.

She softened even more.

“Felix, I’m sorry,” she murmured. “This whole situation is terrible for you.”

I moved away from the counter, heading toward my room. “Are you going to stay?”

Her head tilted and she pushed off the counter before saying, “Do you want me to stay?”

Forever and ever.

“Yes,” I admitted.

She gave me a firm nod, then said, “Are you going to shower?”

She knew me so well.

After a long hard day, or even a short hard day, I always took a shower because there was just something so soothing about the hot water running over my body and washing away the day.

“I am,” I said. “Do you want to watch a movie?”

*Please say you’ll watch a movie.*

*Please say you’ll stay for a long time.*

“Of course,” she said. “I’ll set it up in the living...”

I interrupted her. “Not there. Please, not there.”

I didn’t think I’d ever be able to go in there again.

Which fuckin’ sucked, because that’d been my most favorite room in the house.

The house that I’d searched and searched for over a period of six months.

A house that had once been Val’s dream home.

A house that we'd fought over, over and over again, when we'd talked about living out the rest of our lives.

She'd wanted old. I'd wanted new.

And I knew I'd always give her what she'd wanted.

When this all started a few months ago, getting the house had been a big 'fuck you' to her.

Now... well, now I didn't know what I was doing.

What I did know was that now that I had the house, I wanted her in it more.

"Okay," she said softly. "Where then?"

"The only other television in the house is in my room. Pops has one..." I paused. "Pops had one, but it broke last week. That's why we decided to set the bed up in the living room."

She nodded her head, and then I disappeared into my bedroom, her not far behind.

I grabbed some things out of the dresser, pants, underwear, and a t-shirt, and headed to the bathroom just as she was making her way inside my sanctuary.

I closed the door on her wide eyes taking in everything.

The house was cool.

One of the oldest on Swiss Avenue, it definitely had a lot of character to it—character that really was a complete pain in the ass, like I'd always told Val.

The bedroom was made up of lots of crown molding, wallpaper that was probably put up in the eighties, and enough gaudy old stuff to make even a historical person cringe. But overall, a lot of room with even more potential.

I could practically see her wheels turning, wondering what she would do to the space if it was hers.

I turned the shower on, and grimaced at the way the pipes groaned in the walls.

At first, I hadn't realized how much trouble the old house would be. I mean, logically, I'd known it would be a pain in the ass. But I'd underestimated just how much of a pain in the ass.

Not just because it was old, but because it was old in a way that the City of Dallas required certain steps to be taken in the restoration process.

Once, I'd called an electrician. When he'd arrived, he'd told me that he wasn't certified to work on the historic homes, and I'd have to find someone else.

That was a continued trend through an electrician, plumber, general contractor, and even the damn house painter.

Apparently, the City of Dallas took a lot of fuckin' pride in Swiss Avenue, and all of their historic buildings. Meaning I was fucked because I had to follow their fuckin' rules, or else.

Or else being that I could get fined out the ass, lose my house, and have nothing to show for it even though all I was trying to do was unclog a fuckin' toilet.

The spray finally stopped sputtering, and the pipes in the wall settled down enough that they were no longer knocking against wall.

When I stripped out of my clothes and stepped inside, the spray of overly hot water was like balm to my cold soul.

I'd felt cold for a solid week. And today had only made me colder.

Thoughts derailing now that I was behind closed doors, I spiraled down a rabbit hole of what nexts.

Tomorrow, I'd have to call Woody.

Next week, I'd have to go pick Pops's ashes up from the crematorium.

At some point, I'd also have to go back to work.

That would be a whole lot of fun.

Honestly, the very last thing I wanted to do was go back to work where everyone would know I'd just had a loved one pass away.

They always treated you like you were a child, and honestly, I'd like to go back to normal where no one knew what was going on in my life.

But I knew it was likely that Tammy would share.

She couldn't help herself sometimes.

Everyone in the hospital would know by the time I arrived at work. It was inevitable.

My hands made quick work of washing off and cleaning my hair.

By the time I was done, there was no longer any hot water left—the hot water was working subpar at best and was the next thing on my list to have fixed—and my skin was a mottled pinkish-red color.

I scooped up the towel that looked the cleanest on the floor—again, doing any housework the last week was put on the back burner and it would take me a solid week of constantly doing clothes to catch up—and dried off.

Next came the clothes.

I slipped into them, the shirt clinging to my wet shoulders as I did, and opened the door.

The wave of steam that entered the bedroom—because again, the exhaust fan didn't work in this godforsaken house—preceded me.

That's when I found Val, in my bed, wearing a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt from my drawer.

She'd changed because she didn't want to get her hospital scrubs—dirty from a full shift at work—near my bed.

I was wholeheartedly thankful for that small act.

I knew what got on doctors' and nurses' clothes while they were working in the emergency room, and quite a bit of it wasn't pretty.

"You want to shower?" I asked curiously as I came to my side of the bed.

She was directly in the middle, meaning we'd probably be touching when I crawled in beside her.

"Oh, that's okay," she hedged.

She didn't sound okay with being dirty.

"Run and go get in," I said. "I'll go see if I can find a clean towel somewhere. I'm a bit behind on laundry thanks to this week."

Before she could deny me, I went into the bathroom, turned the shower on, and prayed that the five minutes I'd been out was enough time to scrounge up some hot water.

As it was, she'd probably have three minutes of it, max.

"Rápida," I urged, resorting to Spanish as I was wont to do.

I spoke three languages fluently.

Spanish, English, and ASL—American Sign Language.

Once upon a time, I'd fancied myself as being an interpreter one day.

But then I'd realized that my life would be better spent using the languages I did know in a setting in which someone could benefit.

"I'm on it, I'm on it." She held up her hands in surrender.

She disappeared into the bathroom just as I disappeared out of the bedroom.

I found a couple of dry towels in the dryer, restarted the clothes that had been in the washer for the last week, and then went back to my bedroom.

I gently pushed open the bathroom door and tossed the towels on the counter—knowing that she preferred using two

and guessing she hadn't changed since I'd last showered in her vicinity.

She came out dressed in my shirt and nothing else, but I could distinctly tell that she didn't have a bra on, and I suspected the same could be said for underwear.

"I dropped the pants into a puddle of water you left," she grimaced. "Have anymore?"

I was already shaking my head. "No. When I say I need to do laundry, I mean that I probably should've done it last week and never did. Just crawl in here and cover up with the blanket.

"I don't know..." she said as she looked at me.

In an act of desperation, I leaned forward and ripped my shirt over my head. "There, now we're even."

Her eyes were super wide, but instead of staring at her as she came up with a decision, I turned my attention back to the TV to act like her coming to my bed wasn't a big deal. Clothed or not.

I pressed power on the television, and then I scrolled through Netflix until we both settled on *Heartland*.

Of course, the first fuckin' episode, the mom died.

Which only helped put me in a bad mood all over again.

Sensing this, she'd changed the show to something new, a K drama that actually was quite cute and endearing.

Throughout the four shows that we watched, she crept closer and closer to me until she was all but pressed up against me.

In one brave move, I put my arm around her shoulders and tugged her into me, causing her to snuggle in tight.

That was, of course, when there was a knock at my door.

"Oh, no." Val scrambled out of bed, grabbing up a pair of my sweatpants off the floor. There was a mustard stain on the

left ass cheek where I'd wiped my hands one day last week. "I forgot I told Vicky she could call me so we could get your living room set to straights. I left my phone in my car."

I followed behind her, shirtless, and leaned my shoulder up against the banister of the stairs as I looked on.

She yanked open the door, had an apology on the tip of her tongue, and bit it off when she saw who was on the other side.

Tammy.

Tammy pushed through the door with a flourish and said, "Move, bitch."

Anger coursed through me at the way Tammy called Val an ugly name after she'd just done so much for me over the last half a day.

"Tammy," I said quietly. "What are you doing here?"

Tammy looked shocked that I'd even ask that. Absolutely shocked.

And pissed.

"What am I doing here?" she questioned, surprised by my curt response to her arrival. "I'm your best friend!"

She was my only friend.

There was a difference between best friend and only friend.

One didn't make her the other.

"I know that I asked Val to relay to you that I need time." I lifted a hand and rubbed my head. "Do you mind giving that to me?"

Tammy blinked.

But before she could add anything to my request, like a big fat 'no,' I left the room, hoping that Val could deal with Tammy.

I just didn't have the brain power or the desire to deal with anything else right then.



Not a single damn thing.

# CHAPTER 14

*Once in a while, someone amazing comes along. And here I  
am.  
-text from Val to Felix*

## VAL

To say that I was flabbergasted by Felix leaving after delivering that parting comment would be an understatement.

Tammy obviously felt the same way, because she was mid-word, ready to rip into him, when he turned his back and left the room.

She hadn't expected his response any more than I had.

"I can't believe..." she said as she stared, for a solid five minutes, at the hallway he'd disappeared down. "I went through all that trouble to get his information from HR, since you wouldn't give it to me, and *bam*. He asks me to leave!"

That only served to piss me off.

The fact that she went to HR was absolutely ridiculous.

What was even more ridiculous was that human resources actually gave her the information.

That wasn't how this worked.

You didn't give out an address to someone else's place under any circumstance, no matter what kind of sob story was fed to you.

"He did ask you not to come," I pointed out, trying to rein in my annoyance at her and her ability to ruin just about anything.

Especially a good time where I was cuddled up to Felix, and we pretended that our world had never changed.

"I didn't ask you," she hissed, crossing her arms.

I crossed my own, causing her to notice that my breasts were unbound.

I'd taken my bra and underwear off in the bathroom, intending to put them back on when I was done with my shower, but like old times, I'd forgotten how messy Felix was when he was first out of the shower.

There was barely a dry spot in the entire bathroom, and my bra, underwear, and sweatpants had found their own puddles to fall into.

“No, you didn’t. Or I would’ve reiterated that he needed some time,” I pointed out. “Thank you for stopping by, but he really does need some space right now.”

“And you’re allowed to be in that space?” she snarled, eyes flaring.

She really didn’t like that I was here, and that he was choosing me to lean on.

It made me feel ten feet tall, though.

“Apparently, seeing as I’m here and you’re not,” I said. “I’ll walk you out to your car. I have to get my phone out of my car anyway.”

*And I really want you to leave.*

*So badly that I’ll walk out into the cold in barely any clothes and head to my car.*

Luckily, I’d forgotten to lock my car in my haste to get inside, meaning that I was able to grab my phone without the keys I’d left somewhere in the huge home behind me.

When I had my phone and saw no call from Vicky, I breathed a sigh of relief.

When I got back to the walkway, it was to see Tammy glaring daggers at me with her hand on the door handle.

She had this stupid-ass grin on her face when she deliberately closed the door before I could get there.

I cursed and hurried closer, hoping that I would find the door open, but with my hand on the knob there was no doubt it was locked.

Instead of playing her stupid game, I dialed Felix’s number.

Nothing.

The call didn’t go through at all.

I cursed, wondering if he still had me blocked.

I walked around the house, to the far room that I assumed was Felix's bedroom, and knocked on the window.

The curtains parted, and Felix stared at me in confusion from the other side of the glass.

Then his face did something spectacular.

He gritted his teeth, and even through the full beard I could see those muscles in his jaw work.

Then he was gone, walking to the door that I hadn't seen before this moment when it opened not three feet away from me.

"Get in here," he growled, sounding pissed as hell. "What happened and how did you end up out there?"

I explained, letting Felix know that he had an intruder I couldn't seem to get rid of.

Then shivered when I was done.

Instead of going out there, he closed and locked his bedroom door, then patted his bed.

I crawled into it, or tried to, but he stopped me before I could get all the way under the covers.

"These pants have to go," he said as he stripped them off of me so fast I couldn't warn him that I was bare underneath. "They're dirt..."

His eyes didn't miss it, though, as I fell backward onto my back in his exuberance to get the sweats off of me.

His eyes, obviously being drawn to the spot between my legs, widened.

I'm not quite sure who moved first. Him or me. But we were in each other's arms a few seconds after his gaze went heated.

Later, I'd think about how I was taking advantage of a grieving man.

Later, I'd tell myself that we couldn't do this again.

Later... Well, later me and current me were two completely different people.

After everything that had just gone down with Tammy, paired with the way I'd needed him like I needed water or air to survive, well, it was quite inevitable.

The illogical next step in our torrid love affair.

"Sometimes," he said as he pulled away, panting after the most intense kiss I'd experienced since the last one that consumed me. "When I feel you in my arms, I forget about everything and everyone, and remember what it was like to be happy."

My heart sank.

He wasn't happy?

Was he as unhappy as I was?

Was he putting on the good front just like I'd been doing all this time?

Could we be experiencing the same thing, and neither one of us knew it?

Before I could say anything to his admission, though, he pushed me backward on the bed, pressed his big body between my partially splayed thighs, and said, "I'm not going to regret this time any more than the last."

I didn't want him to.

"Your friend's still here," I told him, practically giddy.

"I don't care," he admitted. "She can listen."

Why did the thought of someone listening to what we were about to do—and it was definitely going to happen, no denying it now—turn me on so much?

Why did the thought of her finding out what we were doing in here, and listening in while she fumed on the other side of

the door, make me want to jump up and clap like an excited toddler?

“Are you su...”

He interrupted my question by slowly working his way down the length of my body. When he got to my unbound breasts beneath his favorite t-shirt, he bit down lightly. Directly on my nipple.

I gasped in shock as I said, “Felix!”

*That hurt!*

His eyes twinkled as he moved to the other breast. And just when I was sure he was about to do the same thing to that one, he changed tactics and nibbled it with his lips wrapped around his teeth.

I squirmed underneath him, unable to stop myself from wanting more.

God, what was it that this man did to me that made me want him so badly?

“What’s that look you got goin’ on there, Poppet?” he asked.

Poppet.

God, when he called me that, it made me want to cry.

“Just thinking about what you’re doing to me, and how I want you to speed this up, but also wanting you to go slow because then I can pack more into one punch, so to speak,” I blurted out, unable to help myself.

He snorted, then kept moving down the length of my body, stopping just shy of the hem of his t-shirt that was rucked up right above my pubic bone.

There, he spread kisses along the hem, making sure to go from hip bone to hip bone.

Years ago, when he had taken his time like this, I’d been a lot skinnier.

But life happened, and the stress of everything that'd been going on lately, paired with working as much as I was, and I just didn't have the time to eat the healthiest.

I'd been at the hospital now for going on eight weeks. I'd put on about fifteen pounds, and none of it was a flattering fifteen. All of it went to my belly and my inner thighs.

But the way Felix was kissing me, it made me feel like I was a Greek goddess.

"What has you thinking so hard up there?" he asked, not lifting his head as he did.

How did he know?

"How do you always know when I'm thinking bad thoughts?" I wondered.

Sometimes I liked to joke that maybe he should be the fortune teller. He could always seem to read me better than anyone—even my siblings who'd spent their lives with me.

"Because you tense up in all the places," he said as he kissed me directly in the middle of my pubic area. "Like right here."

I scoffed as he nuzzled the soft flesh. "It gets all tight and doesn't jiggle like I like it."

I snorted and curled my fingers into his hair, unable to stop myself from doing so.

He practically purred when I started to scratch his scalp with my fingernails.

I continued to do it, not urging him to move faster, but not hiding the way he was making me feel either.

His mouth, just nuzzling that space, was enough for the anticipation to just about kill me.

"Such a good girl, Poppet, being all patient," he teased as he bit down, startling me.



I gasped and instinctively pulled back, but he caught me before I could get an inch away from him.

“Ah, ah,” he tsked. “Come back here.”

Then his big, masculine hands that I’d seen save people’s lives pushed my thighs open wide, and his mouth descended.

I gasped, my body locking, as his tongue started in right away, drawing circles around my sensitive clit.

And, proving that he hadn’t forgotten a single damn thing about me and what I liked, he plunged a finger deep inside me then sucked my clit into his mouth and sucked hard.

I saw stars, and the shout of surprise that came out of me was so loud that if Tammy was still in the house, she’d know exactly what we were doing in here.

His evil chuckle against my clit had me reaching down again to grab his hair that I’d been unaware of letting go. Then I tugged, pushing my pussy up against his face in encouragement.

He bit the inside of my thigh hard enough that I knew I’d have a mark when we were done.

Maybe tomorrow I’d even have a bruise.

“Settle down, Poppet,” he teased as he soothed the bite with a long lick. “And enjoy the ride.”

“What ride?” I teased. “Right now, you’re doing a whole bunch of nothing.”

He looked up at me from under dark eyebrows.

I squirmed underneath that look.

That was the ‘you’re in trouble’ look that I tried very hard not to induce in him when he was fucking me. Or licking me.

Shit.

He moved, giving me his tongue. But he did it so damn slowly that there was no way I’d be coming anytime soon.

He'd get me worked up, sure, but he'd do it in such a way that I would be driven insane by then.

But two could play this game.

I knew what turned him on just as much as he knew what did it for me.

Closing my eyes, I pulled both of my hands out of his hair, then started to caress my nipples, light touches that caused them to pebble and peak up into perfect tips.

Then I started talking.

"I love the way you make me feel," I groaned as his tongue faltered. "You make me so wet, and sometimes, when you plunge your finger in, I can feel it all the way in my throat. I'm going to come so hard on your tongue that you'll choke on it."

He cursed and pulled himself away, abandoning my orgasm with his mouth and shoving his fat cock so deep inside of me that I couldn't help the startled shout from leaving me.

"You fuckin' know what that does to me," he growled as he started to pump his cock into me with solid, fast thrusts.

I curled my arms around his head and held on as he fucked the absolute hell out of me. Pump after pump of his cock had little cries of excitement leaving me in random intervals. Before I knew it, he was burying himself to the hilt so deep inside of me that a jolt of pain intertwined with my pleasure.

I growled, my hips lifting instinctively, and he caught my ass with one hand and helped tilt it up for me.

That was all that I needed.

With two more pumps of his hips, I was coming, and screaming.

Hell's bells, but I felt my soul leave my body for a few short seconds.

His growl preceded his release, and I could feel the hot splashes of his cum jetting inside of me. His belly tightened in

rhythmic intervals, and soon he was collapsing on top of me, allowing me to feel it as he continued to come.

“Fuck,” he breathed raggedly.

I snickered. “You finished?”

He ground into me a few more times, then twisted us so that I was on top and he was underneath me, my head pillowed on his shapely chest.

“Don’t say anything,” he pleaded. “Just let me feel this for tonight. Tomorrow, we can figure it out.”

So I didn’t.

I stayed silent.

We had sex two more times. And I did not miss when Tammy slammed the door on her way out during our second session.

Overall, the night was perfect.

Too bad the day came, bringing with it more problems for him to deal with, and a family emergency for me to deal with.

Sadly, for the next week, our schedules never realigned again, and since he still had me blocked, I couldn’t check in with him.

All I knew was that he’d be back, and I’d give him a piece of my mind.

## CHAPTER 15

*Don't let me drink milk. It makes my tummy hurt.*  
*-Text from Val to Felix*

## VAL

He'd called in to work.

I'd known that he wasn't going to be here last week. I mean, his grandfather had died, for Christ's sake.

But he'd promised he would be back. More importantly, the woman that was head of the whole ER department had said he would be back *today*.

And, after a lot of inward contemplation, I decided that I wasn't mad at him at all for totally forgetting about me all week. I'd helped him in his time of need, but that didn't negate the fact that he was literally in a time of need. I didn't need to be projecting my problems and feelings onto the situation when it could've been just as innocent as him just needing time to process. And sadly, my feelings weren't a part of the bigger picture right now.

Hence me spending last night buying a couple of Fig brand scrubs that fit a little tighter than I'd liked, a new pair of shoes that made my feet look small when they most definitely weren't, and new makeup.

I'd gotten up this morning and had taken extra time on my hair and makeup, and I left the apartment feeling like a million bucks.

And now here I was, working my ass off, and no Felix as my reward.

I did, however, look up every single time the ER doors opened.

The last time they opened it was to emit Tammy.

God, but she really knew how to push my buttons.

I hated her.

Absolutely *hated* her.

I hated that she was privy to information that I didn't have.

I hated that she got to comfort him when I couldn't.

I hated that in the grand scheme of things, she'd become an even bigger part of his life because I'd left it.

I just really hated her.

I was trying very hard not to pay attention to her and Lori as they talked about what gossip they were hearing amongst their friends in other departments.

I was so intent on not listening to her, in fact, that I didn't hear the first part of Tammy's next statement or the nurse's reply.

I did hone in on Lori when she said, "What's wrong with Felix?"

My head snapped up like I'd just received an uppercut, and my gaze focused on the two women.

Tammy and Lori were leaning against the counter enjoying the fruit tray I'd brought in this morning. I was sure Tammy didn't know that I was the one who brought it, otherwise she would've treated it like it was poison like she usually did when I brought stuff.

Though, I knew that Lori knew it was my contribution because she'd beamed at me when I'd placed it on the nurses' station on my way in today.

"His dog was really sick this morning, and he suspects he's going to go have him put down." Tammy sighed. "I told him to drop the dog off at the vet and come in, but he said no and told me he'd talk to me later."

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

That really freakin' sucked.

He'd loved that dog.

While we were in medical school, the dog had lived with his grandfather because he was away from home so much.

He'd just gotten him back...

His grandfather had died a week ago. And now his dog was sick?

That sounded horrible.

But also a really good reason for not being at work today.

Dammit, that sucked.

“Pets are like family, Tammy,” Lori said reproachfully. “You don’t have any, otherwise you’d know that.”

I didn’t have pets for the longest time, and I knew that they could be like family.

It didn’t take owning one to know that.

Poor Gee.

• • •

This was stupid.

I should go home.

I should turn around, leave, and not go back.

In fact, I’d turned around twice now. Convinced myself that this was a terrible idea. That, if he wanted me, he would’ve called me.

Yet, now I was two seconds from pulling up to his house and I was a mess.

Just as I pulled up to his house, I decided to leave again, once again reminding myself that if he wanted me here, he would’ve called.

I mean, it took absolutely nothing to call.

But when I was about to pull away, movement out of the corner of my eye had me glancing up.

And there he was.

No escape to be had now, I got out of the car, heart racing.

It was as I walked up to his place that I saw him leaning against the railing of his steps.

He gave me a small smile when I finally made it to him, unable to turn around now that I'd been spotted.

"Didn't think I'd see you ever again," he said carefully.

Neutrally.

Jesus.

I hated that I'd caused this rift between us.

I hated that we weren't who we used to be to each other.

Even more, I hated that my father had once again pulled me away from something that I loved.

Someone.

"You didn't show up at work today and then I heard through the grapevine that Gee was sick," I said. "I contemplated not coming over. I mean, if you wanted me here, you'd have called. But I had to check on you. It's stupid. I should go."

He took the stairs two steps at a time, then caught my wrist in his.

"Where have you been all week?" he asked. "I know for a fact that you had four days off this week."

I blinked.

Then blinked again, sure that I hadn't heard him correctly.

"I've been working." I paused. "Where should I have been?"

He let me go and threw his hands up in exasperation. "What do you mean where should you have been? With me, goddammit! You should've been with me!"

I jerked at the vehemence in his voice.

"I..." I paused. "I called you, and once again, I couldn't get the call to go through. Two rings. Then voicemail. Like. Always."

He frowned. "What?"



...

## FELIX

I was so fucking mad at her.

All goddamn week, I kept calling, texting, and nothing.

I'd even driven by her apartment—which was locked up like Fort Knox with no hope of getting in—and the circus.

Hell, I'd even thought about resorting to dropping by work, but I hadn't wanted anyone to give me grief for not being there. And I hadn't been in the mood.

I'd seen her circle the block twice, too, as I'd been outside to get my mail.

And so I'd posted up against the railing outside and waited until she got the courage to stop.

She looked as if she were about to leave again, but something made her look up, then she saw me.

Her eyes had gone wide, and I knew that she was contemplating leaving despite having seen me, but she drew a deep breath and left her vehicle.

Which led us to now.

Her telling me that she couldn't get a call through to me.

“What are you talking about right now?” I asked. “What do you mean *like always*?”

“I mean exactly what I said!” she snapped, throwing her hands out wide. “Wake up! That's what happens when someone blocks you!”

Blocks you.

“Let's ignore the fact that you're making shit up. So you 'can't get calls through.' That doesn't mean that you don't have other forms of communication,” I pointed out.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously, and I fucking hated how damn hot she looked doing it.

She looked like a modern-day Viking woman in scrubs.

The scrubs were bright yellow, and it looked great against her skin tone.

Her makeup was done a bit more heavily than usual for her, but I loved it.

Her eyes also looked like they were on fire, and I was the subject of her ire.

“I called you,” she said softly. “I texted. I texted a lot, actually. I emailed you. I... Felix, you freakin’ left me just as much as I left you.”

I stilled, my brows furrowing as I looked over at her with a very slow turn of my head that clearly said I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“You what?” I asked.

“I called you. I texted. I did everything that I said I was going to for the first six months. Every single day, I sent a text to you,” she repeated. “So if anyone has a right to be mad at this situation we’ve found ourselves in, it’s me. I held up my end of the bargain. You didn’t.”

I threw my hands out wide.

“I haven’t gotten a single email, phone call, or text message since you left,” I pointed out.

“That’s because you freakin’ blocked me, bozo!” she screeched, her hands clenching into fists.

I opened my mouth and then closed it. “I didn’t block you!”

“Give me your phone,” she ordered.

I did, having nothing to hide.

She furiously went into my phone, tapped around a bit, and then whipped the phone around toward me so I could see.

And sure enough, there was her number.

Blocked.

“I...” I paused. “That’s not your number. Yours has a three in it.”

She was already shaking her head. “No. This is my number.”

I pulled my phone out of her hand, then went into my messages.

I pulled up her thread—which was still pinned to the top of the page—and then showed it to her.

“Then who is this?” I asked.

She looked at it, a frown marring her brow.

“I don’t...” She paused. “This isn’t my number.”

Worry started to niggle at my brain.

“That’s the only number I’ve ever had for you. I literally gave you my phone to put your number into it... and then that’s the only person I’ve ever texted since,” I told her bluntly.

She started poking around in my phone, a frown marring her brow.

Then she pulled out her own phone and called me.

My phone rang instantly.

My heart sank.

“That’s my number,” she whispered. “Let me call Folsom.”

I waited as she placed the call, using speakerphone so we could both hear.

“Hey,” Folsom said. “What’s up?”

Val dove right into an explanation.

“And my picture that I put as my contact is in his phone. The phone number is one digit off of mine. And my number was blocked,” she said. “He has no knowledge of doing any of that.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, the cold starting to leech into my bones.

“Come inside,” I urged, just now realizing that my feet were beyond freezing at this point.

“Hold on and let me search up the number,” Folsom said.

I led her into the kitchen where I’d been preparing dinner. And since I didn’t know how to cook for just one person, I had enough to feed her.

I checked on it in the oven, then turned around to study Val who was waiting impatiently, her eyes taking in the kitchen.

“So did y’all finally make up?” Folsom asked. “I mean, this has to mean that y’all talked and are figuring it out, right?”

Guilt ate at me.

I needed to tell her about how I’d found her.

“Yes,” she said. “And I already know you helped him find me.”

I blew out a breath. “How?”

“Because my information was hidden by Folsom. There’s no one who can find that without her knowing about it. And her not telling me about it meant that she was being sneaky and thought to hide it from me.”

Well, when she went all logical like that, it did make sense.

“Ohh, ho!” Folsom clapped. “You’ll never guess who that number belongs to.”

A sick feeling of dread started in my stomach. “Who?”

There was some keyboard clicking, and then my phone blinked.

I glanced at it and then my heart sank.

The photo that had once been Val was now... Tammy.

“What?” I barked. “You’re shitting me.”

“Nope,” Folsom said. “That’s Tammy’s phone number. She has two on her account. That number that’s close to Val’s, and her number that’s already in your phone.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I’ve sent that number hundreds of texts, called it probably a thousand times.”

“I can forward you everything,” Folsom murmured. “There, sent. You should have everything he’s sent in the last few years, Val. I’m sorry I didn’t think of this sooner.”

Val looked at her phone, her face leeching of color.

“I don’t even know what to say,” she murmured.

“I’d say that you need to get rid of that best friend, Felix,” Folsom said. “Gotta go. My kid wants food, and my husband thinks she needs Sonic.”

I couldn’t muster the energy to say goodbye.

I just kept staring at the picture of Tammy pinned to the top of my message screen.

All this time...

# CHAPTER 16

*Do I hate everyone, or just need a little snacky snack?  
-Val's secret thoughts*

VAL

*Then*

*“You’ll call?” he rasped.*

*I nodded, my heart in my throat. “I’ll even come visit anytime we’re close enough for me to drive. I’ve already looked up the schedule, and there’re at least three shows coming up that are less than a five-hour drive. I’ll be back, Felix.”*

*He nodded, then turned his head on the pillow to face me.*

*How many times had he done just that? Had we talked about our lives, and what we wanted out of it?*

*So many times, I couldn’t even count.*

*And now I was leaving, and everything that I’d wanted from my life was being put on hold, yet again, because of my father.*

*I moved until my face was buried in the crook of his neck. I could feel his pulse against my lips.*

*“It’ll be okay,” I assured him.*

*Felix wasn’t usually so clingy.*

*But with all the stress he was under...*

*“I love you, Felix,” I breathed against his neck.*

*He reached up and cupped the back of my head, then leaned toward the side so that he could press a kiss to my head.*

*“I love you, too, Poppet.”*

*We lay like that for what felt like a solid hour before my phone beeped, letting me know it was time for me to leave, or I might miss my flight.*

*“What are you going to do tonight?” I asked quietly, not wanting to get up.*



*He looked up at the ceiling, swallowing hard. "I guess I'll take Tammy up on the offer for pizza since she's in town."*

*Tammy.*

*Ugh.*

*I'd heard a whole lot about that woman, though I'd never met her.*

*Honestly, when it came to Tammy Wilkes, I felt like a freakin' saint.*

*Felix and Tammy texted all the time.*

*To the point that sometimes, it was the middle of the night, and she'd text. If she didn't get a text back immediately, she'd call. If she didn't get the call answered, then she'd start making travel arrangements to come down to us from wherever the hell it was she was travel nursing at.*

*Honestly, I counted myself lucky that she was traveling full-time right now as a nurse.*

*It meant that in the time I'd known Felix, I'd only had to compete with phone calls and text messages out the wazoo. I hadn't had to meet her once, even though I'd talked to her plenty of times when I'd answered Felix's phone.*

*She hadn't struck me as a very nice person, and after the third such encounter with her over the phone, I'd made the choice to no longer try when it came to her.*

*"Oh," I said softly.*

*He chuckled. "Don't worry, Poppet. She'll only be here for a week."*

*That didn't make me feel better.*

*In fact, knowing she was going to be here when I wasn't—and wasn't it just so convenient that she was coming when I was leaving—was like a burn to my soul.*

*"I'll call you when I land, okay?" I asked as I pushed up to my feet beside his bed.*

*My apartment had been packed for days.*

*I'd been staying at his place for a while now, and seeing him lying there, shirtless in the bed we'd shared so many times, the very last thing I wanted to do was leave.*

*But alas, my sisters and Keene were counting on me.*

*It was time to go, whether I wanted to go or not.*

*"Yes," he said as he threaded his fingers behind his head. "Are you sure you don't want a ride to the airport?"*

*I was already shaking my head. "That's a three-hour drive, Felix. I'm not going to have you drive it when there's a shuttle that'll take me straight there."*

*He sighed. "Promise to call?"*

*I shouldered my bag, then walked around the bed so I could reach him.*

*Bending down, I placed a soft kiss to his lips and then pulled back to say, "I promise."*

# CHAPTER 17

*Sometimes the only thing that fixes a situation is saying 'fuck  
you.'*

*-Val to Felix*

## VAL

“I promised I’d call,” I repeated.

Felix’s eyes, so hurt and confused, looked up and caught mine. “I don’t even know what to say.”

Because there was no good answer here. Either he agreed with me and he lost a friend. Or he agreed with her and lost me. Because there would be a decision made. There was no other choice.

“I think that you need to make a choice,” I admitted softly, feeling sick to my stomach at what I was about to say. “Her or me.”

I steeled my belly, waiting for the blow I just knew was about to come, and seeing no way to step out of the way of it.

He swallowed hard, and my heart utterly sank.

But his words didn’t match what I was ‘worst-case scenarioing’ in my head.

“It was never a choice, Poppet. I would’ve chosen you. I picked you from the moment that I met you. Tammy was never, ever going to compare to you,” he replied, eyes soft as melted butter.

My heart felt full at his words, and a sick sort of hope started to fill me up from the inside out. “So what do we do?”

Because there was no easy way to fix any of this.

Tammy had just stolen years of our lives together. And this was only what we knew. What else had she hidden from us?

“What we do now is block her number. Both of them,” he said. “As a start. And tomorrow, I need to go to human resources and have a talk with them. One, about our relationship, and what they think we should do about it since we’re not going to be hiding it. And two, about what they want to do about Tammy. Because I now refuse to work with her.”

I nodded miserably. “We need to talk about us. We need to figure out where we go from here.”

“Where we go from here is where we were always meant to go,” he replied forcefully. “I’ve spent the last couple of years wishing you were here. Wishing that I could talk to you, hear your voice. Where we go from here is right back to where we left off. Back to that place where I felt like I could breathe.”

That sounded... too easy.

Which I told him in the next instant.

“That’s too easy,” I pointed out. “She won’t let that happen.”

His eyes narrowed dangerously.

I’d never been afraid of Felix before, but in that moment, I could see a darkness in him that he’d never let me see. And that darkness was absolutely chilling,

I was glad it wasn’t aimed at me.

“She doesn’t get a say in how we live our lives,” he told me, eyes hot. “If she makes a big deal of us, tries to intervene again, then we leave.”

“I’m not leaving. I just got here,” I replied angrily. “Plus, this is where the other half of my life is. Until we’re established... I just can’t leave, Felix. I know that’s not what you want to hear, but I can’t leave.”

He moved then, cupping my face so gently that I wanted to cry, and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “When I said leave, I meant that we’d find another hospital in Dallas. There are three other teaching hospitals within a thirty-mile radius that I have connections with. I just bought your dream house, woman. We can’t leave. I have a mortgage that’s slowly bleeding me to death.”

I laughed then, burying my face into his chest.

Then I cried.

I cried for so long that he picked me up and carried me to the couch, where I continued to cry into his chest.

“Shhh,” he breathed, hugging me close. “It’s okay. Breathe.”

“It’s not okay.” I sniffled. “It’s been such a bad few years without you, Felix. I’ve had to deal with learning that my sister killed our dad because he’d been abusing her her entire life. Abusing others. I’ve learned that we’ve been an unknowing part of his disgusting sex trafficking ring. I’ve had half of my sisters nearly die on me. All of this stuff keeps happening, and every time it does, I just wanted to go to you and get a hug. But I couldn’t.”

He dropped his head down to mine and stayed silent.

But I’d felt his utter displeasure with it all. I knew he would beat himself up about this. Felix was just a great guy, and if I’d been honest with myself all this time, I would’ve realized that he never would’ve treated me this way. But I’d just been too hurt to see the other side.

And now we’d lost all this time.

“I’m sorry.” I sniffled indelicately. “I’m a jerk for throwing all of that at you.”

He breathed in deeply, and I could tell that he was trying to regain control.

His words were clipped and disgusted when he said, “I hate myself. I hate that I didn’t realize sooner. I hate that I’m a dumbass who couldn’t think to look at a number and memorize it when it belonged to someone who is the most important thing to me. I’m fucking pissed as hell that I wasn’t there for you when you needed me. And most importantly, I hate that we’ve missed all this life living together thing, and I was an unknowing part of that.”

I patted his chest as I said, “We’re both forgiven.”

He chuckled, the sound vibrating my body. “It doesn’t work like that, Poppet.”

“It works like that if I want it to work like that,” I disagreed. “We’re not going to blame each other for this. We’re going to go back to how it was before, blissfully happy with our lives in front of us. You’re going to meet my family and become close with them, because besides you, they’re the best things in my life. We’re going to fix this house up so that you don’t have to spend your every day off working on it, and we’re going to be happy as clams. You, me, and Gee.” I mentally slapped myself in the forehead and jackknifed in his lap to stare into his face. His fallen face. “Gee?”

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Gee didn’t make it.”

Tears leaked out of my eyes. “What?”

He swallowed hard. “Apparently, dogs have issues with kidneys when they’re seniors. I must’ve missed the signs or something these last few months. Or maybe Gee was just reading the room and knew that Pops needed me more than he did. But Gee was well on his way to complete kidney failure. And since he was eleven, they suggested that he be put to sleep.”

Tears once again gathered in my eyes, and then I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my face into the crook. My favorite place in the world.

“I’m so sorry, Felix.”

He squeezed me tight, as if I was a lifeline right now in his turbulent sea of sadness.

And we stayed like that for so long that we lost track of time.

It wasn’t until my phone started to ring over and over again that I realized the time.

“Shit, I was supposed to be Madam Val today,” I murmured. “Fancy a trip to the circus?”

I hoped he said yes, but I expected him to say no.

When he nodded once, and then stood up with me in his arms and said ‘of course,’ I was a bit stunned.

But then I remembered that Felix loved me.

The last few years might’ve been crazy for us, but neither one of us had been able to stop those feelings from shining through. Time and distance, you couldn’t break a love like this.

You could try to stop it, but in the end, love won.

“You’ll probably hate it,” I said, remembering about his social battery. “But I have a really great office you can escape to, and the food truck my brother-in-law runs is the best thing ever.”

His eyes started to gleam at the mention of food.

“You haven’t eaten today, have you?” I asked.

His eyes sparkled with mischief as he said, “Nope.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course you haven’t.”

He caught my hand, and together we walked out the door to my car.

I didn’t hesitate to give him my keys, and when we both showed up at the circus, not a single member of my family gave him shit.

It was... perfect.



## CHAPTER 18

*Parenthood is really about accepting the fact that you will be permanently worried for the rest of your life.*

*-Pops to Felix*

## FELIX

*“You called,” I said stiffly.*

*Had I heard her correctly?*

*She’d called?*

*“Yes,” she replied. “I called a lot.”*

*My automatic response was not to believe her.*

*But she was already pulling out her phone.*

*She swiped a few times, then handed it to me.*

*I swiped.*

*And I swiped.*

*And I swiped.*

*For six whole months, she texted me every day.*

*Every. Single. Day.*

*I bet she’d called just as many times.*

*Stomach now cramping, I pulled out my own phone so I could compare.*

*I, of course, still had her number pinned. Even though I hadn’t opened the text thread in over a year now.*

*I turned it around and showed her.*

*She blinked.*

*“I called, too. A lot,” I promised.*

I woke from the nightmare with a cat sitting on my throat.

I groaned and pushed Cyclone off, but he came right back.

Last night after the circus, we’d decided to both stay at her place.

It was closer, and her cat was there.

A cat that had gotten impossibly more annoying since I’d first met him.

“Get off,” I growled, pushing him off again.

I became aware of the bed shaking and turned over, again dislodging the cat, and looked at the woman at my side.

“What has you laughing so hard you’re shaking the bed, Poppet?” I narrowed my eyes at her.

Her mouth pinched together, but the shaking didn’t stop.

“Come on,” I teased. “Tell me.”

“It’s just,” she snickered. “You’ve always hated this cat so much.”

I had.

It wasn’t a secret.

“He’s worse than when I left him,” I replied, feeling that sharp pang of anger that once again reminded me that I’d left.

I’d left her.

She might’ve been the one to physically walk out the door, but I’d been the one to leave her.

I could’ve tried harder.

I could’ve put forth more effort.

Yet, none of that had happened.

Before I could continue on that train of thought, the woman at my side stopped laughing, then crawled over until she was straddling my lap.

The cat left then, his anger palpable as he sashayed away from the bed.

But my mind was now on the woman straddling me, and the way she felt pressed against me.

“You are being bad again,” she said. “We agreed. We would stop feeling bad about this and start living again.”

We *had* decided that.

That didn't mean I could just forget about it with a snap of my fingers.

"Are you going to HR today?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yes."

I would start my day with talking to them.

Day off or not.

"Good." She smiled, her eyes dragging lazily over my face. "Can we have morning sex now?"

I chuckled. "A man would never say no to morning sex."

Her eyes twinkled as she leaned back, then reached for the hem of her shirt.

I caught said hands and stilled them before saying, "Allow me."

Eyes alight with excitement, she held her hands up for ease of removal.

I slowly slipped it up the length of her torso, stopping right under her unbound breasts.

The sight felt like a gut punch.

I pushed higher, exposing her perfect breasts, and barely resisted the urge to lavish them with attention.

Only when it was up and over her head did I drag a finger down her nipple and say, "These are so pretty, Poppet."

She shivered, and her nipples pebbled to perfect little peaks.

"They're boobs, Felix," she said.

"They're my boobs," I countered as I cupped both ample breasts in my palms and pulled her toward me.

She went onto her hands, dangling the perfect morsels in my face for me to enjoy.

And I did enjoy them.

I sucked and licked, lavished and devoured, pulling groans and curses from her the entire time.

“Jesus Christ,” she said as she ground down on my erection—the only thing separating us was the cotton of my boxer briefs. “If you don’t start doing something with that penis of yours, I will start using my hands.”

Chuckling, I rolled us until she was underneath me, then went back, ass to heels, and studied her.

She was gorgeous. So fucking beautiful that it hurt to stare at her sometimes.

Her breasts were heaving, her breaths coming in sharp pants.

Her nipples were pebbled and red from my attentions and her thighs were spread, giving me a great view of her pussy and just how wet she was.

I dragged one lone finger down the length of her sex, starting at her clit, and ending at her asshole.

She hissed and shied away, just like she used to.

“I want that,” I told her bluntly. “It’s the only thing left I haven’t had.”

She was already shaking her head. “It’ll hurt.”

It might.

I wouldn’t know.

I’d never experienced anal with anyone, so I didn’t know the intricacies of the act.

What I did know was that it was something I wanted to experience with her.

We hadn’t been virgins when we’d met.

She’d had three before me, and I’d had at least double that.

But one thing I could say about our coming together? There was now only one single person who could ever fill that void inside of me, and it was her.

“You’ve never...?” she asked in surprise.

I was already shaking my head. “It’s only been me and my hand since you left.”

Her mouth fell open. “Felix! Really?”

I felt my stomach tighten.

I wanted her to say the same, but I was honest with myself.

Val was a gorgeous woman, in the prime of her life. Women didn’t just go spending years celibate when they were the ones who were wronged.

“Yeah,” I rasped, my hand going to her thigh as I smoothed it up toward her pussy. “Didn’t want anyone else but you.”

Before I could prepare for what she was about to do, she hit me like a linebacker.

My boxer briefs went flying.

One second, she was spread wide for me, and the next she was on top of me smothering me with kisses.

And there were tears.

Lots of tears.

“I didn’t...” She hiccupped. “I’d hoped. But I didn’t figure that you had.”

I kissed away each of her tears as a feeling of euphoria traveled lazily through my veins.

God.

We were a pair, weren’t we?

“I’d never have asked,” I admitted. “I didn’t want to know.”

She snickered and wiggled, and that’s when I realized just how close my cock was to entering her without either of us even realizing it.

If I just pulled her down...

She gasped when my cock slid inside of her easily, and I rolled us both to our sides where I made slow, sweet love to her. The exact opposite of what I was going to give her only a few minutes before.

She squirmed with each thrust of my cock. And due to the angle, her clit was being dragged along my pubic bone with each stroke, causing her to tighten with each pass of my length.

“Jesus, you know how to work that cock,” she squeezed her eyes shut and threw her head back. “Just over and over in the exact. Right. Spot.”

She came.

It didn't take much to get her off.

And since I was so low on orgasms as of late, I followed right behind her, grunting with each spurt of my seed inside her until I was empty and replete.

Her hands pulled my head closer, and I rested with my face between her pretty tits so long that I was nearly falling back to sleep.

But she moved, pulling me out of my lazy haze.

“I have to pee,” she said. “And your thigh is really freakin' hard.”

Chuckling, I let her go, pulling free of her as I did.

She rolled to her hands and knees and tried to scramble out of the bed without spilling.

It was a lost cause, though.

As she threw her leg over the side of the bed, my cum spilled out of her, traveled down the length of her thigh, and then fell right to the bed.

Just the sight made me hard as hell.

“Damn,” I said as my cock started to stiffen once again.

She looked back at me, noticing my cock that was now standing erect, and shook her head. “We have plans today, Mr. Kent.”

I watched her walk into the bathroom, then got up only to sit naked on the side of the bed, uncaring of any mess since it was obvious we would have to change these sheets now.

I watched as she used the restroom, cleaned herself up, and then washed her hands before brushing her teeth bent over the counter.

I enjoyed the view from behind, and waited until she was finished before I said what I said next.

“Marry me, Val.”

She blinked at me. “W-what?”

“Marry me,” I repeated.

Her eyes were huge when she said, “We just got back together!”

I shrugged.

I knew what I wanted.

And it was her.

“I’ve known what I wanted out of you since our first year in med school,” I pointed out. “I’ve had your ring in my sock drawer since our second year.”

Her eyes were huge when she said, “Why didn’t you ask me when we were done with school then?”

I felt my stomach drop. “Life.”

“Life.” She looked down at the floor, uncaring of her nakedness. “Yes.”

“Yes?” I asked, my heart in my throat.

“Yes.” She looked up, unshed tears once again in her eyes.

If I never saw her cry another day in her life, it would be too soon.



Each tear that fell because of this fucked up shit that Tammy had instigated was like a stab directly to my heart. My stomach physically ached, and my chest felt tight, as I saw those tears spill over.

“Don’t cry,” I rasped, raising my hand to her cheek.

“I’m not crying,” she cried.

I chuckled as she came into my arms, both of them wrapping around her upper thighs.

“I love you, Valhalla Drew. Say you’ll marry me,” I urged. “All the words.”

I needed all the words.

Not a whimpering ‘yes.’

“Yes, I’ll marry you, Felix Alexander Kent.” She placed both of her palms on my face and leaned down, sealing her declaration with a kiss.

That’s how we were positioned when three of her sisters poured through her bedroom door, came to a halt, and then one said, “Wow, Val. You’re totally naked. And I didn’t think Felix was hiding this kind of body behind those baggy scrubs.”

I froze, my eyes wide, as I stared up at Val.

Val squeezed her eyes shut and then turned to her sisters and said, “He just asked me to marry him, I said yes, and then I was planning on sealing that with a couple of orgasms. Can’t y’all learn to knock?”

“No,” one replied as another said, “We don’t knock. We’re sisters.”

I had to laugh.

“Go outside so we can get changed!” Val yelled.

“Changing would mean that you had clothes on to change,” Hades, I thought, said. I wouldn’t be able to confirm without looking at them. “The word you’re looking for is ‘dressed’.”

“Get. Out. Now,” Val said through gritted teeth, turning her glare on her sisters.

They left, but not without a parting comment.

“How do we keep meeting these men with such big penises? From what I understand, the average American dick size is only four and a half to five inches,” one of them noted.

I pressed my face against Val’s belly, unsure how to feel about three of the sisters knowing what size my dick was, let alone that it was above average.

The door slammed, and then Val sighed. “I want my ring.”

I felt a smile return as I said, “I’ll get it for you when I’m done with HR.”

We parted after that, me hopping in the shower, and Val getting dressed before pulling the sheets off the bed.

I came out of the bedroom, freshly showered, to an apartment full of Val’s family.

Not a single one of them looked as if they cared that they’d just caught me going at their sister.

Last night, the majority of them had been nice, but they’d been working. Today, though, I had every single eye on me, and their complete attention.

“Uh, hi,” I said as I scanned the room. “It’s awfully early for a family meeting, isn’t it?”

I mean, it was six in the morning.

Yet all of them were there.

Even Simi with her twins, and the angry dad behind her.

Though, last night, after I’d tried some of Coffey’s food, he’d eased up a little bit. Apparently, someone who could enjoy his food like I did was okay in his book.

But it did look like he hadn’t gotten much sleep last night.

“It’s Val’s turn to make breakfast, and since she got all pissy that we were holding our breakfasts after she left for

work, we changed our times. Today's Val's day to cook.”

# CHAPTER 19

*Well I'll be damned.*

*-Things you don't want to hear from your ER doctor*

## VAL

I rolled my eyes and went to the fridge where I'd put the breakfast items I'd bought from the store a couple of days ago.

I pulled out six tubes of cinnamon rolls, a full two pounds of bacon, and the eggs I'd gotten at the farmer's market last week.

After making one giant cinnamon roll in the middle of a baking dish, and then putting heavy cream, as well as more butter and brown sugar in it, I shoved it into the oven to bake without pre-heating it.

I got started on the bacon a few minutes later, pulling out two countertop griddles that I'd gotten from the thrift market down the road.

I'd just gotten the bacon package open when I felt Felix wander up and grab half of the bacon from me.

Together we laid the bacon out on the griddles, and then worked in tandem to get breakfast finished up.

Once everything was cooked and on my big ass table—one of the only things I had in my apartment at all—we sat and dug in.

“So you're getting married,” Winston said between bites of bacon. “That's kind of sudden, isn't it?”

I looked up at Felix to see his jaw tight.

He didn't like being questioned.

I opened my mouth to tell Winston to fuck off, but it was Felix squeezing my thigh that stilled my words.

“We found out some news last night,” he murmured quietly, then went on to explain everything, ending with, “I've never stopped loving her for a single day.”

“Val said that you only moved here to be vindictive,” Tony said. “Is that true?”

Tony's husband, Slone, wasn't there. He had a game in Michigan that night.

"It might've been originally," Felix sighed. "I can't say that I reacted all that well when I thought she just left us. Allowed our relationship, which I thought was absolutely perfect, to break. I hated that she left me to go to y'all and do something she fucking hated. I hated that she couldn't call me and explain. I hated that she was ignoring my calls and truthfully, I was so hurt about it all that I might've reacted with an undue amount of spite. But that all flew out the window as she walked back into that ER, and I saw her again. My heart," he placed his hand over his chest, right over his beating heart. "I didn't realize that it wasn't beating right until she came into the room."

My throat felt thick at his words.

"That's sweet," Zip said. "How the fuck are we supposed to eat this cinnamon roll?"

Keene pulled out a pocketknife and started to cut into it, divvying it up into plenty of pieces.

And that was that.

My family accepted him.

There was no outward sign of aggression. No getting into their good graces. Just like that, he was one of us.

"I think you just pick it up and eat it like a slice of cake," Crimson muttered from her chair.

"You don't pick up slices of cake and eat them," Keene pointed out. "You use a fucking fork, like a lady."

"Do you ever wonder how many places we pass that have people in the basement?" Zip asked after that.

There was a long, hollow pause and then Hannibal said, "Well, I fucking do now."

Felix snorted up some coffee, and then had to die for a few long seconds while Zip slammed her hand down on his back

before he came back to life again.

“Thanks,” he wheezed.

“What the fuck prompted that question?” I asked right before there was a hard knock on my door.

“That must be Nash,” Winston said as he got up and headed that way.

“Who is Nash?” Felix whisper-asked me after I’d taken a seat from refilling my water.

“I asked that question because yesterday I watched a video about how long a Walrus comes for.” Zip paused when Nash came into the room. “What are you doing here?”

The sneer that followed those words had my eyes rolling and Felix’s eyebrows rising.

“What the hell?” he whispered.

“I’ll tell you when they leave,” I whispered back. “Long story short, though, Nash lives in our building. He’s a big-wig NASCAR driver, and Zip hates him.”

“Why does Zip hate him?” he wondered.

“Because she likes him.” I shrugged as if that was the most normal answer in the world.

“Women,” he muttered under his breath.

I pinched him, causing him to pull away and laugh.

Which then pulled everyone’s attention to us.

Well, not me, exactly. But Felix. Who happened to be sitting next to Zip and just a little too close.

Whoa there.

I hadn’t seen Nash act as if he cared one way or the other what Zip did, but with Felix there, an unknown, he definitely didn’t like the closeness between the two of them.

Felix, having noticed this, leaned slightly away from me and threw his arm around Zip, who didn’t pull away.

She was the snuggle bug of the family, she'd take a hug anyway she could get it, even if it was from a man she only halfway knew.

Though, I supposed that wasn't all the way true. Zip had gotten plenty of time to talk with Felix over the phone in the years that I'd been with him. Zip had an iron clad memory. She remembered everything there ever was, even conversations that happened twenty years ago when we were still children.

So yeah, she might've just 'met' Felix, but she'd talked to him plenty to have formed an opinion about him.

"Who are you?" Nash asked, sounding surly.

Felix's eyebrows rose at the silent demand.

It was more than obvious he didn't like the closeness.

And Felix, being Felix, just had to push it.

"I'm Felix," he said as if that was answer enough.

"Felix who?" Nash continued, eyebrows lowering and stance becoming stiffer.

So he really, really didn't like Felix based solely on the fact that he was the one holding onto Zip.

And then there was Zip, absolutely clueless as she continued to lean on Felix.

"Felix is the doctor who saved my life," Crimson said. "He helped keep me alive long enough that I was able to get to surgery where they did all these repairs," she indicated her entire body with a sweep of her hand. "He's pretty important to us."

Winston, who'd been standing back by the door where Nash had once been, looked at his wife with adoration on his face.

"He's also engaged, as of this morning, to Val," Winston said, ruining our fun. "Come into my office and we'll talk about what security precautions you want to make."



Nash looked between Felix, Zip, and me, then turned on his heel and walked out the door to Crimson and Winston's place.

The door didn't slam behind them, instead it closed in an almost too controlled fashion.

"Wow," Crimson waved her hand in front of her face. "He totally likes you."

"He's the devil," Zip grumbled as she got up and went to the kitchen to start cleaning up. "And stop talking to me about him."

There was a moment of silence and then Hades said, "They're next."

My brows rose. "Not Keene?"

Keene scoffed. "Absolutely not me."

I looked at my big brother.

He'd been awfully quiet today.

"Why are you so quiet?" I wondered.

Keene's eyes darted to me, then looked away.

So he had a secret.

I grinned evilly. "Keenie weenie, tell us."

"Tell us what?" Hannibal asked.

"Keene Weenie has a secret," I said. "He's being quiet, and he knows why, and we don't."

"Whoa," Zip dropped a dish into the sink and stormed back to the table. "What's going on, Keene?"

Keene sighed. "Stop calling me Keenie Weenie, brat." He glared hard at me, then turned to Zip. "And nothing's going on."

"Then why do you look so guilty?" Simi asked, leaning forward.

Coffey, who was holding one twin—who might I add had been extremely quiet today—pulled Simi back by her ponytail.

Not hard, but not softly, either.

She rolled her eyes and went back, no longer squishing the kid in her arms with her forward movement.

I leaned forward and held out my hands to her, and Simi passed the baby—who hadn't been affected in the least by her mother's attempt at squishing her—to me. "Oh, you poor thing," I said to the girl. "Some people just aren't meant to be mothers."

"Hey!" Simi cried out playfully. "She's alive and kicking!"

"She's alive, but she has this cute little smooshed face now." I poked the baby's chin. She still didn't wake up. "What did y'all give them to keep them so quiet?"

"Boobs," Simi said. "I fed them before we came. They're milk drunk."

"That's interesting," Zip paused. "Do you think it'd help me sleep?"

"To breastfeed?" Tony asked cheekily.

"No," Zip flipped her off. "Breast milk. I know it's kind of weird and all, but damn, I haven't been sleeping a single wink lately. I think I was up for twenty hours yesterday. I got a total of four hours of sleep, and none of it was consecutive."

I lost the attention of the man at my side who'd been staring at me with the baby. He focused on Zip.

"What's changed lately that you can't sleep?" he asked her.

"Other than learning that my father was a fucking roach? Not much. Just stomach issues. But not to the point where they affect my daily life. Just one of those if I eat cheese things then I have to immediately take a poop afterward. Then have to stay there while my stomach and intestines purge any signs of dairy from me for the next three hours."

"Please," Tony said dryly. "Make sure that you share every single thing that's weird about you with the man Val is trying to impress."

I snickered. “I don’t have to try to impress him anymore. He already bought me the ring, remember?”

Coffey stood up and handed the baby he was holding over to Hannibal, who took the baby as if he was made to cuddle them, and walked to the door. “Speaking of morning shits, I gotta take one. Bye.”

“He’ll be at least thirty minutes,” Simi rolled her eyes. “That shouldn’t affect Zip’s sleeping habits, though, right?”

That question was directed at Felix.

I grinned as I listened to them diagnose Zip, in the end deciding to get her on a sleep regimen of Magnesium glycinate, vitamin D, plenty of water throughout the day, and a few other things that she needed to try before they went further to the real medication side of it.

Keene, who was quietly listening but not commenting, smiled.

I narrowed my eyes at him and said, “Don’t think we forgot about you, Keene. We’ll figure it out, and that’ll just be at an inopportune time for you. Wouldn’t you rather share with us now and not be embarrassed?”

Zip snickered.

Crimson giggled.

Tony crossed her arms and lifted her eyebrows.

Hannibal, who was now rubbing his face against the baby in his arms, grinned wickedly.

But it was Simi who said, “Just let him be. When we figure out who it is he’s seeing, we’ll just make his life a living hell then.”

Keene’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t dispute the charge.

That’s when I realized that Keene had a crush.

“It’s a race to the finish, isn’t it?” I said to no one in particular.

Felix threw his arms around my shoulders and said, “So do we have time to get married at a church? Or should we just elope?”

I looked over at him. “Once upon a time, I wanted a huge wedding.”

He grimaced.

“But now, all I want is something small and intimate that has unlimited cake,” I told him.

His eyes sparkled as he said, “I think we can handle that.”

I knew we could.

# CHAPTER 20

*I saw. I came. I had anxiety. So I left.  
-Text from Felix to Val*

## FELIX

“You have Robby back in room four.” Lori smirked as she handed me the chart.

I nearly groaned, snatched the stupid chart out of her hands, and stomped out of the nurses’ station.

Fucking Robby.

God. Dammit.

When I was halfway there and through going over his most recent test results, I felt my eye start twitching.

“Robby,” I said as I yanked the curtain open to his room. “Your blood sugar level is four hundred.”

Robby, who’d been coming into the ER for the last three months, looked up at me and shrugged. “I’m doing my best to manage it.”

“Well, you’re not,” I told him, not pulling any punches today. “You’re at dangerously high levels.”

He rolled his eyes, and I only seemed to get angrier.

See, I loved treating patients. It was my passion.

What wasn’t my passion was when I gave medical advice, and the advice was completely disregarded the moment they walked out of the hospital after getting a temporary fix for their ailments.

Like Robby here. I’d seen him come into the ER two times a week. Sometimes more.

And each fucking time, his sugar levels in his blood was dangerously high.

“I know, I know. But I’m trying,” he said as he reached for the fucking Route 44-sized drink on the table next to him that definitely wasn’t something sugar free.

I walked over to him, took the drink out of his hand, and poured it into the sink.

He started sputtering and tried to move toward me, but he was so sick he could barely do that.

“This ends now,” I said. “The next time you come in here, it’s going to be worse. And one of these times, you’re not going to walk out of here.”

“I’ll walk out of here right now!” he bellowed from his perch on the gurney.

“Good!” I said sarcastically. “Enjoy it! Because one of these times, I’m going to have to amputate your fucking leg, and you won’t be walking out again!”

Okay, so maybe I shouldn’t have said ‘fucking’ to a patient. But there was only so much bullshit I could shovel in a day, and I was way past that.

Robby started sputtering more, throwing his hands up. “I’ve been seeing a doctor!”

“Well, is that doctor named Dr. Pepper?” I asked. “Because you obviously aren’t taking his advice! Just like you’re not taking mine!”

His eyes narrowed. “This is fucking bullshit.”

“Well, you want to know what else is bullshit? The fact that you have four kids at home, a wife who loves you, people who depend on you, and you’re in here treating your body like shit because you can’t take the freakin’ time to take care of yourself!” I argued.

The man didn’t even have the decency to look ashamed.

Douche.

Robby sighed. “I’m trying, Doc.”

No, no he wasn’t trying. If he was trying, he would have lower numbers. If he was trying, he wouldn’t be back in my ER for the third time this week. If he was trying, his wife would be at his side instead of at home with the kids because Robby was too embarrassed to tell her he’d fucked up again.

“Try harder. Because I’m serious. You’ll die. Then they’ll be screwed because all of them depend on you,” I told him. “Do *better*, Robby.”

A throat cleared, and I looked behind me to see Val standing in the doorway. “Can I help?”

The anger that was slowly simmering over instantly cooled.

Yes. Yes, she could fucking help.

“Yes,” I replied tightly, not angry at her intrusion.

She walked into the room, brushed past me purposefully, trying to calm me down, and then said, “Tell me what’s going on, Robby.”

I left them to it, heading back out to the nurses’ station to see every single one of them staring at me with mirth in their eyes. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“Hear what?” Lori blinked her eyes exaggeratedly.

I rolled mine and headed for the break room, finding my lunch exactly where I’d set it this morning.

It was cold. No doubt about it.

When I opened it, I found it soggy and gross, and felt my inner demon start to rise again.

Picking it up, I threw it into the trash, then got on Uber Eats and ordered more food for me and Val that would hopefully arrive just in time for us to eat on our way out.

And it did, arriving at the end of our shift, just like I’d planned.

Val was giggling when I handed over her Taco Bell order after she got her coat on.

“Guess that means no sex tonight,” she teased as she took a large bite.

“Hey, wait!” Rose called out. “We have a mandatory meeting we have to attend!”

I physically felt my entire body deflate at her words.



Fuck, I was tired.

“What’s this meeting about?” I asked, tired as hell and thinking I could just skip it and nobody would notice.

We’d had two back-to-back shifts in the ER, meaning that I’d been at work now for over thirty hours. I’d been on my feet for no less than thirteen, and I was about two meals shy of being a happy camper.

Needless to say, hearing that I now had to attend a meeting after getting off shift was not something I was very happy about.

“It’s okay,” Val said as she caught my hand up in hers. “We’ll make it work.”

Speaking of making it work, I had a meeting with HR to talk about my and Val’s relationship.

To say that my supervisor wasn’t happy would be an understatement but losing me as a doctor was something they weren’t prepared to deal with at this moment in time. So they allowed me to continue doing what I was doing.

Or, more importantly, who I was doing.

Oh, and I’d also had to deal with my Uncle Woody showing up at work to berate me for not getting with him about Pops’s funeral. When I explained that Pops didn’t want one, he then complained that I’d had Pops cremated and not buried. When I’d also explained that Pops had wanted the cremation, Woody had flipped me off and told me he would see me in court for his half of Pops’s money, which I then informed him Pops didn’t have any money—though I wasn’t counting the life insurance policy he’d left me.

And honestly, it’d just digressed from there.

The only saving grace was that he’d been escorted out of the hospital by security, and I got to watch it.

“I know we’ll make it work,” I replied grumpily, not caring that people were getting the end of my cranky stick. “I’m just tired as hell, and I don’t want to go to a fucking meeting.”

“Sorry, bro,” a deep voice said from in front of me.

I looked up to find none other than Quincy Carter.

Quincy was a police officer for DPD—Dallas Police Department—and working in the emergency room, I saw him a whole lot more than we wanted to see each other.

But that was life, and him being here today meant that something was likely pretty shitty.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, hoping that his ‘sorry, bro’ didn’t have anything to do with the hospital meeting.

Sadly, he rained on my parade seconds later with his reply.

“The meeting is with me,” he said as he fell into step beside me. “Who’s that pretty girl on your arm?”

I narrowed my eyes at him, but it was Val who said, “You should probably steer clear of the coffee. You look like you’re one cup away from being a live wire. And you don’t have to sound so condescending when you ask about me, or act like you’re surprised.”

I snorted and looked at Quincy, who was double fistfing two big ass cups from the Coffee Mill on the first floor.

Quincy laughed, then shrugged. “Whoa there, wee Viking. I wasn’t trying to be mean. I was just trying to find out who my friend was with. No disrespect meant at all. To be honest, the very last thing I want to be doing right now is this meeting. But the world won’t save itself. And, since I’m the one who has to be peopling it today, I’m gonna need a couple extra shots of liquid courage.”

That was why I got along so well with Quincy, neither one of us were people persons, and we found that we tended to gravitate toward the sides of the room whenever either of us were forced to attend functions that the other was at.

“This is Val,” I said. “Actually, you’ll get a kick out of her real name. It’s Valhalla.”

Quincy blinked, then started chuckling. “Apt name, ma’am.”

Val made a harumphing sound, which had me chuckling.

She was on her period, hadn’t eaten just like me, and had only been at work for about six less hours than me. So yes, she was just as tired as I was at this point. Probably more so since her period was slowly killing her.

At least that was what she said. Her period was slowly bleeding the will to live out of her one tampon at a time.

Needless to say, if anyone here had a reason to be grumpy, it was her.

“Sorry, I’m not in the best mood,” she admitted. “It’s nice to meet you, Quincy.”

Quincy winked. “I wish I could say I was about to make your day better with what I have to say, but most likely it’ll only make it worse. Unless you’re into gangs and shit.”

Val shook her head. “Can’t say that I am.”

“Then it won’t get better,” he smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

•••

## VAL

We made it into the conference room and realized that other than a few people who were left working shift, everyone was there.

We didn't find a seat because they were all taken, so Felix and I went to the corner of the room and leaned against the wall as Quincy made his way up to the front.

"Everyone here?" Quincy asked, looking around the room to confirm that everyone was, indeed, here and ready.

"Floor's yours," the hospital director called out from his corner of the room.

I crossed my arms over my chest, and then leaned slightly into Felix, resting my head on his shoulder.

He dropped his mouth to the top of my head but didn't move from his position any more than that.

It made my heart feel like it was about to shatter.

So simple of a movement. It was just a kiss. Yet, it made my heart so freakin' full.

Like I was wanted.

Loved.

"Not to completely ruin your day"—Quincy sighed as he reached into his front breast pocket for a pair of reading glasses and slipping them onto his face—"but this is gonna suck to hear."

I studied the man for a few moments while he spread out his papers, unfolding them from the tiny wad he'd managed to get them into before shoving them into his pocket.

Quincy was tall, much like Felix.

But where Felix had brown hair and eyes, Quincy was everything dark.

His eyes were dark. His face was covered in a dark, well-kempt beard. He had tanned skin. Dark, almost black tattoos. He was also wearing black suit pants, a black button-down shirt, black shoes, and black socks.

Literally, there wasn't a single thing about him that had any color to it. Not even his glasses—which were also black.

Even the pen that he had tucked behind his ear was black.

“Wonderful,” I heard someone say.

I looked over to see if I could spot said person, but whomever had spoken had been in a crowd of people who were milling in the corner of the room near the food table I hadn't seen until now.

Not that I would eat that when I had Taco Bell to eat.

Speaking of Taco Bell...

I reached into the bag and pulled out a taco.

If I was going to sit here for however long and endure a mandatory meeting, I was going to eat.

Crunchy tacos were only good for so long.

Amusement filled Felix's features as he watched me dig in, but he didn't eat.

Instead, he paid close attention to what Quincy said next.

“As some of you know, I'm the head guy in charge of gangs and gang related activity in the Dallas Police Department,” he said to the room at large, his eyes nodding at a few men he knew as he went. “It was approved by the brass to let y'all in on a few gang related activities going on in this city right now, and hopefully prepare y'all a bit for what's about to come.”

The taco in my mouth turned into ash.

What's to come...

“What's going on is a turf war.” Quincy didn't mince his words. “So far, it's been all very under wraps, at least, as best as we can tell. But things have escalated in the last week, and

with a new gang moving into town, the already existing ones are fighting openly to get out on top of it.” He pulled out a sheet of paper and turned it around for us all to see. “This is the new gang that’s just popped up here. It’s new to Dallas, but not new to the US. Originally, this gang was homebased in Houston, but recently, The Codes have moved into this area. And let’s just say West Backers, the neon green and blue you see there in that photo, and Breakers, the orange and teal, are not happy about it. It’s caused a lot of fighting between them—not that there wasn’t already a lot of that—but now they’re trying to find top dog so this bigger, more established Code gang comes in and wreaks even more havoc.”

Quincy then proceeded to give us a very slap-dash description on the gangs, the big players involved, and what we could expect in the coming months.

“I’d like to say that this is all going to be swept under the rug.” Quincy pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes with two fingers. “But what it’s looking like is that we’re about to see a huge uptick in activity, and the overflow is going to start spilling into the hospitals.”

“What do you want us to do if this does come here?” Felix asked.

Felix, as one of the main ER doctors, would be one of the first ones to see these individuals.

“That’s where I want to start suggesting that the hospital employs a couple extra off-duty police officers who are equipped to handle this kind of situation,” Quincy said.

“That’s not in the budget, Officer Carter,” the hospital director grumbled.

I winced.

Here we were, being put in danger, and he’s going to say that’s not in the budget?

“What wouldn’t be in the budget is a couple of your nurses or a doctor dying because you refused to shell out the money to pay for security,” Quincy quipped.

Exactly what I'd been thinking.

And based on everyone else I could see from my spot lounging against the back wall, others felt much the same way I did.

I took another bite of my getting colder by the second taco and listened as the staff argued amongst themselves, the hospital director shot down almost every one of their suggestions.

“So what I'm understanding,” Felix said, coming out of his lean against the wall and crossing his arms over his chest. “Is that you couldn't give one less of a fuck about our safety.”

I winced.

Murmurs followed his words.

But Felix only had eyes for the hospital director.

“I wish it was something as easy as just getting these guards in the door,” he countered. “But it's not. We're already facing extreme budget cuts. We're short staffed. And since we're a county hospital, we don't get to decide who does and doesn't come in the doors, which then means that some of those people don't pay their bills like they should, making us more in debt. Does it suck? Yes. But it is what it is.”

“It is what it is.” Felix shook his head. “So what happens if one of us gets a bullet to the forehead? What will you do then?”

He didn't have anything to say to that.

“Maybe what would suck more is your people not coming to work because they don't feel safe,” Felix murmured. “Walk outs happen all the time.”

The hospital director stiffened.

I finished off my taco, loving how Felix was going to bat for us all.

I just hoped he wouldn't get in trouble for it.

“*Mr.* Kent,” the hospital director mused, purposefully not using his title of ‘doctor.’ “I’ll talk to the board. But I can’t make any promises.”

Felix rolled his eyes. “*Dr.* Kent. And, then I guess we can’t make any promises either. But I do know that if my fiancée gets hurt because of something you could have prevented with a few extra security personnel, I’ll own this hospital.”

Shivers of excitement started to leech through me.

Goddamn my man was hot.

“Noted.”

Quincy, eyes sparkling, tucked his notes back into his pocket. “If y’all have any other questions, please feel free to reach out anytime. My number is on the DPD’s website.”

With that, he nodded at everyone and headed for the door.

Catching my hand with his free one, Felix followed Quincy out.

“Tell us how bad it really is,” Felix called as he caught up to Quincy.

Quincy looked at me, then at Felix, before saying, “If you can get those security personnel hired, I’d be happy.”

With that, Quincy left, leaving us to walk more sedately to the shuttle that was luckily there waiting for riders.

It took the bus three minutes to fill with people leaving the building, and soon we were exiting off, each with a taco in hand.

We made it out to Felix’s car just in time to see a man leaning on it.

Remembering what Quincy had just said inside, it had me tensing.

But then the man at Felix’s car turned, and I saw Woody’s face.



I couldn't say that this was better, but at least I knew I wasn't about to get stabbed or shot.

At least, I hoped not.

Woody had never shown violence as his poison of choice. But never say never with a man like him.

"What are you doing here, Woody?" Felix asked, finishing his taco as he waited for Woody to answer.

I could hear the exhaustion in his voice.

I was glad that I was with him, because the warmth of his hand made me want to hold on and never let go, but I also didn't want Felix to have to hear the vitriol that Woody was about to spew.

"Dad left you money," he snarled. "I want some of it."

"Pops didn't leave any money behind other than a life insurance policy that he set up twenty-five years ago when he was still quite sane," he said truthfully. "He helped me pay for my house. And before you say that money was yours, I want you to remember that it was me who took care of Pops over the last few years. And this money would've been spoken for if he'd gone into a government assisted living program, but he'd come to live with me. So yeah, I benefitted from that. But I've also been the one to take him to every cancer appointment, every doctor's appointment, every treatment, every follow up appointment. Every single thing I've taken him to in the last few years. Were you ever here to help? No. So if you feel the need to take me to court, go ahead. But I'll win. And then you'll have to pay for the attorney fees. And then you'll only be worse off than you are right now."

That was news to me—Pops paying for some of Felix's house—but it made sense.

"I'm going to see you in court," Woody snarled.

Felix shrugged his shoulder, then reached to point his key fob at his car, which started with a loud rumble.

Woody stomped his foot, then turned on it to march away.

I waited until he was completely gone, then reached for another taco. “Can we eat these now before they get any colder?”

Felix got the door for me since I was now double fisting two tacos, then laughed as he shut the door on me.

He got into the driver’s seat, then reached for his big ol’ burrito.

I kept myself leaned over the bag of food, dripping my taco into it so as not to make a mess of his car.

Felix had no such compunction.

When I gave him shit for it, he shrugged and said, “I pay for it to get detailed once every couple of months or so. It’s a car. It’ll buff.”

I rolled my eyes. ‘It’ll buff’ was one of his favorite sayings lately.

“Whatever you say, darling. Whatever you say.”

He reached over and squeezed my taco, making it splatter.

“Hey!” I cried out in surprise. “That was my taco!”

He winked. “Look at the mess you made, baby.”

I looked at the car, seeing pieces of taco shell, cheese, and meat on the ground and seat around me.

I rolled my eyes and ate what was left of the taco, using my hand as a bowl.

Funny enough, it was even better all smashed to bits.

I’d remember that for next time.

# CHAPTER 21

*My body is a machine that turns dicks into sucked dicks.  
-Text from Val to Felix*

## VAL

Okay, so we might or might not be living together.

And since we were living together, I now remembered all the things that Felix used to do to drive me absolutely insane.

I suppose, over the last couple of years, I'd been able to forget all the bad, and remember only the good of what I no longer had.

But now that I'd been practically living with my attending for the month, the man I'd always said was the one who got away, I'd found out that he wasn't as perfect as I'd made him out to be.

He was loud.

So. Fucking. Loud.

Why the fuck did someone have to listen to their phone on full blast every single time they watched a video?

Also, why did the man insist on leaving his clothes on the floor and then complaining when I stepped on them and got them wet when he left them in the bathroom?

Also, why did he have to be so damn messy when he got out of the shower? Why couldn't the man understand that there was a reason for a towel and a bathmat?

Then there were his bathroom habits.

Sure, I knew that men pooped overly long.

But sometimes it felt like he was in there for thirty damn minutes, and that was where all my supplies were so I could get ready.

And, seeing as the moment we'd made it official he'd decided to start doing bathroom remodeling in the other two bathrooms, it meant I had nowhere else to go.

I loved the man, but I didn't love him enough to endure the smell of his poop while I got ready every morning.

Which really was what led us to now.

The man had been in there for a long time today.

At this point, I was convinced that he was just doing it to annoy me, because he knew I was going out to breakfast with a male co-worker—platonically—and that I needed to get ready a little bit earlier than usual.

Hence him staying in there way longer than he should have, knowing damn well I wouldn't go in there until he was done.

But seriously, being a baby doctor was hard. Sometimes it was great to commiserate with your peers. Hence coffee.

The door to the bathroom finally opened, and Felix appeared, looking as if he'd been taking a nap rather than using the bathroom.

I narrowed my eyes, shouldered past him, and slammed the door.

It smelled like roses, which was yet another indication that the man had just been wasting time.

The ass.

Getting ready took longer than I expected, because I couldn't seem to find a damn thing.

My makeup was in one spot, the lotion in another.

And it wasn't until I'd found just about everything that I realized the ass in the other room probably moved it all just to make my time longer than it needed to be.

By the time we were walking out the door, I had to send my friend a text saying I wouldn't be able to make coffee, because now I barely had time to get to work.

“This isn't over, Felix Alexander,” I snarled at him as we got onto the shuttle.

He took the first chair like usual.

I took the back.

And since we were the only ones on the shuttle, it was glaringly obvious that we were mad at each other.

At least, I was mad at him. I didn't know if he was mad at me anymore since he'd gotten his way.

We got into work, and I started to look through patient charts, wondering which one was assigned to me.

When I flipped Felix off when he got too close, he picked up the first patient chart he saw, then grinned wickedly before handing it to me. "Robby's back. Guess you can handle him."

I rolled my eyes and did as told, avoiding the man the entire morning as best as I could.

It wasn't until lunch, when he placed a bag of takeout and a cupcake in front of me, that I finally started to cave.

The ass knew exactly what to do to get me.

I ripped open the bag and viciously shoved a handful of fries in my mouth, trying to maintain my anger, but knowing damn well it'd be gone by the time we were through with our shift.

If I were being completely honest with myself, I would admit that I probably wouldn't be too happy with him going out with a female co-worker, either. Even though I was trying to make friends who could commiserate with me, I wouldn't want those friends to be at the expense of my happiness with my man.

My man.

Geez, it felt so weird to call him that, even now.

I'd prayed to every god there was that what Felix and I had would heal what was broken inside of me, but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that by 'healing' I would be getting back together with the stubborn man.

"Whoa, someone's trying to fix things." Rose smirked from her seat across from me.

I rolled my eyes and continued typing on my chart, very aware of the man who was talking to a patient in the curtained off room directly in front of me.

When he finished, he noted my lack of fries and smirked.

Which made my eyes narrow.

When I didn't tell him thank you or even acknowledge him—I would forgive him... eventually—he narrowed his eyes right back.

He moved around me, glaring at me just as I'd glared at him all morning.

We were on hour four of glaring, but still wanting to be around each other enough to be close, when the doors to the ER burst open and a mob of screaming men and women rolled through.

Every last nurse at the nurses' station launched out of their chairs, looking at the crowd pouring through the sliding glass doors with worry.

Then a few things made themselves known.

One was the sheer amount of people there were. And there were a lot.

But that wasn't the thing that had my heart pounding a mile a minute.

Most prominently were the colors.

Orange and teal, the Breakers Gang, and blue and neon green, West Backers.

Son of a bitch.

Fear struck my blood the moment the colors became apparent.

I knew the moment Felix saw it, too, because he stiffened and looked at me, his eyes wide and worried.

Gone was the anger we'd been exuding all morning long. In its place was fear for each other.

I wouldn't have known the gangs or their colors at all had we not just had that meeting.

Afterwards, when we were home, Felix had told me all about the Carter family.

The matriarch of the Carter family, Garnett, was a forty-year veteran with the DPD.

The patriarch was only a thirty-year veteran, though that was only because the previous twenty years of his life had all been focused on the military.

In total, Garnett and Germaine had eight children. Seven of them were at the Dallas Police Department, and one of them was a Marine.

The police officer who focused on the gangs, Quincy Carter, was a fourteen-year veteran with the DPD. He'd been ruling the gang task force for four years and had an extensive amount of knowledge on them.

Felix told me what Carter had told him, and that was that all the things that had been going on in Dallas lately could be contributed to those two gangs.

He'd warned us of the possibility of the gang war spilling into the ER.

But I'd hoped and prayed it would never happen.

Turns out, it did happen.

And they were right in front of us, fighting and screaming.

Heart utterly pounding, I rounded the counter.

One girl, who looked to be a hapless coincidental initiate into this fiasco, tried to creep away. But the man at her side, wearing a bright orange bandanna around his head, snatched her up by the hair and hauled her toward his side.

"Call 911," Felix murmured as he moved toward the group. "Ask for Carter to be informed. And whatever you do, don't get in the middle of them if they start fighting. Fall back."



My stomach sank as he started to walk toward the group.

Orange and teal, neon green and blue, and then some regular colors were mixed into the crowd. But it was more than obvious that if I was going by colors on people, there were four Breakers, and six West Backers in the hallway. And then there were eight non-gang related people.

All of them were screaming and yelling.

Yet, no one had brandished a weapon yet, so there was that.

I reached for the phone on the counter and called 911, then told them everything that was going on.

When I'd relayed all of that, I asked to be sent to Quincy, and they sent me over within seconds.

"Quincy Carter," Quincy answered tersely, sounding miffed.

"Quincy, this is Valhalla," I said, not wanting him to confuse me. "There's a... They're here."

I could hear something drop, and then what sounded like a rolling chair being forced backward into a wall.

"The hospital?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"I'll be there as soon as I can." He paused. "Can you get into a room?"

No.

I would not leave Felix outside.

"I'll see what I can do," I murmured as I hung up the phone.

People started poking their heads out, and I made wide eyes at each of them, urging them to get back into their rooms.

They went.

All except for one.

Nash.

He'd come in for a possible concussion after a training run had sent him into a concrete wall 'on turn three' according to Nash.

He stayed where he was, had his arms across his chest, and stared as he took everything in.

It was then that I felt maybe I didn't know Nash anywhere near as much as I thought I did.

Because when I looked at him now, I saw dead eyes.

I saw... nothing.

Shivering, I turned my attention back toward the group at large to see Felix there now, standing in front of them, with his hands in the air.

"Everyone needs to calm down and break it up!" Felix yelled to get their attention. "What's going on?"

Other doctors were there, too.

But they weren't wading in like Felix had.

Mostly because every last one of us on shift today was a female, and with men as big and as mean looking as them, we knew when to stand back. We weren't dumb.

The crowd dispersed somewhat, and that's when I saw the two people in the middle, both covered in blood.

One Breakers, and one West Backer.

Both looked... bad.

They were barely standing.

"Each of you," he pointed at them. "One go to trauma room four, one go to trauma room nine."

"Where's that at, bro?" the one on the left asked.

"Back hall, farthest room." He pointed.

That was the psych room.

We barely ever used it unless it was an emergency... like, say, now.

“And me?” the other one asked, looking like he was about to fall down.

Before Felix could answer, he did.

“If he fuckin’ dies, you’re fuckin’ finished!” I heard yelled.

Then there was movement.

The non-gang members pushed back into the back of the hallway, leaving only the rival gang members in the middle of the floor.

“It’s my fuckin’ brother! Save him!” one yelled.

Felix went to step forward, and then a knife appeared in the closest West Backer’s hand.

In that moment, the only thing that I noticed, before it moved, was the way the fluorescent lights in the hallway reflected off of it.

Then it was coming down in an arc.

But the rival gang member wasn’t there.

Felix was.

The knife went in through Felix’s left, upper chest. Then up.

Right toward his heart.

“NO!” I screamed, voice so loud it hurt my own ears.

“Oh fuck, we gotta get out of here!” one said.

Then there was no one left but the gang member who fell to the floor.

And Felix, bleeding out next to him.

Felix twisted and fell to his back, his hand over the knife wound in his chest.

His eyes were wide and pinned directly on me.

The moment the doors closed, one of the nurses who had functioning brain cells ran and pressed the lock button on the

doors.

They closed with a finality to them, making my heart twist.

I was somehow at Felix's side.

Somehow, I managed to get to him, and then I was staring into his wide, terrified eyes.

"I'm going to kill Marty," he rasped.

Then there was blood on his lips.

"Get back," I heard someone say.

I looked up to see a gurney headed our way.

I got back, and two burly nurses were suddenly there, getting Felix onto it.

I stayed back, unable to move, as I watched them take him into the closest trauma room and start working on him.

A groan sounded from the floor, and I looked down at the forgotten West Backer.

Anger, revulsion, and pity warred through me as I stared at the disgusting excuse for a human being.

Every last inch of me wanted to leave him there to die. To leak his lifeblood onto the white floor.

But the doctor in me, the one who kept saying that we didn't get to choose who we treated, said I needed to work on him. That human life was precious, and we didn't get to pick and choose who lived and who died.

Swallowing hard past the lump in my throat, I snapped at the closest nurse and said, "Help me get him up onto a bed."

She was already shaking her head.

"Fine. You're going to have to walk there," I said to the young man.

His eyes were blue.

So. Blue.

“I can’t,” he said.

Screaming and urgent calls of help came from the room that Felix was in, and I had to pause for a short second and say a prayer to whomever would listen that I needed him. That I didn’t think I could do this life without him anymore.

Such a short time back with the man shouldn’t have had me acting so stupid, but there I was, unable to function without him.

My brain was muddled, and there wasn’t a single thing that was helping clear it.

The only thing that could, would be hearing he was okay.

But I didn’t think he would be.

Tears streaming down my face, I helped the man to his feet, and walked him into the room.

“Where are you hurt?” I asked him as I all but helped him fall onto the bed.

The man groaned, then tried to point to his chest, but couldn’t quite pick his fingers up.

I cut his shirt open with the trauma shears in my pocket, and stared at the same exact wound that was just inflicted on Felix.

A heartbreaking sound left my throat, but I shut it down before it could form into more.

“I need help in here!” I yelled.

No one came.

Not a single person.

I swallowed hard.

“Rose!” I yelled. “I need help!”

I knew Rose would’ve come if she were near. Lori, too.

Tammy walked right up to the door, took a look at the man on the table, and snorted. “If you think you’re getting help

after what they did to Felix, you're delusional."

I hated her.

I hated her so much.

"Do you honestly think that I would be doing this if I had a choice?" I snapped. "Get the fuck out. Maybe if you're feeling generous, you'll go find someone that's willing to help."

"Fat chance," Tammy said.

That's when I saw Nash.

"Nash," I said as I called him to me. "I need help."

He came into the room and took a look around.

Then he grabbed some gloves off the wall, slipped them on, and walked up to me. "What do you need?"

I told him everything I needed, then said, "Take my badge. You can get me some medications from that cart. You don't happen to know how to start an IV, do you?"

He took the badge, then I walked him through how to get what I needed.

He came back seconds later, laid everything down on the bed near me, and then left.

Heart sinking, I stared at his retreating back, then did what I had to do.

If I didn't have help....

Nash came back with a timid looking nurse, a bag of saline, and IV paraphernalia.

"Get to work," he barked at the nurse.

I hadn't seen her very many times.

And that's when it hit me.

She was a student nurse.

"Come here," I urged. "Help me."

Together, the three of us, some of the most inexperienced people in the hospital, worked in tandem.

And that's how, three minutes later, I was standing with my fingers in a man's chest, when Quincy Carter walked in.

His eyes were wild as he took a long look at the man I was helping.

Then his eyes came up to me.

"You're saving my brother's life."

I looked up to find Quincy there, staring at the man in front of me in horror.

The look on his face was one I'd never forget for the rest of my life.

I had my fingers in the man's chest, pinching off an artery that was seconds away from causing him to bleed to death.

"What?" I asked.

"Garrett is my baby brother," he said as he stared at me. "He was undercover."

Garrett. Undercover.

He was a cop.

I'd just saved Quincy's brother's life.

What would've happened had I left him there to die?

Practically kicking myself for the thought that had crossed my brain earlier, I stiffened my spine and gestured at him.

I swallowed.

"Go tell the nearest two nurses that I need them," I said. "And I need a surgeon. They'll know who to call."

Quincy left at a sprint, which meant he knew how serious this all was.

Garrett didn't have long.

Not without medical intervention, and someone who could fix what was wrong.

“What do you need me to do?” Nash asked.

His hands were covered in blood.

His shirt.

His shoes.

“We’re going to get some blood in him now that we have his brother here to tell us his blood type,” I said. “Go ask him, then go down to the lab. Look for someone who will help you get it. Tell them it’s a cop, and it’s urgent.”

God fucking damn them all for making this way harder than it needed to be.

So that was what Nash did.

Me and baby nurse worked, her trying to clean up the wound, and me with my fingers in the guy’s chest as we held on.

It took them less than two minutes to respond.

By that point, Nash was back with the blood and hanging it. Baby nurse was running the line. And I was praying that my limited knowledge in what to do in this situation would be enough to save Garrett’s life.

The surgeon came in and started talking a mile a minute.

Then we were moving, heading to the OR with me on top of the gurney, holding the bleeder closed.

We’d just made it out of the trauma room when a gurney from the room down the hall was wheeled out at a sprint.

Heart in my throat, I looked at the gurney with desperate eyes.

“Is he okay?” I asked when we both met in the hallway.

I didn’t reach for him. Not when I was covered in this much blood.



Felix's face was pale. His hands were bloodless. His mouth was slightly open, and he had a breathing tube down his throat.

"Punctured lung, might've nicked the heart," someone replied.

I looked over to that someone to see Rose covered in just as much blood as me.

Felix's blood.

I closed my eyes and swallowed down the bile.

He'd make it.

He had to make it.

Please, please, please, Felix. Make it.

I opened my eyes and that's when I made eye contact with Tammy.

She was sneering at me.

I looked away just as the elevator doors opened.

"Us first," Tammy snarled.

I didn't have any complaints.

Mackson, who'd been the responding surgeon for me, pulled us back without a word.

It was an unspoken understanding that our ER doc would get first dibs.

It sucked, but it was just what it was.

I watched as the elevator doors closed on my fiancé.

And the tears, which I'd held at bay so far, started to fall.

"Don't fall apart on me now, darlin'," Dr. Mackson ordered harshly. "We got a cop to save."

I looked down at my hand in Garrett's chest and said, "Yeah."

The elevator opened, revealing nothing left but blood on the floor, and I watched it until the gurney moved too far forward

to see it anymore.

Closing my eyes, I said one last prayer to whomever would listen, and steeled my spine.

He would make it.

There was no suitable alternative.

## **CHAPTER 22**

*Bring back lead paint. Survival of the fittest.  
-Text from Felix to Val*

## FELIX

“She was so brave.”

I was fourteen hours post op from a collapsed lung, and multiple other things, but all I could do was smile.

“She’s a fighter,” I rasped.

My throat was still raw from the recent tube being in it, helping me breathe.

“You have no idea,” Mackson said as he watched Val sleep at my side.

I wasn’t sure when she’d gotten there. I was awake when she’d come in, looking utterly exhausted and broken.

I’d pulled her to me, and she’d all but collapsed, asleep in my bed seconds later.

“Tell me everything,” I urged.

Quincy, who’d just come from visiting his brother two doors down, said, “Well, I got the call from Val telling us they were here.”

I nodded.

“And I got the call from a nurse ordering me to come downstairs, that there was a consult needed.” Mackson shook his head. “So, Kelly and I came rushing downstairs. We both went to your room, but since he’s the expert on that, I let him take lead.”

“From what I was able to piece together,” Quincy said, “your woman helped my brother up off the floor and all but carried him into the trauma room when no one would help. She got him there—and this is all coming from that ‘baby nurse’ as Val kept calling her—and then started to work on him. The baby nurse came in with that famous race car driver, who might I add was a fuckin’ steal seeing as he is a trained medic and helped Val save my brother’s life. When I got in

there, she had her fingers in his chest stopping some bleeding, she said.”

“That’s where I came in,” Mackson said. “This guy went to the nurses’ station and started barking at whoever would listen. I heard him from your room and came to take a look. I’m ashamed to say I didn’t even know anyone else needed anything. We were all so focused on you.”

“That’s bullshit,” Quincy said. “Because some of them knew. Every nurse in the ER could’ve told you, as well as some of the doctors.”

“Agreed,” I murmured. “Some of them need to be reminded of their Hippocratic Oath.”

“You can’t blame them all,” Val sat up, hair wild from allowing it to dry. “They were pissed as hell. And the dude on the floor was an accomplice in getting one of their favorite doctors hurt.”

“Agreed,” Quincy said. “I’m just glad you didn’t leave him there.”

She wiped the sleep away from her eyes, then noted the other two men in the room.

Her face flushed.

Then she turned to me. “Are you okay?”

“All drugged up nicely. Nothing hurts right now,” I promised.

As long as I didn’t move, anyway.

I’d learned that one the hard way as I’d tried to resettle due to her head being on my forearm. When I’d tried to lift it, something had pulled in my side, and I’d immediately resigned myself with knowing that I wouldn’t be moving until she woke up.

Even now the feeling was starting to come back to my left hand.

“Liar.” She rolled her eyes and stood up. “I have to use the bathroom.”

Then she disappeared into the ensuite bathroom.

I watched until the door fully closed behind her before I looked at Mackson and said, “I want the hospital director’s job.”

He tilted his head slightly. “The actual job? Or do you want him out of the job, and anyone’s good enough to replace him?”

I thought about that one for a long moment and said, “Either or.”

He shrugged. “I can talk to some people,” he said. “But you’re right. Today shouldn’t have happened.”

That was the understatement of the century.

The door creaked open, and a nurse’s head popped in.

“Um, Mr. Carter?” she said to Quincy.

Quincy looked up. “Yes?”

“You have several very handsome men out here waiting to speak to you.” She flushed. “They look just like you.”

I chuckled as Quincy rolled his eyes.

Quincy stood up and headed toward the door. “I’ll check on you later, Kent.”

I jerked my chin at him just as the door opened and five men and one beautiful woman—who, might I add, wasn’t mentioned—pushed through the door.

“We want to thank her real quick,” one of them said.

He was the one that was the spitting image of Quincy.

Maybe Quaid or Quinn.

The door to the restroom opened, and then Val stared in shock at all the men staring at her.

Then, one by one, they all gave her a long hug.

Much longer than I felt was necessary, but I didn't complain.

She deserved the thanks.

She was amazing today, and everyone knew it.

The last to hug her was the woman.

"My name is Ande, and if you ever, and I do mean ever, need anything, I'm your woman." She smiled. "Garrett is the baby of the group."

"You're the baby." Quincy curled his arm around his sister.

That's when the door pushed open for a second time and Keene, as well as all of Val's sisters, came into the room.

"You do know that the ICU is only supposed to have one visitor at a time, right?" Val drawled.

Ande leaned away from her brother toward Val and said, "Who is that man?"

'That man' was Keene, who was looking at the crowded room with a grimace.

"My brother." Val's eyes widened. "Do you want to meet him?"

But before she could say anything more, Keene disappeared out of the room.

Snorting, I looked at all my visitors and said, "Thanks for coming to check on me."

It was Zip who put me in my place. "We didn't come for you, dude. We came for Val."

I rolled my eyes. "Of course you did."

## CHAPTER 23

*You only think I'm mean. Wait until I don't like you.  
-Val to Felix*



## FELIX

I was heading back to work, and it felt fuckin' divine.

"Do you have your lunch?" Val said as she picked up her lunch box.

I held mine up to show her, barely containing the eye roll.

The babying was real, and I really, really, really didn't like it. The first couple of days, maybe a week, was fine. But now I just felt like a child she was taking care of. Another pet she had to look after.

And today was the day that I would show her I was a man, and not the poor thing she'd been babying over the last six weeks.

"Good," she said as she crossed the room and gave me a kiss. "Bye!"

It took me a few seconds to comprehend that she had her own car keys in her hand, and she was walking out the door.

I followed her outside, barely keeping the bastard, Cyclone, in the house when he made a mad dash for the open door and slammed it closed behind me.

I frowned even harder when I saw where she was heading.

"Hey," I called out when she headed toward her car. "Where are you going?"

I could practically feel the eye roll despite not seeing it.

Okay, so maybe she had a legitimate reason to roll her eyes. She might say things all the time, and half of that time, I didn't comprehend the things she shared. It was horrible of me, I know. But I was working on it.

"Remember I have that doctor's appointment today," she explained rather patiently. "I have to drive myself."

I nodded, vaguely remembering hearing about a doctor's appointment, but not remembering that it was today.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “For your lady bits?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah. Such a great use of your medical terminology, Dr. Kent.”

I grinned wickedly at her.

“I try,” I said. “I’ll meet you there. Love you.”

I kissed her on her upturned lips, then opened the car door for her.

She sank inside, and I closed it behind her once she’d swung her feet inside.

The drive to the hospital took longer than I wanted it to, and I was reminded that the last six weeks at home had been rather relaxing not having to spend it in Dallas traffic.

By the time I parked in the employee parking lot, my blood pressure was elevated, and temper was flaring.

“What the fuck was that?” Val asked as she got out of her own car a few parking spots away.

“I have no fucking clue,” I admitted. “But I remember now why I hated driving to work every day.”

She snickered. “My apartment was closer.”

It was.

But the house was her dream house, so we’d deal.

“I...”

I was interrupted by Mackson calling my name.

I looked up to find him folding out of his car, scrubs rumpled, as if he’d been about to head home when he was called back.

“What’s up, dude?” I said as I held out my hand to him.

He took it, and we did the manly back slap thing that all men do and stepped back from each other.

“I was going to head home, but I was called back for an emergency board meeting.” His eyes gleamed. “Know

anything about that?”

I grinned wickedly. “Sure do.”

When the news of the hospital director’s firing had come from the hospital’s CEO in a late-night phone call, I’d been ecstatic. Because, though I’d been excited to head back to work, I knew there were still issues with security that needed to be dealt with before I would feel entirely comfortable being back there.

The bad thing was, I’d spent the last six weeks on the phone calling anyone and everyone who was influential in our hospital and telling them about the issues we were having. Mostly, it was due to my nervousness at having Val there unprotected. But also, it was because I was traumatized. I wasn’t willing to admit it, but that day had really fucked me up.

Sure, I could see a therapist for my issues. But I felt like it would be better solved if I got certain people fired and had control of the situation somewhat.

Hence the call last night informing me that if I wanted the job, hospital director would be mine.

Sadly for him, I didn’t.

I was about to be married, and the last thing I wanted to do was have the hospital as my new mistress.

“Any idea what I’m about to go in there and face?” he asked.

I just smiled.

Because in about an hour and a half, Mackson would become the new hospital director, and he would probably hate it.

But it would be a great thing for the hospital, which was why I suggested Mackson to the CEO.

“I don’t know, but when you’re done, stop by and let me know what happened,” I lied.

He sighed, rubbing his tired face. “Val, you do know you’re about to marry a liar, right?”

Val, who’d been quietly standing next to us as we now waited for the shuttle, looked over at Mackson and said, “I knew that a half dozen years ago when I did a reading for him.”

“A reading?” Mackson asked.

“A palm reading,” she expounded.

“Oh,” he shook his head, clearly not understanding. “I gotcha. And what did this palm reading say?”

“Only that he was my fated mate, and one day, after lots of bad stuff happened, would we be together and happy,” she said.

That was news to me.

Either she was completely making everything up on the fly, or she really had read my palm, and just hadn’t shared any of that with me.

Either one was possible with my Val.

“Well, I guess some bad stuff really did happen.” Mackson shook his head, eyes tired. “I want that one day.”

Val tilted her head slightly, her eyes narrowing, and said cryptically, “Mackson, I think you’re going to find that very soon.”

The shuttle pulled up before Mackson could reply, and the three of us filed on, along with about ten other people.

When we arrived at the ER, I was surprised to find the entire place filled with people. Staff from all shifts were there with smiles on their faces to welcome me back, and I waved at them all.

Sadly, I was quite uncomfortable with the attention and the amount of people in the room, so instead of mingling with everyone I clapped my hands and said, “No offense, ladies and gentlemen, but I’m really looking forward to getting back to

work. Eat and hang out! But it's time to save some lives for this old man."

Val snorted. "You're not old."

"He's definitely old."

I looked over to find Zip there munching on a celery stick.

"What are you doing here?" I asked her.

"I was in charge of bringing food for her," Zip pointed at Val. "She couldn't be bringing food to your surprise party."

I grimaced, looking over at Val accusingly.

I couldn't believe she knew about this crazy plan and didn't warn me.

My look caused Zip to laugh. "I'll have you know, Val is like a vault. We never know what she's feeling. Just one day she blows up at you and you want to kill yourself for causing Val to get mad at you."

I snorted. "Val doesn't blow up."

And she didn't.

Val was an emotional person, but I knew how to read her like a book.

I knew when she was mad or sad. I knew when I needed to give her space or cuddle up next to her. I also knew that the sight of the woman walking up to us was about to make her want to brawl.

"It's so good to see you..." Tammy trailed off just as Val's head whipped around. "Oh. Family reunion?"

Val and Zip crossed their arms over their chests, then moved in front of me protectively, as if they could actually do something to prevent my getting hurt by sheer will alone.

"Leave, Tammy," Val said softly. "This is your one and only warning. Don't talk to us. Don't mention our names. Don't give him looks from across the hospital. If you end up having to work with one of us, be professional, but stay away,

because I was really, really good about all this. I could've handled it differently, and had honestly been planning to, but then Felix was hurt, and I couldn't think about both you and him at the same time. So I had to choose, and I chose him. It'll always be him. But I am telling you now, my anger is still there, beating like a living heart beneath the surface of my skin. I'm angry, and don't think I didn't notice that you stole years of our lives from each other."

"And truthfully, like I was just about to tell my future brother-in-law, Val is a vindictive bitch," Zip said. "Don't get on her bad side or you'll regret it."

"We'll see." Tammy rolled her eyes. "I'm glad to see you back, Felix. We'll talk later."

Tammy left with a roll of her eyes.

I sighed.

"This is going to be so stupid of her," Zip said. "Do you want me to call Folsom?"

Val laughed then, and to be completely honest, I was kind of scared of it.

"Oh, don't worry about it," Val said. "I have it completely taken care of."

With a kiss to Val's lips, I escaped to the ER.

And I did, indeed, save some lives.

•••

Later that night, I arrived at my place with a feeling of exhaustion nearly overwhelming me.

As much as I'd enjoyed being back at work, I still wasn't what one would call one hundred percent.

I was about seventy percent, which had gone down from the eighty percent I'd felt this morning.

Nothing was more humbling than heading to a twelve-hour shift and being reminded how out of shape you could get in

about six weeks' time.

I'd also had to make a stop at the store to pick up Val's ring.

I'd taken it in eight weeks ago to get it resized, but this was the first time she'd let me out of the house by myself since the stabbing had happened.

The box was warm in my pocket, and I couldn't stop the stupid grin from overtaking my face as I pushed through the door of the home I'd chosen with her in mind—albeit a bit more vindictive of reasons than I sometimes liked to admit—and called out to her. “Poppet, I'm home!”

She came walking around the corner, a huge smile on her face.

A smile that dropped off when she saw the exhaustion on my face. “You overdid it, Felix Alexander Kent!”

I smiled at her outrage.

God, I loved her.

“I might've,” I admitted, voice filled with exhaustion.

She was just about to reply to that statement when a sharp bark filled the air.

My head whipped around, and I started scanning the room, heart in my throat.

I gasped when I saw the dog in front of me, practically sitting there waiting for me to see him.

“What have you done, Poppet?” I asked quietly, staring at the puppy that was staring back at me.

“Well,” Val said as she came up to me and threw her arms around my chest. “I was at my doctor's appointment, and the nurses were talking about a dog they couldn't get to come to them behind the hospital. Since I parked out there, I decided to try my hand at it. And he came right up to me. When I got a good look at his face, I knew I couldn't leave him there.”

That's because the dog was a mirror image of Gee.

From his pointy ears to the white dipped tail.

“Holy shit,” I breathed. “It’s Gee 2.0.”

“I know,” she whispered. “I know it hasn’t been that long, but I just couldn’t leave him there.” She paused. “The vet said that he’s about two and a half months old.”

Even more significance.

Because Gee had died exactly two and a half months ago.

“Shit,” I breathed.

Why was my throat so choked up?

“So as you can see, he’s ours,” she teased, looking up at me.

I patted her ass, placed a kiss on her nose, then let her go to move toward the dog.

“Careful not to scare him,” Val said. “He’s pretty skittish.”

I went down onto one knee, then held out my hand.

The puppy wasted no time in launching himself at me, tail wagging, and tongue lolling.

“I thought you said that he was skittish?” I teased, pulling the playful puppy into my arms.

She blinked, sounding just as dumbfounded as she looked. “Because he is.”

“Well, maybe it’s just you,” I teased.

“And about thirty other doctors and nurses who tried to get that dog to come near them. You’re the first person besides me who’s actually touched him. I had to hold him down for the vet to give him a shot and check him out. And then he held a grudge for the next hour.” She shook her head. “I’m glad he likes you, though. It makes this all easier.”

It did, but my heart still ached a little bit.

“I’m not trying to replace Gee,” she said softly. “This was an ‘I’ll bring him home and see what you say’ kind of thing.”



Not ‘I’m bringing him home no matter what’ kind of thing. A few of the vet techs expressed interest in him.”

I was already shaking my head, excitement at having a puppy almost as great as having her get me this puppy.

“Thanks, baby,” I said as I pulled her into my arms.

She came easily, her head going to my chest, and her body practically melding into mine.

I’d missed her today, even though she’d been there most of the shift. Really, I’d gotten used to having her all to myself as I’d been off—on the days that she was off, anyway—and not having her where I wanted her—in my arms—sucked pretty bad.

She pushed back from me and frowned. “What is that?”

“What is what?”

She slipped her hand into my pocket and pulled out the box, and I immediately wanted to slap myself in the forehead.

Jesus.

“Umm...” I said quietly. “Well...”

She giggled and practically ripped it open. “You got it sized for me.”

In all the confusion and hecticness that’d followed the shooting, I’d downright forgotten all about the ring I’d dropped off to have resized to Val’s ring finger.

It was only after they’d called me for the fourth time in as many weeks to come pick it up that I did it.

Sure, I could’ve gotten Val to pick it up, but something inside me hated that idea.

I should be the one to do it.

I should be the one to put it on her finger.

“Hey!” she said as I snatched the ring out of her hand before she could slide it on her own finger.

I grinned, dropped to my knee in front of her, and then held the ring out. “Will you...”

“I already said yes!” she declared, shoving her hand at me. “Put it on!”

I did, sliding it on over her knuckle, then farther down to the base of her finger.

It looked great.

Too bad she wouldn’t be able to wear it while she was at work.

Which was where the second piece of jewelry that was in my pocket came in handy.

“Good,” I said as I stood up, then reached for the other pocket where the necklace lay. “Now this is for when you’re at work and you can’t wear the ring on your finger.”

She all but melted right in front of me. “Oh.”

Feeling ten feet tall at having gotten her something she would wear and love, I stood up and gestured for her to turn around.

She did, then lifted her hair up to present her neck to me.

Once the necklace was in place, I pulled at her ring and then showed her how to get it onto the necklace.

She held it out to look at it, her face sporting a huge grin.

“I love it, Felix.”

I pulled her back into my arms, then dropped my head down onto her shoulder.

“Not that I don’t want to hold onto you all day,” I said as I groaned. “But can we hold each other from the couch?”

She patted my ass, then pushed me away gently. “Go sit down. I have dinner simmering on the stove. A lasagna soup. Then I’m going to let 2.0 outside, and then we can sit there and figure out the name we’re going to use.”

I took a seat like she instructed, then lay back with my eyes closed until she brought the lasagna soup to the coffee table.

I dropped my feet from atop it, then leaned forward to give 2.0 a scratch before Val called him outside.

I waited until she was back to eat, though, and smiled when she gave me a pleasure-filled smile at my consideration.

We ate the soup. Then she let me lie on the couch with my head in her lap until I was practically sleeping.

Only after a few hours of this did she force me to take a shower and go to bed.

My last thought of the night as I dropped off into sleep was I wished I had enough energy to fuck her like she deserved.

But that would come with time.

I had forever.

## CHAPTER 24

*Sometimes, all you can do is kick them in the cunt.  
-Text from Zip to Val*

## VAL

*1 month later*

“That is it!” I snarled to myself as I stood up, tried not to force my chair into the wall behind me, and failed.

“Whoa, darlin’,” I heard my favorite person in the world coo. “You okay?”

No. No I wasn’t fucking okay!

“She needs to go,” I snapped. “Her or us.”

Felix narrowed his eyes. “What did she do this time?”

I showed him the paperwork. “She said that I ordered this, when I most certainly did not!”

He took the paper from my hands and frowned when he saw the notes scribbled in the chart.

“That’s not even the right drug or dosage for that drug,” he murmured. “Did she give it?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. But Rose brought it to my attention, then said that she got the order via Tammy.”

His hand clenched on the paper he was holding. “She’s going to get someone killed.”

“I agree,” I muttered darkly. “And then she didn’t call for a check on the insulin she pulled and was just about to give it to Robby when I happened to walk by and hear her saying what she was administering.”

His jaw flexed, and he picked up the phone next to my hand and started dialing a number.

I could hear the new director pick up on the first ring. “Mackson.”

“Mackson,” Felix growled. “It’s time.”

There was something said that I didn’t quite catch, and then Felix was hanging up the phone.

“You’ve already talked about this?” I asked in surprise.

“Just like you’ve already set Folsom in motion,” he answered with a knowing grin. “But I’m just going to make it easier for whatever you’re doing there. She’s not going to take your career away from you, which is likely what she’s trying to accomplish with this.”

He shook the paper at me for emphasis.

I deflated slightly, happy that he’d agreed with me and hadn’t teetered on his promise.

“Good,” I murmured.

He twirled a piece of hair around his large finger, then placed his hand underneath my chin, tilting my face up. After placing a soft kiss onto my upturned lips, he walked away, grabbing the chart he’d come for on his way out of the nurses’ station.

It wasn’t an hour later when I saw Tammy walking by with all of her things shoved into one large hospital bag, a security guard on one side and Mackson on the other.

I couldn’t help the feral grin that spread across my lips as she was escorted out.

Hallelujah.

•••

“Yo!” a sharp male voice said.

I looked over at my brother and raised a brow at him.

I was at the circus.

I wasn’t sure why, to be honest. It wasn’t my scheduled day to be there. But I didn’t really question it.

They wanted me there, I’d be there. It was the least I could do since I’d pulled back so much after going back to work.

“What?” I asked as I walked toward him.

He gestured toward the makeup and outfit tent. “Get ready.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s where I was going, loser.”

He looked at his watch. “You’re going to be late.”

I sighed and went to the tent which wasn’t really a tent. Once there, Hades helped me with my hair and makeup, and Crimson helped me into a long white dress.

I frowned when I saw it. “Did we change our outfits?”

“Today, yes,” Simi answered, both of her babies strapped to her body with this weird sheet-like contraption. “Can you finish up here and be out in ten?”

I nodded, and they all disappeared, leaving only Keene there outside the room.

“What are you doing?” I asked when I saw him lurking.

“Waiting to escort you,” he answered. “There’s quite a crowd today.”

I looked at his attire. “Why are you so dressed up?”

He looked down at his suit. “New thing that Zip wanted to try. I don’t know. I just put it on.”

I rolled my eyes.

Zip and her ideas.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m ready. Should I take my phone?”

“Leave it,” Keene suggested, offering me his arm.

I took it and together we walked out of the dressing area to the main part of the ‘tent.’

I stopped in my tracks when I saw all of my family sitting there, as well as a few friends from work.

But what had my heart absolutely racing was the man at the end of the makeshift aisle waiting for me dressed in a three-piece suit, a lavender tie breaking up the all-black thing he had going on.

My mouth must've been on the floor because the grin that flashed across his face when he saw me was nothing short of magnificent.

“Come on,” Keene ordered. “You’re the first sister I get to walk down the aisle. I feel like I need to savor this.”

Keene walked me down the aisle to the man who had given me everything and continued to do so.

When Keene gave me away and Felix took my hand, he said. “You ready to get married, Poppet?”

I licked my lips and stared into his beautiful brown eyes as I said, “As long as you’re here with me, I’m ready for anything.”

•••

The reception was great.

Coffey cooked.

Zip provided alcohol.

Keene made a dessert.

Hades and Hannibal DJed.

Crimson and Winston brought the dog.

Slone and Tony provided the entertainment in the form of Titus King, the funniest man ever when he was drunk off his ass.

All in all, it was the best wedding ever.

But what made it magnificent was the woman who showed up for the reception with her husband.

Folsom and Kobe.

Folsom came bearing gifts, too.

A few of them, actually.

One that showed Woody and Merrina Kent were evicted from their home for embezzlement and back taxes. Oh, and



that his best friend had been responsible for the rape of his family.

The imbecile had kept literal scanned letters between him and his best friend on his home computer talking about how they were going to keep it quiet and protect Cordell.

According to Folsom, who'd done a lot of digging, Cordell West, Woody's best friend, had died of a drug overdose about eight months after he'd assaulted Linny.

Pops's last dying wish was granted, even if the asshole didn't suffer enough if you asked me.

The other gift Folsom and Kobe brought was that Tammy was on her way to Calgary for her permanent position as a basic ER nurse that started at the bottom.

Overall, I couldn't have asked for a better way to end my day.

That was until Felix pulled me into the closest closet, showed me just how much he loved me having his name, and reminded me that I got to have his dick for the rest of my life.

No. Life couldn't get any better than this.

At least... I thought so, anyway.

Turns out, a surprise was on the way. One I wouldn't find out about until days before she arrived.

# **EPILOGUE**

*WTF is a kilometer?  
-Val to Felix*

## FELIX

My wife, exhausted and annoyed, stared at her sister with her arms crossed over her chest, and a glare permanently etched on her face.

“What, exactly, do you want me to do here?” Val snarled.

The two of them had been bickering back and forth for going on ten minutes now. All because we’d gone to the doctor today for what we thought was Val to get a renewal on her birth control, only to leave the office with something quite different.

“Well, who is going to run the stupid tarot card table?” Zip raged. “Seriously, you made it so stupidly popular, and no one is going to be happy that one of us, or some random person who’s not even related to us, is running it.”

That was true.

When shit had hit the fan that day in the ER, and that man had stabbed me in the chest, nearly taking my life, Val had poured herself into life with a passion. Everything she did now was with one hundred percent of herself.

And that was something that had definitely helped the circus.

Only, things had changed.

And we were now here to deal with the consequences.

“It’s not like she really did this on purpose, Zip.” Simi added her two cents.

“Well, whatever,” Zip grumbled. “What kind of stupid announcement was that, anyway? Just a ‘hey, we’re having a baby.’ Way to be inventive.”

Val’s sisters were all fucking crazy. Every last one of them.

And they all had their cycles synced. That was why every last one of them was in a bad damn mood.

“‘We’re pregnant’ is a more socially acceptable announcement than ‘we were doing it, she was tied up, my hand was around her throat, and I forgot to pull out,’” I drawled.

Val choked on her water.

I patted her back a little too hard, and she glared.

“Don’t try me, Felix Alexander Kent,” she snarled. “This was absolutely the worst timing ever. I’m going to be having this kid before I’m even a full ass doctor. That’s going to be a pain in the ass!”

Okay, so she was right.

It would be tough.

But not impossible.

“Val,” I said. “Like I said earlier, it’s not like we didn’t do everything right. It just happened. That’s life. We’ll deal. Plus, though you’re not a full-blown doctor right now, I am. And I can take off whenever the fuck I want to.”

She blew out a breath.

“You could just split shifts,” Keene suggested. “You already do that partially anyway since he came back from the stabbing.”

I glared at Keene. “That’s not cool.”

Keene shrugged.

Every time the stabbing got brought up, Val always got this far away look in her eyes that told me she was reliving the experience.

I hated it, and I hated even worse that it was brought up so much.

“Did you know that a baby’s head emits hexadecanal which makes women more aggressive and men less aggressive?” Zip wondered. “The hexadecanal is an evolutionary survival mechanism to induce mothers to defend the baby and fathers

to not attack it. Though, they're not sure that it's enough to affect other humans besides the immediate parents."

That was... interesting.

"So when is this bundle of joy arriving?" Hannibal asked curiously.

I looked at Val, who only seemed to deflate more.

"Well, about that..."

•••

*Three days later*

It was a good thing that we'd gone into the doctor when we had, because had we not, when she'd woken up in the middle of the night while I was on shift, and she was by herself, she would've had the baby on the bathroom floor.

As it was, she drove herself to the hospital.

When she arrived, I took her to labor and delivery myself.

"Well hello there, Dr. Kent, squared," a labor and delivery nurse said. "What do I owe this pleasure?"

I gestured at Val. "She's in labor."

The nurse, Kelly, tilted her head to the side. "What?"

Val sighed. "It's a surprise to me, too."

She looked Val up and down then said in an incredulous tone, "You're not pregnant... are you? Is this a joke?"

"I wish it was," Val muttered.

I squeezed her hand and said to Kelly, "We found out three days ago that she's well past full term. And yes, we're very aware that she doesn't look pregnant."

Kelly just shook her head. "At least you didn't have him or her at home on the toilet."

Val snorted. “I almost didn’t come in, but when I realized that my contractions were only ninety seconds apart, I decided that Felix might kill me if I didn’t come.”

She would’ve been right.

And sure enough, when we went to the labor and delivery room to get checked out, not only did we hear the baby’s heartbeat for only the second time, but Val was right. She was in active labor and was almost nine centimeters dilated.

“Well I’ll be damned.” Kelly shook her head as she stripped off the gloves. “Who is your doctor?”

Val was already shaking her head. “Whomever is on call. My gyno doesn’t deliver babies.”

Kelly’s eyes sparked. “Well then, you’re in luck. We have the best doctor on the planet here right now. Dr. Tiffany.”

Dr. Tiffany was, indeed, one of the best doctors in the hospital.

I liked her a lot, and I was glad that she was there to help.

She made it into the room in time for Val to suddenly sit bolt upward and say, “The baby is coming.”

And she wasn’t wrong.

All Dr. Tiffany had to do was pull the sheet off and hold out her hands.

I watched in aghast surprise as Dr. Tiffany practically lurched forward and caught the baby that slid free of my wife’s legs.

Just... boom.

She was there.

And screaming her little head off.

“Holy shit,” I breathed, watching Val and then the baby. “What the hell was that?”

“What that was,” Dr. Tiffany said, “is a mother who you’re going to have to watch at the next birth. She’s going to be

popping them out with barely any notice. And lookie there, healthy as healthy can be.”

Long minutes later, as the baby lay on Val’s naked chest, I said, “How the hell did you hide that big thing for so long?”

Val looked at me with wide eyes as she said, “Ten pounds?”

“Ten pounds even,” I confirmed. “Wow.”

“Wow is right,” she shook her head. “A whole ass baby, ten pounds at that, inside me and we didn’t notice at all.”

I reached out and caught the tiny little fist between two fingers before pressing a kiss to it.

When I looked back to my wife, I said, “This is one of the best days of my life.”

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against my chest as she said, “Despite my hesitancy at having a baby at this point in my career, I wouldn’t trade her for the world.”

I smoothed the hair back from Val’s face and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Now the hard part.”

She threw her head back with a groan. “We have to name this one.”

Our dog was still nameless.

But our kid couldn’t be.

The dog was one thing. A full ass baby was another.

“How about after your mom?” she asked. “Linny?”

My heart stopped, and right when she heard the name, the baby opened her eyes.

“Linny it is.”