

SUZANNE WRIGHT

The  
*Pact*



THE PACT  
SUZANNE WRIGHT

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*For Sara*

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# Prologue

This was probably what would be called a soap opera moment. I mean, I was standing in a ladies restroom ... wearing a bridal gown ... being smirked at by a woman who coveted my husband ... while my ex-boyfriend and the local sheriff argued a few feet away.

Not that weirder things hadn't happened in my life. Particularly in the past year. After all, it wasn't every day that you legally bound yourself to an ex-lover as part of a fallback marriage pact.

I looked at Mimi. "We'll talk again soon." I waved my hand at the door.

Still smirking, the brunette folded her arms and gave a little head flick that made her chin-length layers dance around her face. "I'd prefer to stay. This looks like it might be fun."

God, I needed to cut that bitch up at some point.

For now, I switched my attention back to the two men who were deep in an argument. A deputy sheriff looked on, seeming intent on not getting involved—well, most cops swerved getting on my husband's bad side, and this little scene would sure piss him off.

"I'm only here to ask her some questions, Grayden," the sheriff insisted, his large fists perched on his stout hips. "She doesn't need a lawyer present. And if she *did*, you wouldn't be able to act as one for her—it would be a conflict of interests, given your past history."

"I'm not leaving, Lowe," Grayden asserted, a stubborn upward tilt to his chin as he drew himself up to his full height, placing him a few inches over the sheriff.

Exasperation rippled across Lowe's jowly face. "Has it occurred to you that she might not want you here? I have to say, taking into account the way everything played out between you two, I wouldn't blame her if she didn't."

An emotion flickered in Grayden's hazel eyes too fast for me to process it. "If you're trying to manipulate Addison into demanding I leave, it won't work. She knows better than to talk without legal representation present."

"As I said before, she doesn't need it—I just mean to ask her a few questions."

"Go ahead," Grayden invited, his tone as smooth as the short brown hair he'd slicked back. "But I'll be right here while you do."

Lowe's gaze narrowed. "How do you think my niece will feel when she hears you rallied to the defense of a woman she hates? Do Felicity's feelings matter to you at all?"

"You won't guilt-trip me into walking out of here."

"You turned your back on Addison once before. What's the difference?"

Oh, low blow. Accurate, though. Once, it would have stung to be reminded that Grayden had broken every promise he'd made to me when he'd scuttled back to his ex-wife. But now? Now I could think of him and feel nothing—no regret, no sadness, no anger.

Lowe sniffed. "Who is it you're really protecting, I wonder? Her, or Dax Mercier? Are you worried she'll spill something about your old buddy that will put him in prison where he belongs?"

Grayden's eyes flicked to the manilla file the sheriff held. "You don't know that Dax has anything to do with that."

"It has his name written all over it." Lowe turned back and pulled something out of the file. A photograph, I realized, as he held it up.

*Damn.* The dude in that picture had taken one fuck of a beating.

"Tell me, Mrs. Mercier, how would you feel if someone had done that to one of your loved ones?" asked Lowe. "How do you think his family feels? Do you really



believe your husband should be allowed to get away with that?”

What I believed was that the guy had brought this on himself.

“Did the victim finger Dax as the culprit?” Grayden interrupted.

Lowe’s face tightened. “No.” He dropped his arm to his side. “He claims he remembers nothing. But it’s fear keeping him silent.” Lowe tilted his head at me. “Is that what’s keeping *you* silent? Or do you just not care?”

I kept my expression neutral as I stared back at him, honestly wondering if he truly thought I was going to tattle.

“Obstructing justice is a serious crime, you know,” Lowe warned me.

“So is wasting police time,” Grayden chipped in. “That is essentially what you’re—” He cut himself off as the door swung open with a squeak of hinges.

A tall, suited-up, familiar figure loped inside. A person who wore many hats, who was so many things—Entrepreneur. Businessman. Criminal. Protector. Avenger.

Dax Mercier. Also known as my husband.

And a man who had only ever loved—and maybe only *would* ever love—one woman. A woman that was not me. So it sucked large that, when it came to him, I’d fallen so deep into the L pit I’d never find my way out.

His mismatched gaze locked on me, glittering with anger, and gave me a quick head-to-toe inspection. Satisfied I was fine, he drank in the rest of the room. His eyes briefly narrowed on Mimi—whose smirk slipped away—and then lasered in on Lowe with a predatory focus.

Dax coolly hitched up a brow at him. “Want to tell me why you’re harassing my wife?” he asked, a deadly note to that otherwise velvety tone.

The sheriff straightened his broad shoulders. “Questioning her over a crime doesn’t count as harassment.”

Again, he held up the photograph.

Dax's expression didn't alter in the slightest as he studied it. He then looked at the sheriff blankly.

Lowe's mouth went tight. "If you didn't personally do this, you had one of your people do it," he upheld. "Either way, you're responsible."

Grayden cleared his throat. "You said yourself that the victim named no one. You have no proof that Mr. Merc—"

"I don't need proof," the sheriff snapped. "This reeks of Dax. He wanted revenge, and he took it. That's his pattern."

His expression still inscrutable, Dax looked from him to the deputy. "You can leave now."

I almost snorted at how readily the deputy headed for the door.

Lowe, on the other hand, jutted out his chin. "You can't throw me out. I'm not done questioning—"

"If this was about merely investigating a police matter, you wouldn't have sought Addison out here at an event she's managing," said Dax, an edge of agitation to his words. "This is you using your authority to yank her chain and cause issues for her company. Simple. And I won't tolerate it."

Lowe's nostrils flared. "You're not above the law, Mercier, you are—"

"Rapidly losing my patience with you," Dax finished, his face hardening. "You really don't want me to push me further. Not unless you want *certain things* about you to come to light. Your wife might be interested in hearing that your Saturday poker nights aren't really poker nights at all, though some 'poking' is involved."

Watching Lowe's face flush, I inwardly smiled. He should have expected that Dax, who made a point of sniffing out the secrets of his adversaries, would have something on him.

"You're still here. I'm struggling to understand why." Dax pursed his lips. "Maybe you'd prefer it if I made a call to

your wife here and now.”

His face morphing into an almighty glower, Lowe jabbed a finger in his direction. “This isn’t over.”

“Then your marriage soon will be,” said Dax matter-of-factly.

Cursing a blue streak, Lowe stormed out.

Grayden cast me a tormented look and then turned to Mimi. “Come on, let’s go.”

Ignoring him, she nervously licked her lips and zeroed in on Dax. “I know about the pact.”

“Do you.” Dax didn’t phrase it as a question. It was more of a bored statement. He made his way to me, his eyes roaming over my face. “Are you all right?”

Removing my headset, I sighed. “Yeah. Just annoyed.”

“I have no idea why you acted all secretive instead of just telling me about the pact,” Mimi said to him. “We’re friends. Practically family.”

I snorted. If circumstances were different, Dax might have one day been her brother-in-law, but she did *not* think of him as family. We all knew it.

“Mimi,” Grayden clipped, “it’s time to go.”

Again, she completely ignored him. “You’ve done some crazy stuff, Dax,” she said with a smirk, shaking her head in incredulity, “but marrying a woman you basically put on reserve? That’s wacked.”

His eyes darkening to flint, he cast her a glare. “What’s wacked is that you would dare come here. You know you’re supposed to stay away from Addison. Yet, here you are.”

She rolled her eyes. “So she got her boo-boos hurt by what I said last time we talked. It ain’t a huge deal.”

Uh, like what she’d said was *nothing*? Unreal.

His gaze iced over. “Don’t try to trivialize what you did.” The words were quiet. Deep. Dripping with anger. “The

things you said might have fucked up my marriage.”

“This isn’t a *marriage*,” she snarked. “You made a pact, you stuck to it. That’s it.” She looked away with a sniff. “I should have guessed it was something like that, really. An emotionless union would of course suit you just fine.”

“Mimi,” Grayden cut in, a plea in his eyes. “Don’t do this. Let’s you and me just walk on out of here.”

“Why?” she demanded, whirling on him. “Why should I have to stay quiet? Why would *you* want to leave when we both know you hate this situation as much as I do? You’d take *her* back in a fucking heartbeat if—”

“Enough,” Dax bit out, pinning her with a somewhat callous look. “Out. Both of you.”

Mimi turned back to him, clenching her fists. “But I—” She stopped speaking when he slashed an arm through the air.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Dax asserted. “I’m not interested in hearing what you have to say about anything. I have officially hit my limit where you’re concerned, and I want you gone from my life.”

Mimi blanched. “You don’t mean that,” she breathed.

“I gave you chances. Too many. It was my mistake, and you’ve been making Addison pay for that. No more. I’m done with you.”

She slowly shuffled back, her expression wounded. “How can you say that to me?”

“Very easily. You made it easy when you started fucking with my wife.”

“Like that ring she wears means anything,” Mimi scoffed, the words coated in pure scorn. “She’s nothing to you but a backup plan.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

“Bullshit,” she sneered.

“No bullshit,” he said, his voice grave. “Pure truth.”

Mimi gave him a *Come on* look. “If she left you tomorrow, it wouldn’t even be a ping on your radar.”

“Addison isn’t going anywhere. Ever. I wouldn’t allow it.”

“Oh, *please*. It never bothers you in the slightest when women walk away. You might have married *this* one, but you didn’t do it because you care for her.”

Yeah, ow. Not that she was wrong, unfortunately.

“The only woman you have, and will ever, truly give a crap about is Gracie,” Mimi added, bitterness lacing each syllable. “No one will come close to mattering to you the way she did.”

“Once upon a time,” began Dax, “I would have agreed with you. But not now.”

I tensed. *Whoa, back up.*

For a few beats, Mimi only stared at him. “You ... What’d you just say?”

That was my question.

Dax didn’t repeat himself. He held her gaze, his own sober and unblinking. The resoluteness in the depths of those eyes had my pulse quickening.

A weak, nervous chuckle fluttered out of her. “Right,” she drawled, all skepticism.

Again, he said not one word, letting his unwavering expression speak for him.

The faint amusement began to drain from her face. She forced a mocking smile, but it withered fast. “I won’t buy that she means anything to you.”

“You should,” he told her. “Fact is she’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

I all but gawked at him, my heart slamming so hard against my ribs I was surprised the bones weren’t creaking in protest.

Dismay settling into the lines of her face, Mimi took another step back. “No,” she rasped, emphatic. “I don’t believe it.”

He gave an uncaring shrug. “That won’t make it untrue.”

She gave her head a hard, fast shake. “You’re lying.” She slammed her manic gaze on me. “He’s just saying all this to hurt me, right?”

Uh ... quite possibly, come to think of it. After all, she’d probably disappear for good if he could convince her of his claims. Dax didn’t exactly have an issue with being deceitful if it meant getting what he wanted.

“That’s all it is, isn’t it?” she pushed.

Digging my teeth into my lower lip, I cut my gaze to him. He wasn’t looking at me. Or her. His attention was on the object he was smoothly pulling out of his pocket.

He lifted it up for her to see. “Maybe this will answer your question.”

# Chapter One

*Six months earlier*

“I don’t know why you keep giving me that look.” Sabrina sat across from me on a leather egg chair, idly picking at the silicone protector attached to the corner of my office desk. “I’m not saying anything that you wouldn’t say to me if the situation was reversed.”

Probably not, but admitting that out loud would only encourage her. Besides ... “I’ve told you I’ll handle it just fine, and I will.”

“I don’t doubt that you can handle it, I just don’t want you to have to.”

“Which is sweet, and I adore you for it, but you have to understand why I didn’t do as you suggested.” I set my almost-empty coffee cup on my cute fox coaster. “I’m a professional. I do not let people down.”

“The couple would have understood.”

I frowned, closing my laptop. “Understood that I’d decided to pull out of organizing their wedding just because my ex is on their guest list? Not likely.”

“There’s no ‘just because.’ You two were super serious about each other. You loved him, Addie. And that dufus loved you—probably still does. What he did hurt you big time.”

“Yeah, *half a year ago*. It’s not like I’m hung up on him or anything.”

“You were when I first suggested you pull out of the wedding,” she reminded me.

“He and I had only just broken up then.”

“Yeah, and I get why you chose to still forge on ahead with organizing this event. But I reserve the right to be annoyed by it, because I know it’s going to sting for you to see him and Felicity together, even though you’re over him. And *she’ll* sit there looking all smug because she managed to lure

him back to her. If she has the opportunity to throw verbal barbs at you, she will.”

Such was the life of a shrew.

I’d read countless romance books where the female main character got involved with a dude who had a bitch of an ex. In many of those novels, said ex strived to win the guy back. But he’d resist, he’d choose the female lead character, and they’d live happily ever after.

In real life, though, it didn’t always work out that way. Sometimes, the man chose his ex-wife, even when he swore it broke a part of him to do it.

“You know I’m right,” Sabrina added.

“She might go ahead and act like a tool,” I conceded. It honestly seemed like Felicity couldn’t help herself in that regard. “But I would never let something like that stop me from doing my job, nor would I let down my clients. Period.”

I’d started my company, Sapphire Glade Events, six years ago. While there were plenty of highs and lows to running your own business, I loved it.

A whole lot of time and effort went into designing and managing events. The work could sometimes be complicated, and the hours could be long—particularly since we were often planning several events at once.

No two were the same—each had different needs and stages, so the process of bringing one to life would vary. This also meant that, although there were some things we commonly did each day, we had no real daily routine.

So, yeah, the job could be challenging and unpredictable. Even stressful at times. But it was also highly rewarding.

I cocked my head at a sulky-looking Sabrina. “Knowing me as well as you do, did you honestly think I’d agree to pull out at any point?”

She blew out a breath and fussed with her spectacles. “No. Neither did Alicia,” she added, referring to one of my



younger sisters. “But we figured there was no harm in me taking a shot at convincing you.” She sulkily slid her gaze to the large window of the multi-office building.

In my opinion, it was one of the swankiest buildings here in Redwater City, Florida. Like many company directors, I rented an entire floor. There was therefore an office for each employee, a break room, a conference room, and also restrooms.

Sabrina had handled our floor’s interior design, including that of my office. Bright and airy, it was very chic. Aside from the wall behind me—which was pure white covered in black, decorative swirls and lined with shelves and cubbies—the walls were a striking royal-purple.

The company logo in a moss design hung on one wall—a gift from my mom. A bonsai potted plant sat in the far corner. There were a few other pieces of wall-mounted artwork, including a black, metal tree.

There was a lounge area at the rear of the office. It had a gray-velvet sofa, a glass coffee table, two cushioned swivel chairs, and a coffee machine.

The entire space was clean and tidy. But there was nothing neat about the dry-erase board. It sported haphazard scribbles in various colors, along with an endless amount of sticky notes for a number of upcoming events. This particular summer was proving to be busy for us so far. We were only in the third week of June and already—

“At least let me handle the wedding,” implored Sabrina, her blue eyes pleading. “You don’t need to be there. I’d make sure it all runs smoothly.”

“I know you would.” I hadn’t made the brunette my event coordinator because she was my best friend—one I’d known since childhood, since our moms were close; I’d assigned her the role because it fit her like a glove. “But I always attend such huge events to oversee everything. If I wasn’t there, people would guess why. And their respect for me would dwindle at the idea that I’d allowed my personal shit

to get in the way. There's no chance in hell I'll let Grayden or Felicity have *any* impact on Sapphire Glade."

With the help of my team, I'd built it up through sheer hard work. A lot of blood and sweat and soul had gone into it. I would never do anything that would trample on the company's success and reputation.

Her shoulders drooping, Sabrina let out a resigned huff. "I don't know what he sees in her. I mean, okay, she isn't evil or anything. In fact, she's apparently a total dear to all the elderly people in the nursing home where she works. But she's so damn catty and sly. I've never heard her say a kind word about anyone. All she does is bitch about others—including people who think she's their friend. Why he chose her over you, I'll never know."

"You can't really blame him."

"Oh, I can, and I do," she insisted.

"Okay, you can't *rationaly* blame him."

"Rationality isn't required here." She shifted in her seat. "You're my BFF, I love you, and I don't like that he hurt you. That means I don't have to be understanding—you can't make me."

My lips twitched. "Fair enough." I took in a deep, cleansing breath, pulling in the intoxicating scent of the candle my mom had bought me. It smelled like old books, bringing to mind my parents' home library. I'd practically lived in it growing up.

Thinking about them made my eyes fall to the framed family portrait on my desk. Alicia and I stood on one side of our parents while our younger siblings, Oliver and Harriet—or Harri, as we called the baby of the family—flanked their other side.

"You're seriously not in the least bit mad at Grayden?" asked Sabrina, tucking a brown curl behind her ear.

"A little, but I *do* understand why he walked away. What else could he have realistically done? Felicity would

have moved to Denver with their kids if he hadn't agreed to make another go of things."

Sabrina scoffed. "She was bluffing. She didn't like that he was serious about someone, so she made a play to reel him back."

"Maybe." My desk chair squeaked as I leaned back in the exceedingly comfortable leather monstrosity that my dad had recommended. According to him, it was *the best* office chair in the world. I could agree. "It doesn't really matter either way, does it? What's done is done."

Honestly, what bummed me out more than losing him was that I'd wasted time out of my life on him. Time I could have spent with someone who I could possibly have a future with.

I knew the whole "marriage and kids" thing wasn't everyone's cup of tea. Alicia, for instance, loved children but wasn't so certain she wanted any of her own. I'd wanted to be a mom as far back as I could remember.

I'd been one of those little girls who'd mothered her younger siblings and had a passel of dolls she'd bottle-fed, rocked to sleep, and all that jazz. I'd even chosen my future children's names. According to my maternal grandfather, Simon, my mom had been the same when young.

Sabrina heaved a sigh. "Love sucks sometimes, huh?"

Oh, indeed. Society encouraged you to seek it; essentially told you that everything else would fall into place once you found it. Only that wasn't always how it worked.

I honestly wasn't as enamored with love these days. It had never brought me hearts and rainbows. Aside from the short period I'd had with my college boyfriend, my dating history was sad as shit. I'd always envisioned that I'd be married with kids at this point in my life. But here I was, a week away from turning thirty, *still* single and childless.

Meanwhile, many of my friends had moved onto the next stage of their lives, including Sabrina. She and her partner, Tamara, were talking of having children. And my

brother was engaged to be married to a total sweetheart who happened to be Sabrina's younger sister, Marleigh.

As part of my job, I often organized weddings. Each time I watched yet another couple say their vows while I remained single, I felt a pinch of envy. And each time one of my relationships failed, I felt further away from the future I sought.

It didn't help that I had to always be on my guard when it came to dating. The thing with having a rich family and a hefty trust fund was that you could easily find yourself being pursued by guys for the *wrong* reasons. Especially if they were also people in the same business as your father who thought that being with you could grant them an "in" with him.

Hell, one of my dates had actually brought *his resume* when I'd introduced him to my parents.

There had been guys who'd wanted me *for me*, but we'd often run across other issues. Most commonly, they'd felt intimidated by my family's status or had begrudged that, because I had money, I didn't *need* a guy to financially support me. The latter had made some feel unmanned.

"I'm starting to think I'm destined for spinsterhood."

Sabrina's brows knitted. "No way."

"I think my chance of having all I wanted died along with Lake." My college boyfriend had been everything I could have ever wanted in a guy.

Her eyes glistening with sympathy, Sabrina leaned forward. "Don't say that."

"I never used to put any stock in the concept of everybody having a certain someone meant for them. I thought it a nice, fuzzy idea. Not realistic, though. But these days, I'm not so sure."

"Look, I know that since losing your prince you've found yourself kissing a whole lot of frogs—"

"Lovely metaphor."

“—but that doesn’t mean there’s no one else out there who’d fit you.” She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth. “Is it possible that you compare guys to Lake? If so, that could be part of the issue. I mean, he set the bar high.”

“I did when I first started dating again, but I think that was partly because I felt guilty for moving on.” I hooked my hand around the back of my neck. “I’d thought that maybe things would be different with Grayden. He gave me hope that I’d have another chance at something *good*.” And then he’d taken it away.

“Do *not* allow that shithead to put you off trying again with someone else. He loved you, but not as deeply as you deserve to be loved. That doesn’t mean no one else will.”

I sighed. “I’d like to think so—”

“Then think so. You’ll find someone eventually, Addie. You’re a triple threat.”

“A what?”

“You’re smart, successful, *and* beautiful. A triple threat. Tamara’s a picky bitch, but even she agrees you’ve got a great ass and a real nice rack. In our fine opinion, you missed your calling as an underwear model.”

I blinked. “Uh, thank you?”

“Genuinely, I have serious boob-envy around you. And eye-envy, actually. Mine are sewage-green. Yours are like liquid-dark chocolate. To be blunt, I would in fact do you if we weren’t such close friends it would feel like incest.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “I don’t bat for your team, sweetie, but I’d make an exception for you.”

She flashed me a grin. “Who wouldn’t?”

“Now, are you done objectifying me? Because we need to go check out those venues we talked about.” Several times a week, she and I would spend our afternoons scouting or touring venues—sometimes with clients, sometimes without.

She straightened in her seat. “I’m ready to leave whenever you are.”

I'd already taken a look at the locations on the internet, but I never chose a place purely based on online research. "I just need to email the Palmers a status update, and then we can leave." I opened my laptop and tapped the spacebar to snap it out of sleep mode. As my list of emails appeared on the screen, I froze. "Oh."

"Oh, what?"

My stomach doing roll after roll, I clicked on the new email I'd received and then quickly skimmed over it. "We have another potential client," I said, the words a little strained.

"And?"

"And it's Dax Mercier."

Sabrina's brows winged up, her eyes sparkling with avid interest. "Really?"

"Yes. He hasn't said what kind of event he's looking to throw, only that he'd like me to meet him at his office tomorrow morning for a consultation."

"Hmm." Leaning forward again, she planted her elbows on my desk. "Some very delicious memories must be flowing around your head right now."

They weren't merely flowing, they were *thrashing*.

"I might not be into guys, but I can objectively say he's the definition of male hotness."

*Fucking A.* The man was indecently sexual. No lie, he could tempt a nun—I was certain of it.

There was something so very magnetic about Dax. He gave off charisma like pixie dust. He was just so smooth, so personable, so incomparable. He dragged people into his orbit easily—particularly women.

He was also a superhero in the bedroom.

"You know, he's the only one of your exes I don't dislike," said Sabrina as she lifted my nameplate and began idly twirling it. "He was good to you. Protective."

“I don’t know if ‘ex’ would be the right word. We weren’t actually dating.” Though our families were acquainted, he and I hadn’t officially met until a mutual friend had introduced us when I was eighteen. Dax was twenty-three back then. We’d had a casual fling during the gap year I’d taken between graduating from high school and going to college.

He hadn’t sweet-talked his way into my pants, he’d *dirty*-talked his way there. I hadn’t told him I was a virgin until the moment we were both naked on his bed, ready to roll. He’d been shocked, but not put-off. And when he’d thrust inside me the first time, there’d been a pinch of possessive triumph in his eyes.

Due to us having a mutual friend, Dax and I had come across each other often over the years. But we hadn’t become friends ourselves. We had too much zing between us to have a platonic relationship. But we were *friendly*. Polite. Civil. Also a little distant, though.

Neither of us had acted on the aforementioned zing at any point throughout that time. We’d learned during our fling that we didn’t want the same things from life—more specifically, parenthood didn’t appeal to him.

“He might not have been your boyfriend,” began Sabrina, “but he treated you with more respect than some of your *actual* boyfriends did.”

Sad as it might be, it was totally true.

“I suppose it shouldn’t be a surprise that he’d seek to hire Sapphire Glade, given how well we’re doing. And you two are neighbors now, so—”

“I wouldn’t call us neighbors. He lives at the opposite end of Oakengrove from me.” He’d only moved into the little man-made village a month ago. A village he’d purchased in that exact same month. In addition to running several businesses, Dax owned a lot of real estate. “It’s like a twenty-minute walk away.”

It seemed inevitable that we'd bump into each other at Oakengrove, but it hadn't happened thus far. I'd caught glimpses of him from a distance now and then, though—usually when he was talking with the people who ran the various businesses in the village, since they now technically worked for him.

In terms of how he treated people, he was nothing like the business tycoons I'd come across over the years. One of said tycoons was my father. Dane Davenport was a content man, but his smiles were as rare as rocking horse shit. Also, he didn't make much of an effort to be social, likeable, or approachable. He tended to look *through* people and very rarely greeted them unless he was networking. Many of his business associates could be described the same way.

Dax, however, was different. His lips often settled into charismatic smiles. He spoke to every one of his employees, from cleaners to PAs, treating them all equally. More, he addressed them by name and asked after their families.

I knew from speaking to these people that they loved having that recognition and respect. But it also made them nervous, because it meant they weren't mere cogs in his machine who could hide behind teams and managers if they fucked up. No, if a mistake was made, he'd know exactly who was responsible, and he'd know where to find them.

I would bet it was all very deliberate on his part; that he knew *exactly* what effect his behavior had on them. It was a very devious, albeit effective, way to keep people in line.

“Well, whatever his reason for seeking out Sapphire Glade, I'm glad for it—handling an event for him would be *real* good for business,” Sabrina said, her eyes gleaming with excitement. “Any kind he threw would involve a guestlist of wealthy or, at the very least, influential people.”

“It would,” I allowed. Dax was a true powerhouse. Not merely in the business world, but in general. He wielded so much social power it was nuts. He also had connections everywhere, some of which were the definition of unsavory.



Not all his dealings were legal. Everyone knew it, but no one could prove it. He wasn't knee-deep in organized crime or anything, but he was not a guy who had an issue with subverting the system or bending and breaking rules. He lived life by his own code. In that, he was his father's son.

Given all that, people generally strived to stay on Dax's good side. They didn't merely fear him, though; they respected him. He might have his hands in some illegal pies, but he'd done a lot for the community—organizing fundraisers, donating to charities, arranging holiday food drives, and sponsoring small businesses and youth sports' teams.

“Also, he's hardly likely to want a low-budget event,” said Sabrina. “Our rates would be chump-change to him, which would allow us to be seriously creative and go butt-wild.”

“Indeed.”

Her brows pulled together. “Then why don't you look excited?” She lowered my nameplate to the desk.

I rubbed at my temple. “Maybe because my hormones never fail to fall at his goddamn feet.” Back when we'd had our little fling, I hadn't realized that that type of insane chemistry was rare. It was something I hadn't experienced with anyone else before or since. “My libido snaps awake so fast it's dizzying.”

Sabrina unsuccessfully tried to stifle a smile. “Does this mean you're planning to not take the job?”

I dropped my hand to my lap. “No, I'll always do what's best for Sapphire Glade and, as you said, throwing an event for Dax means big money and lots of exposure. I'm just not looking forward to seeing him again, since I know my hormones will react like idiots.”

“Dax seems to have that effect on most women, if it makes you feel any better.”

It didn't. “Hmm, I've noticed.” He tended to have tall, slim blondes hanging off his arm. Also the occasional redhead.

Female specimens who were, in fact, very much dissimilar to me. I had dark hair, a curvy figure, and was average height. “I’ve realized over the years that, though we had major chemistry, I’m not actually his type.”

“In terms of physical traits, maybe not. But you’re a person who stands out in a *whole* other way—and without even trying. You look so calm, collected, and put-together that it makes guys want to get under your skin and see if they have what it takes to ruffle your feathers. The more dominant they are, the more challenged they seem to feel by you. Dax probably wasn’t an exception to that.” She paused. “You seem really surprised that he contacted you.”

I sat back in my chair. “I am. I mean, I wouldn’t have expected him to consider hiring Sapphire Glade.”

Sabrina frowned. “Why not? We have a shit-hot reputation and are known for going the extra mile.”

“Yes, but he’s Felicity’s cousin.”

“So?”

“So he’ll know that hiring our company is something she won’t like,” I said with a sweep of my hand, almost knocking over my typewriter-penholder. *Idiot.*

Sabrina’s frown deepened. “Given his general nature, I really don’t see him letting something like that sway his actions. I certainly can’t see him letting it get in the way of a business decision. Typically, *you* wouldn’t allow personal stuff to do that either.”

“And I don’t intend to do it now. But I have the distinct feeling Felicity won’t like if I take the job. Not that I care. I just mean it’s possible she’ll ask Dax to hire another company. Especially since Grayden and I agreed to stay out of each other’s orbit when we split—they move in similar circles. They were even friends back when they were in their teens.”

Sabrina shrugged. “Grayden associates with Kaelie and Theo as well. I haven’t been able to convince you to sit out their wedding, despite my best efforts.”

“I made it clear to Grayden when we separated that I wouldn’t do that—he said he understood.”

“Well, he’ll just have to understand this, too. That asshole doesn’t have a say in what you do, and he *certainly* doesn’t have a say in what Sapphire Glade does. Neither does Felicity. Hopefully, Dax will also feel that this has nothing to do with them, because I’ll be bummed if we don’t get this job.”

“I’m not saying I think he’ll *care* that they won’t like it. I just know he loathes drama. Few people are better at causing drama than Felicity.”

“Pure fact. Unfortunately. But she’ll probably be leery of pissing him off and ending up in his bad books. That’s a place *no one* wants to be.”

Sabrina was not wrong. Dax wasn’t a man to be trifled with. Those who dared? Well, he had a way of making them regret it.

“I doubt being his cousin would make a person an exception to a rule when it comes to someone like Dax,” Sabrina added, “so we’re likely fretting over nothing.” She rose to her feet. “Can you squeeze in a meeting with him tomorrow morning?”

“Yes. I only have afternoon meetings scheduled for tomorrow.”

“Then email Dax back and confirm that you’ll be at his office in the morning as requested. For now, you and I have venues to go see.”

“Fine. Just note that if my hormones have another nervous breakdown around him, you’re not allowed to find it amusing.”

“So noted.”

## Chapter Two

Driving past the “Welcome to Oakengrove” sign later that day, I caught sight of one of my neighbors walking her dog. I lightly tooted my horn, and she gave me a brief wave in return.

Oakengrove was much like a holiday resort. Cleaning and cooking services were provided, and there were plenty of places you could spend your time—such as the pools, bars, restaurants, wellness center, and even the gym.

You could live in an apartment, a luxury villa, a pretty town house, a detached dwelling, a forest lodge, or a Cape Cod-style home like the one I’d purchased only five months ago. It felt like I’d lived in the village years. I *loved* it.

As I drove down my street, I noticed Harri’s car parked at the curb outside my home. It was no surprise, since I knew that she and Alicia—who was currently living with me—had ventured out shopping today.

Alicia had returned to Redwater a month ago, after she’d separated from her boyfriend of two years. They had lived in New York together, and they’d seemed happy. But she’d recently appeared on my doorstep, *announced* she was done with him, and hadn’t yet elaborated on why.

Though, since we were only a year apart in age, we’d always been close, I hadn’t put pressure on her to open up about it. None of our family had, because we knew better. She’d talk when she was ready—not before.

Pulling into my driveway, I parked my car beside hers. As I unclipped my seatbelt, I felt my lips curve at the sight of my gray—and somewhat antisocial, not to mention disdainful—tabby cat sitting on the top step.

Gypsy often did that, acting like a lion surveying its territory. She would hiss at every animal that passed—cat, dog, bird, whatever. Oh, and the neighbor on our left hand side, Jenson. But then, I’d come close to hissing at the creep myself.

I grabbed my purse, slid out of the car, locked it with the key fob, and then strolled up the path. My small, two-story house was pretty as a picture. It had a gabled roof, portico, lattice windows, and trails of ivy running up the cream-colored front walls.

As I arrived at the door, I reached down and gave Gypsy a light scratch on the head. She allowed it for a few seconds but then stood and moved away. At times, she was terribly affectionate and wanted to sit on your lap for hours. Other times, she would give you the honor of allowing you to briefly pet her but would then dismiss you.

“Fickle thing,” I muttered.

Instead of following me into the house, she retook her position on the step. Knowing she’d use the cat flap if she changed her mind about entering, I closed the door. Muffled female voices and the faint scenes of grilled meat, hot spices, and warm rice laced the air, making me smile. Alicia was a wickedly good cook.

Pausing at the hallway tidy, I hung up my purse and jacket and then placed my shoes in one of the cubbies there. I then followed the chatter and stomach-rumbling scents as I padded along the light-pine hardwood floor, making my way through the living room.

The large space was bright due to the white walls and the amount of natural light beaming through the high windows. Pale-lemon cushions adorned the cream upholstered sofa and two matching armchairs. The bouquet of peonies and roses in the center of the round, glass coffeehouse were the same yellow shade as the cushions.

The wall-mounted, widescreen TV was positioned far above the white fire mantel. The industrial ceiling light fixtures perfectly matched the floor lamp and hanging clock.

As I walked into the kitchen, the wall paint became a light gray. Every cabinet was white gloss, and every appliance was stainless steel. The countertops were a shiny, off-white marble. The exposed ceiling beams were the same light-pine as the flooring.

Alicia stood at the large range cooker nattering away to Harri, who sat at the island sipping wine.

While both Oliver—or Ollie, as we mostly called him—and I had inherited physical traits from our father’s side of the family, Harri was almost a carbon copy of our mom. Seriously, she looked so much like Vienna with her pale-blue eyes, oval face, high cheekbones, platinum-blond hair, and full mouth it was honestly *uncanny*.

Alicia was somewhere in the middle. She had Dane’s tall stature and long legs but Vienna’s eyes and facial shape. Though her hair was blonde, it was a gorgeous honey shade with hints of strawberry. She also had flawless skin, which she mostly accredited to yoga.

I called out quick hellos and then said, “Damn, Alicia, whatever you’re making smells good.”

She smiled, pleased. “It’ll be ready in about twenty minutes, so—” She cut off as the phone on the counter chimed once. Rather than reach for it, she merely tossed it a scowl.

All right.

Crossing to Harri, I gave her a quick hug and then studied her face closely. “How are you doing?” Her dog had died recently, and the loss had eviscerated her.

Her lips weakly curled. “Better. It’s kind of hard not to think about Gus when I’m surrounded by dogs five times a week.” Harri ran a doggy day care center from her home not far from Oakengrove. She also offered other services, such as grooming and pet photography.

“Maybe you should take a small break and have your staff run it for a couple of weeks,” I suggested. “You could stay here with us, or with Mom and Dad.”

“I’ll be fine,” she assured me.

Grabbing a glass from a cupboard, I flicked a brief look at Alicia as I asked Harri, “Did she rope you into doing a yoga session with her?”

“She gave it her best shot,” replied Harri.

Alicia huffed at us. “I don’t know what you two have against yoga.”

“I have not one thing against it,” I told her, setting my glass down on the counter. “I’m just not as camera-genic as you.”

Harri gave her a faint smile. “Yeah, same.”

Alicia only sniffed. She and her ex used to post “yoga couple video sessions” online—they’d had quite a following. Since leaving Dario, she’d set up a separate online channel where she now posted videos of herself doing yoga sessions, and she occasionally included a “guest appearance.” She had a shit-ton of subscribers already.

“How’s work going?” Harri asked me.

I pulled the opened bottle of wine out of the fridge. “Fine. Got a prospective new client.”

Alicia’s brow pinched. “You don’t look too pleased about it.”

“I’m always pleased to have new clients, but ...” Trailing off, I sighed. “It’s Dax. Dax Mercier.”

Harri’s brows hiked up. “Oh.”

“Yeah, that was what I said when I first saw his email,” I muttered, letting wine slosh into my glass.

Alicia hummed. “Nothing like an old flame getting in touch to throw you off your game.”

Old *bed-buddy* flame, to be more exact, but ... “That was exactly what it did. I wasn’t expecting it.”

Harri frowned. “Why? Sapphire Glade has an awesome rep. And it’s not like you two parted on a bad note or that you don’t get along, so there’s no reason he’d avoid hiring you.”

I lifted a brow, returning the bottle of white to the fridge. “Aside from him being Felicity Buchanan’s cousin, you mean?”

Her nose wrinkled. “Damn, I forgot they were related. But it’s not like they’re close, though, is it? I mean, Felicity’s

dad ... Uh, what's his name?"

"Josh," I supplied.

"Yeah. Josh. Although he and Dax's mom have the same father, for a long time Josh didn't acknowledge that Kensey is his half-sister. He used to give her some serious grief, from what I hear. Their dad, Maxwell, didn't acknowledge Kensey either—he basically seduced her mom, got her pregnant, and then walked away. Quite a few members of the Buchanan family were cruel to Kensey and her mother back then."

Alicia dipped her chin. "Josh and Kensey are civil with each other nowadays, but they don't attend each other's family parties or anything. Dax and his brothers seem to get along well enough with Felicity in a superficial way, as if finding it unfair to take out on her what some of her relatives did to his mom and grandmother. But, as Harri said, they're not close."

"Felicity is a total namedropper, so she tosses Dax's around, insinuating she's under his protection," said Harri. "She'll brag on how 'proud' she is of all Drey's achieved, and she'll jabber on about how talented Caelan is. But the truth is, she seems to barely know them. Or so people say, anyway."

Alicia slid her gaze to me. "She won't like it if Dax hires you."

My smile was a little on the evil side. "I know."

Alicia barked a quick laugh. "Not gonna lie, sis, I'm still jealous you bonked that guy. He is *fine*."

She'd said the exact same thing when she'd first realized I was sleeping with him. Back then, he'd drawn my attention effortlessly. Not merely because he got my feminine parts all stirred up. He was just so decisive, elusive, and savvy. He didn't seek approval or attention. He went after what he wanted, he put actions behind his words, and *dear Lord* I stood no chance against the extent of his alpha-bad-boy appeal.

Even back at that stage in his life, he'd been dipping his foot in this and that—some things legal, some things not.



By the time I'd returned from college, he'd been a force to be reckoned with.

And seriously committed to another woman.

Had I not been deep in grief at the time, it might have stung. But back then, I'd had no room in my head for anyone other than Lake; no emotional space for anything other than pain.

I hadn't known Dax's then-girlfriend Gracie well, but I'd come across her enough times to sense she was an absolute sweetheart. Someone I'd felt would be good for him. So I'd been sad for them both when she'd died a mere year into their relationship.

Even though I knew what that kind of loss did to a person, I hadn't reached out to Dax. He wasn't a guy who would welcome that sort of thing. Not from someone who wasn't one of the people in his small circle.

Plus, I'd known he might be of the opinion that I couldn't truly understand his pain, given that Lake and Gracie died such different deaths.

Cancer had taken Lake—his brain tumor had gone undiagnosed for years. By the time the doctors had discovered it, it had been too late for them to act; he'd died mere months later. He'd had the most wonderful and astonishing attitude throughout those last months of his life; had said that at least, unlike people who died suddenly from accidents etc., he knew when his time would end and so would be able to say his goodbyes.

Gracie's death, however, had been unexpected. Sure, there were risks for those undergoing surgery, but people generally expected their loved ones to come out of an operation just fine. As such, they didn't say goodbyes beforehand.

I didn't believe it made their passing worse or better. Nothing could really make a loved one's death "easier." But it did mean that I couldn't relate to the shock Dax must have felt on hearing she hadn't made it.

For a few years, he'd—to put it bluntly—buried himself in pussy. He probably now wished he'd never stopped, because his subsequent attempts at serious relationships had ended badly. One bitch had sold her “story” to the papers. A bullshit story that had not only painted Dax as a true bastard but included supposed “secrets” about the whole situation with his infamous step-grandfather, Michael Bale.

Why infamous? Because he'd been a twisted, sadistic serial killer. Michael had married Kensey's mom, Clear, while he was on death row.

For someone to have *exploited* the situation by selling their story, for them to have fucked over Dax that way ... it was just plain cruel. I was sure it must have hurt his entire family, including Clear—who'd later died only six months after Bale was executed.

Worse, Dax's only other long-term partner had done the same thing to him after they'd split.

People really sucked sometimes.

Harri nodded, her mouth curved. “I'm more partial to his youngest brother, though.” Her smile kicked up a notch and turned a little dreamy. “Drey is *yowza*. My stomach goes all aflutter whenever I see him.”

He also played professional football. The “middle” Mercier brother, Caelan, was just as successful in his own way—he owned a very popular tattoo shop that drew even the rich and famous.

Alicia pointed a spatula at Harri. “Drey is too old for you.”

Our baby sister rolled her eyes. “You say that about every guy I call attractive. You've been doing it since I hit puberty. I'm now twenty-two, so it's really time you got past the whole trying to keep me away from boys thing. Also, Drey is like, what, twenty-seven?”

“Something like that,” I replied.

“Too old for you,” Alicia reiterated.

“The same age gap exists between Addie and Dax.”

“That’s different,” said Alicia.

“How?” challenged Harri.

“It just is. Don’t question my wisdom.”

Harri flicked a hand. “Whatever.” She refocused on me. “Will it be weird for you to work for Dax? I mean, casually chatting to him is one thing. Having him for a client is another.”

“I can manage it fine.” I sipped my drink. “I’m just not looking forward to my body melting into a pile of goo for him again.” But it would happen.

Harri grinned. “Do you ever wonder if you guys would have pursued something more if you hadn’t gone off to college?”

I felt my forehead crease. “No, never. We have different things in mind for our future. He doesn’t want kids.” Which I hadn’t realized until after I’d suggested we make a pact to be the other’s fallback marriage partner. Not that either of us had taken the pact seriously—we’d laughed even as we’d shaken on it.

Another chime came from Alicia’s phone. A sound she pointedly ignored, her hand flexing around the handle of the spatula.

Arching a questioning brow at Harri, I subtly tipped my chin toward the phone. She only shrugged.

Just then, Gypsy sprung onto the island directly in front of her and butted her hand, all feline demand.

Harri smiled. “Hey, pretty girl.” She petted the cat, who arched into every stroke of her hand and began purring like crazy. Animals loved Harri as much as she did them. As if they were drawn to her or her energy or whatever.

I adored animals as much as the next person, but Harri ... it was almost as if she had an infinity for them. Our dad had thought she might one day become a vet, but she’d said she wouldn’t be able to deal with seeing them injured or abused—

she had a soft heart. She wasn't a softie, though. She had a very calm and quiet alpha presence, which I thought was why dogs in particular responded to her so well and were easy for her to train.

Alicia's phone beeped again.

Harri lifted her glass. "Who keeps texting you?"

Alicia tossed her a frown. "Don't be so nosy."

"I'm your little sister. It's my job to pry like that."

Alicia snorted, the crease of her brow smoothing out.

Gently pushing Gypsy's tail away from her face, Harri asked, "Is it Dario?"

Every muscle in Alicia's body tensed. "We're not talking about him."

"At least tell us one thing: Are you guys just having a bad fight, or are you over for good?"

"Over for good."

I sipped more of my wine. "So you're not going back to New York?"

"No. I'm staying in Redwater. I'll get my own place soon," Alicia assured me.

I waved that away. "There's no rush. You know that."

The set of her shoulders lost their tension. "I do. Thank you."

Harri drank some of her wine and then put down her glass. "I don't know why you won't just tell us what happened. I don't keep secrets from you."

Alicia snorted. "Yes, you do."

"Okay, fine, I do. But I don't see why that has to be relevant."

"That's because you're spoiled."

Harri pouted. "Harsh."

"True."

“You’re just being defensive because you don’t want to talk about Dario.”

“Of course I am. Deal with it.”

The timer on the cooker began to beep.

Switching it off, Alicia declared, “Food’s ready. I propose we eat in silence.”

Harri winged up a brow, her lips quirking. “So you don’t want me to question you about Dario some more?”

“Don’t be a brat to me all your life, Harri.”

“Why not? It’s way too entertaining to stop.”



“Good morning,” I said to a well-groomed male seated behind a very modern desk the following day. “My name is Addison Davenport. I have an appointment with Mr. Mercier.” Which my central nervous system was handling perfectly well.

Oh, what a lie.

The PA stood with a smile and offered his hand. “Hello, Miss Davenport, I’m Benjamin.” He gave my hand a quick shake, adding, “Brie at the front desk downstairs said you were on your way up. I’ve already notified Mr. Mercier. He’s ready to see you now. If you’ll just come with me ...”

I trailed behind him, my heels click-clacking on the oak flooring, my stomach in knots. He stopped outside a stylish walnut door. A gold nameplate hung there that, along with the company logo, sported the words “DAXTON MERCIER, CEO.” The PA knocked on the door, and a deep voice bid him to enter.

He swung open the door. “Miss Davenport, sir.”

“Thank you, Benjamin,” said a deep, distinctive voice packed with smoke, velvet, and little grains of sand.

Hearing it made a shower of memories pelt me like hailstones. Many of those memories were somewhat X-rated, and it was a total wonder that heat didn't flood my cheeks.

*Fuck, you're tight. You're going to feel me for days, Addison.*

Forcing myself to loosen my death grip on the strap of my black, leather satchel, I stepped inside. The office was nothing like mine. Luxurious and elegantly masculine, it was all dark woods, shiny leather, and clean lines.

I didn't take in much of my surroundings. My attention went straight to the male stood near one of the floor-to-ceiling windows, a mug in hand. A pair of mismatched, dark-ringed eyes—one a glacial blue, one a rich green—honed in on me with lethal precision, the whites so clear they made the colors even more vivid.

My pulse skipped, my belly took a nosedive, and—damn it all—an uncurbed, biochemical attraction worked its way through me ... leaving me mentally flustered and feeling so very, very *alive*.

Funsies.

Neat and well-groomed in his dark, tailored suit and black shiny loafers, Dax looked as refined and powerful as he did brutally sensual. There was no denying it—the man had style. And a tongue that could perform sexual magic, but it was better if I didn't think about that.

His short, stylishly cut hair was sleek and black. A fine layer of dark scruff dusted his strong jaw and the strip of skin above his upper lip. A lip as sensual and full as the one beneath it.

He was way over six-feet. His clothes did nothing to hide his toned build. Seriously, his body was *yum*. I'd always loved watching his hard muscles fluidly flex and flow in his arms, chest, back, and broad shoulders as he moved. His butt ... it was so firm and, gah, I really wanted to bite it. Just once.

The thin, faint scar slicing across the side of his face matched the one on his right palm. Both scars ramped up his

air of civilized aggression; warned of the danger lurking within.

In sum, Dax Mercier was a beacon of devastating, unabashed masculinity.

I gave my chin a respectful dip. “Mr. Mercier.” It seemed better to keep things formal; it would help remind me I was here in a professional capacity.

A glint of humor briefly danced in his eyes. “Miss Davenport,” he greeted, the words smooth as silk.

“Would anyone like coffee? Tea? Water?” asked Benjamin.

I gave the PA a grateful smile. “No thanks, I’m fine.”

Dax raised his mug. “I haven’t finished this one yet.”

“Then I’ll leave you both to it,” said Benjamin.

Hearing the door close behind me with a soft *snick* of sound, I advanced further into the office. Dax slowly stalked toward me, a predatory edge to every step. He held out a hand—one that had done all sorts of deliciously indecent things to me in the past.

Pushing that out of my mind, I joined my palm to his ... and might have pulled back if his warm, calloused fingers hadn’t closed around mine, because a little crackle of electricity zapped my hand. My breath almost got snagged in my throat.

His eyelids lowered slightly, and tension turned the air static. Allowing that tension to simmer, he didn’t release me. Didn’t move at all. Didn’t say a word. Just stared at me, his thickly-lashed, steady gaze holding mine with a blatant boldness that I might have found intimidating if I wasn’t used to dealing with such powerful personalities.

I met that unrelenting stare just as boldly, refusing to look away first. His mouth hitched up in a faint, lopsided, oh-so-familiar smile that made my gut twist.

Finally, he let go of my hand. “Thank you for coming.” He gestured at a chair in the lounge area. “Sit.” A smooth

invitation that held a daring note.

Pulling my professional cloak tight around me, I did as he asked and dug my tablet out of my satchel.

“It’s been a while.” He sank into the chair opposite me, making the leather creak. “How are you?”

“Great,” I replied, switching on my tablet. “You?”

“Fine.” Dax splayed a hand on one armrest while balancing his mug on the other. “And your family? I haven’t seen your father in quite some time.”

“They’re all well. I hope you can say the same for your own family.”

“I can, thank you.”

How polite were we? I cleared my throat. “Before we get down to business, I’d like to disclose something upfront.” It would be unfair to do otherwise, and I would prefer to know in advance if I was wasting my time here.

He inched up a brow. “Which is?”

Pretending I wasn’t at all affected by how he looked every inch a king in that chair—shoulders back, spine straight, legs spread, projecting authority and self-assurance—I explained, “I don’t know how much contact you have with your cousin, Felicity. You may or may not know that she’s not a fan of mine.”

“Because you dated Grayden?” he asked, his tone neutral.

“Yes. She’ll probably be very unhappy if you hire me. As your cousin, she’ll see it as a betrayal on your part. To be honest, I don’t think Grayden will like it much either. When he and I separated, we agreed that we wouldn’t be in contact”—which didn’t mean he didn’t occasionally call or text me for random reasons, the dick—“and that we’d steer clear of each other as far as possible. He may be divorced from Felicity but, considering they’re back together again, he’s effectively your cousin-in-law once more.”

Dax let out a low, thoughtful hum.



“I don’t want to talk myself out of a job, but I also don’t want to be the cause of any drama or put you in an awkward position. If you would prefer that another company take on the event, I will understand and respect that. There are some very good event organizers out there—I’d be happy to recommend some.”

He pursed those lips that I knew could do wicked, wicked things. “I’m very aware of Felicity’s animosity toward you. But, quite frankly, I don’t see that it’s relevant. This has not one thing to do with her. Or with Grayden, for that matter.” Dax’s eyelids lowered a little. “You were mine long before you were his.”

Choosing to ignore the fluttering in my belly, I swallowed. “Okay. If you change your mind ...”

“I won’t. Sapphire Glade comes highly recommended. It has repeatedly been referred to as the best.” Dax paused. “I want the best.”

I gave a slow nod. “Well then, now that that’s out of the way, tell me what sort of event you have in mind.” Looking down at my tablet, I opened the app that featured a questionnaire I used for all consultations. “Be warned I’m going to fire a whole lot of questions at you. I need to be clear on what your wants and needs are.”

His lips kicked up in the beginnings of a wolfish smile.

“Regarding the event, I mean,” I quickly added, proud of myself for not blushing.

“I figured that, since you’re already aware of my ... wants and needs.”

*This motherfucker.* “What makes you think you were that good I’d remember them?” I blurted out.

He let out a low, rumbly chuckle that was all warmth and approval. “It’s good to see you haven’t changed, Addison.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. Now, back to the event you wish to throw, I’m assuming it’s corporate,” I prodded, desperate to get back on professional ground.

“Typically, it would be. Not this time.” He sipped at his coffee, watching me so damn intently it made my nape prickle.

Dax could focus on you with the intensity of a leopard; concentrate on you with his eyes, ears, and very being. Like nothing else could possibly hold his attention at that moment. It was a heady thing. It was also nerve-wracking.

He’d always pinned me with that same focus when moving in and out of me.

*I’m going to fuck you so hard, Addison. Harder than anyone else will ever take you.*

He hadn’t bullshitted me on that score.

“This specific event”—Dax rested his mug on the armrest once more—“will be a wedding.”

The words punched the breath from my lungs and made the bottom drop out of my stomach. “Wedding?” I echoed, glad my voice sounded even.

“Yes. Whether I’ll definitely be going ahead with it, however, will depend on a few things.”

I inhaled deeply, determined to ignore the twinge in my chest. “Such as?”

“Mainly ... on whether or not you’re a woman of your word.”

I blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“We once made a pact, didn’t we? We swore that if we were both single when you turned thirty, we’d marry each other. Your thirtieth birthday is in a week’s time. You’re unattached. So am I.” He gave a loose shrug. “The time has almost arrived for us to honor the pact. I’m prepared to do so. The question is: Are you?”

## Chapter Three

Uh ... what?

A surprised laugh almost bubbled out of me. He had to be kidding. He had to be. But ... the gaze that was locked on mine held no humor, only an intense resolve.

Clutching my tablet, I openly stared at him, my heart pounding a little too fast. I felt planted to my chair by shock, unable to move. Thoughts were gushing around my brain too fast for me to process.

He didn't push for a response; he simply sat there taking leisurely swigs of his drink, his incredible eyes never leaving me.

I hadn't once considered that his purpose in asking me to come here was to discuss our fallback pact. Not once. I mean, we'd laughed about it back then. Okay, so it was more that *he'd* let out a low chuckle while *I'd* laughed, but still.

It had been something I'd proposed on a whim after hearing of a couple who'd acted on such a promise. I'd thought it was cute, thought it would be funny to suggest he and I do the same ... not expecting him to do anything other than snort. Instead, he'd agreed. But I hadn't believed he truly meant it.

I licked my lips. "Dax, we were just joking around back then."

"I wasn't," he claimed before taking another easy sip of his drink.

"You can't be serious." The words came out on a whisper.

"Why not?"

My gaze bounced around the room. "Is this ... If you're helping someone Punk me right now—"

"This is no prank, no game." He very slowly cocked his head as he studied me intently. "You didn't think I'd

remember our pact?”

“No. Nor did I think you’d taken it seriously.”

A faint line dented his brow. “I would never enter into any pact lightly.”

I threw him an impatient look. “Dax, be real. This wasn’t a harmless ‘we swear we’ll be BFFs forever’ promise or something like that. We’re talking holy matrimony here.”

“I’m aware of that.”

I felt my brows draw together. “You want to marry someone you don’t even consider a friend?”

“It’s not as if we’re anything close to strangers, Addison,” he said, lowering his mug to the coffee table. “We might not know a great many personal details about each other’s life or have a friendship of any sort, but we have a familiarity that’s not common for those who had nothing more than a fling.”

That was true. I couldn’t claim to be aware of his fears, secrets, goals, and other private details, but I *knew* him on more than a superficial level. But it made no difference, given that we weren’t in sync on a very important matter. “We made the pact before I learned you don’t want kids. Maybe you’ve forgotten, but I do.”

“I didn’t want them back then. That changed somewhere along the way.”

Oh. Still, it didn’t thereby follow that it made perfect sense for us to live up to our pact. “How is it you’re so sure I’m single?”

“I have many sources. It’s how I keep my finger on the pulse of all that goes on within Redwater.” Bracing his elbows on the armrests, he steepled his fingers. “Where do you see yourself in five years?”

At the moment, while two of my main life goals seemed so out of reach, I didn’t have a clear vision. It must have been written all over my face, because he gave a slow nod of understanding.

“If you live up to the pact we made, that uncertainty you’re feeling will go away. You’ll know exactly where you’ll be.” He hiked up a brow, adding, “Aren’t you tired of arranging weddings for everyone else? Aren’t you finding it difficult watching the couples around you start their own family?”

Both were rhetorical questions. I’d been honest with him all those years ago about what I wanted from life. It wouldn’t be hard for him to discern where I was mentally at right now.

Unable to believe we were actually having this conversation, I shook my head in incredulity and switched off my tablet. “This is nuts.”

“Why? Because it’s not a conventional way of entering into marriage? That doesn’t make it outlandish.”

“But it does seem odd that you’d wish to do this.” I slipped my tablet back into my satchel. “It’s not as if you struggle landing women.”

“Dating doesn’t always amount to anything. Neither do serious relationships. We can both attest to that, can’t we?”

Well, yes.

“It may seem odd to you now that I’d consider this. But if you reach the age I am today and are still single, you might have a different perspective. At thirty, I would have told you I’d be committed to someone by now. A lot can happen in five years. But you know something, Addison? A lot can stay the same. Nothing about my personal circumstances has changed in five fucking years. That could be you.”

That was what I was afraid of.

“Do you wish to take that chance? Do you want to let life happen to you? Could you really be satisfied with plodding along as you have been, knowing you’ll be taking the risk that all you’re doing is allowing more time to pass you by? Wouldn’t it instead be better to take control and ensure that you meet the life goals that have so far eluded you?”

I'd forgotten how good he could be with words. "You always know what to say to sway people into giving you what you want," I muttered.

A brow winged up. "Are you implying that I'm manipulative?"

"Yes."

One corner of his mouth tipped up. "There are worse traits to have."

Feeling a restless energy begin to build inside me, I pushed to my feet and strode to the large windows.

"Don't close your mind to this, Addison. Don't reject it out of hand. Consider it for a moment. *Really* consider it."

I was. Which unnerved me, because I should surely be walking out the door. I should be saying a very emphatic *no, thank you*. I should be set on instead searching for a man I could build a life with—a man who, unlike Dax, loved me.

But ... I'd tried that. It had come to nothing. More, love had given me no guarantees in the past.

Love hadn't stopped my exes from later hurting me in some way; it hadn't meant they remained loyal; it hadn't ensured that—in the case of Grayden—they didn't leave me for someone else.

Maybe I was just bad at choosing men. But then ... Lake hadn't been a bad choice. And honestly, neither had Dax—he might not have loved me, but he hadn't hurt me. He hadn't broken my faith, hadn't tried using me to further his ambitions, hadn't cared about my trust fund in any sense.

The things he was now saying ... I wasn't stupid. I knew he was playing on my fears by painting a picture of what could be my life at thirty-five if I continued having such bad luck with relationships. That didn't mean it wasn't working.

One of the reasons it was working so well was that there were more risks of pregnancy-related complications for women in their thirties. I'd already miscarried once before—that was four years ago, and very few people knew about it. I

didn't want to have to go through that again; didn't want to increase the risks. Which made me feel even more pressured to find something serious.

"We could make it work, Addison," he said, still so cool and confident.

I turned to face him. "And you're ready for marriage? Parenthood?"

"I am. Aren't you?"

"Yes. But do you really see this as the right route to go down?"

He pushed to his feet. "Arranged marriages aren't rare, you know. They happen all over the world for one reason or another. They may, in many cases, be more like business transactions—at least initially. But a successful marriage can still be built on one."

"Our fling didn't go anywhere, so why would you think we'd have a chance at making a marriage work? That's a little backwards, if you ask me."

Lazily making his way toward me, he said, "We didn't *try* to make what we had work. We decided it would be temporary because we were focused on other things—for you, college; for me, business. We also weren't on the same page when it came to what we had in mind for the future. That's no longer a factor." He halted a mere foot away. "I'm sure you heard about my exes who sold their stories."

I nodded.

"What bothers me more is that those relationships proved to be a waste of my time and energy—I'm not a man who wastes either, and I don't intend to do it again." He tilted his head. "Do you not resent how much time you lost to the relationships you strived to make work?"

I exhaled heavily. "Yes."

For me, it wasn't merely about having wasted my time and energy, though. It was also about *hope*. I'd invested so much of it in each serious relationship, I'd thrown myself into

them, wanting so bad for them to amount to something. They never did.

“Then you understand,” he said.

I did. I got why our fallback pact would appeal to him. He’d given up on trying to build a real and long-lasting relationship with someone. Sealing business deals was what he did best; what he knew. And so he was taking that approach to secure the future he sought.

He smoothly glided closer, inadvertently blanketing me with the masculine, intoxicating scent of his cologne—as if he wasn’t potent enough without it. “You already know what it is to be mine, so you know what you’d be walking into. More to the point, you know you can rely on me. You know I don’t need your money or your connections.” Heat bled into his eyes. “And you know we suit well in bed.”

The low, deep pitch of his voice sent a wave of goosebumps sweeping up my arms. My body knew that pitch. Responded to it instantly, tightening; tingling; firing up.

“Just the same, I know what I’d be walking into. You’re dependable. Honest. Principled. Not a user—I’ve known too many of those.” He dipped his head slightly, his eyes darkening. “You also take my cock like it’s what you exist for.”

Those words were like a tongue dragging its way up my spine. The fucker could wield dirty talk like a sexual weapon. “Don’t.”

One brow slid up. “Don’t what?”

“Use that bedroom voice on me or hit me with trigger words.”

“I’ll use whatever I have in my arsenal to get what I want.”

Not a shocker. “It doesn’t bother you that this wouldn’t be a, you know, love match?”

“No. I’ve known plenty of couples who walked down an aisle because they loved each other, but then they later



divorced. Love doesn't ensure that a marriage is successful."

Well, he had a point there. "You act dismissive toward love, but you had it once. You know it's not something to be waved away."

His jaw minutely tightened. "You and I have that in common, don't we? We both had something good once. We both lost it. And we've both failed in our attempts to find it again."

I narrowed my eyes. "You don't think you ever will, do you?"

"No. Do you?"

Swallowing, I briefly looked away. "I used to think I might." But even with Sabrina's assurances, I didn't feel hopeful.

"My exes like to claim I'm incapable of love. It isn't true. But the fact is I've only ever loved one woman. I've cared for others, but that was as far as it went. I don't foresee that changing."

Or he didn't *want* to feel so deeply for another again. If so, I could understand it. The pain that accompanied that kind of loss could make some people determined to never experience it again, even if it meant forever being alone.

I might be wrong in thinking it applied to Dax, though. As I recalled, he'd always held himself apart from others, even before Gracie.

Whatever the case, it was evident that entering into a marital life that was essentially a formal agreement appealed to him greatly. I suspected it was partly because there would be no pressure for him to *feel* the emotions that kept a typical marriage alive—something he didn't believe he was capable of doing.

"Wouldn't you at least want to care for the person you're tying yourself to?" I asked. "Wouldn't you rather they mattered to you on at least *some* level?"

His gaze flitted over my face, hyper-focused. “You have ... value to me. Not many people outside my inner circle do.”

“That’s nice and all, but do you really think you could tie your life to that of someone you’ll only ever ‘value?’ Do you honestly believe you wouldn’t eventually come to resent that your marriage has about as much emotional importance to you as a toaster?”

Humor flashed in his eyes. “A toaster?”

“You know what I’m getting at. To you, this will be no different than a corporate agreement.” I cocked my head. “Be real with me, Dax, do you even care who you marry? Because I’m getting the sense that you don’t; that it makes no difference to you, since you don’t envision yourself becoming emotionally invested.”

His brows met. “I would never be indifferent toward something as serious as my choice of wife—a person I would have to commit to, live with, raise children with. Pact or not, I wouldn’t have made this proposition to you if I didn’t believe a marriage between us would work.”

“How can you be so sure it would?”

“Because we’d refuse to allow anything else. We’re both determined people who throw ourselves behind whatever we do and take our commitments very seriously. If we walk into this intent on ensuring it stays strong, that’s exactly what will happen.”

It was really starting to get annoying that he had an answer for freaking everything. I carved my fingers into my hair and held it in place at the back of my head. “Look, I understand why an arranged marriage would appeal to you—”

“It appeals to you, too,” he maintained, his eyes boring into mine; daring me to contradict him. “You would have walked out of here by now if it didn’t.”

“There’s *some* appeal in it, yes. But ...” I trailed off, releasing my hair with a sigh.

“The problem here is you feel that you should brand it a crazy idea. You feel that you should reject it merely because arranged marriages aren’t common. But why does that have to matter?”

Truthfully, I guessed it didn’t. I’d organized weddings for couples who weren’t in love. They were still positive about their future; still happy to be moving forward with their lives; still determined to take their vows seriously. I’d respected them for it. There had been times I’d come across them years later happily walking hand in hand or pushing strollers.

“Who gives a fuck what other people typically do, Addison? Only you know what’s right for you. Only you know if searching for some supposedly all-important emotion is *to you* really worth putting the things you want from life on hold.”

I should really gag him or something. He was making too much sense, and I wasn’t sure I wanted him to. “If we did this—and that isn’t a yes, I’m just curious—when would you want to get married?”

“As soon as possible. I see no reason to wait. And if we were to set a date far off in the future, you’d spend the time in between second-guessing yourself.”

Oh, so true.

“I’m sure, given your experience with organizing weddings, you could arrange for ours to happen quickly.” It wasn’t a query; it was a confident statement.

I studied his face. “This is really, truly, honestly what you want?”

“Yes. It was your idea, remember?”

“I suggested we make the pact, but I didn’t actually think we’d need to go through with it. Admit it, you didn’t think it would come to this either.”

“I doubted it would, but that doesn’t mean I wasn’t serious when I agreed. Whether or not you meant it all the way, the fact remains that you promised me *you*. Are you going to keep your word or not?”

“I can’t quite believe you’re holding me to it.” Needing some breathing room, I stepped back, reeling and so damn overwhelmed. It was hard to think when he took up so much of my personal space. “Look, I can’t give you an answer right at this moment. This is a lot. You’ve had an opportunity to ruminate on it—and I’m sure you did plenty of it before you contacted me. I need that same opportunity.”

He twisted his mouth. “You still have a week before your time is fully up. Take that week to think about it. The day after your birthday, I’ll come to you. And I’ll expect an answer.”

I licked the inside of my lower lip. “Okay.”

“I want you to promise me that you’ll genuinely think about it—no closing your mind once you’re alone.”

“I’m not dismissing the idea, Dax. I just need time to properly go over it in my head, and I’ll do it with an open mind.”

He gave a satisfied nod. “Good girl.”

I narrowed my eyes, cursing my stomach for clenching. “I said no trigger phrases.”

His mouth hitched up. “Did you?”

God, he could be a handful.

Turning, he slowly prowled away. “You have my email address. If you reach a decision before the week is up, or you have questions between now and then, contact me.”

Crossing to my satchel, I picked it up. “Will do. I’ll, uh, let you get on with your day.” I headed for the door.

“One last thing.”

Pausing, I half-turned toward him and arched a questioning brow.

He planted his feet, his gaze once more boring into mine. “When you’re weighing up whether or not to honor your word, ask yourself something: Would you regret saying no five years from now if your personal goals remain unmet?”

I scraped my teeth over my lower lip. “All right.”

“I’ll be seeing you soon, Addison.”

I gave him a quick nod, left the office, and said my goodbyes to Benjamin. Outside the building, I blew out a long breath, mentally rocked.

God in heaven, I’d walked into that place expecting to discuss organizing a potential event and I’d walked out with a proposal of marriage to mull over.

Except ... it wasn’t a real proposal. It was more of a suggested business deal. And I had a week to decide what to do about it.

After sliding into my car, I let my head tilt back to hit the headrest. Part of me couldn’t quite believe I was willing to consider going through with his suggestion. Another part of me thought I’d be stupid not to at least give it some thought—the same part of me that believed there was a good chance I’d end up a spinster.

Dating could be stressful even if you didn’t have marriage in mind for your future. A lot of pressure often came with it. It could be a rollercoaster at times.

It hadn’t been easy to move on after losing Lake, but I believed a person’s heart could be big enough to experience such a depth of emotion for more than one individual.

I’d eventually jumped back into the dating sea. It was often said that there were plenty of fish there. True. But sometimes you had to do an awful lot of fishing before you hooked a good one. And sometimes that fishing resulted in nothing, no matter how much effort you put into it. And sometimes you then got lonely as hell.

On how many occasions had I taken someone I barely even liked to a party or dinner as my plus-one just so I wouldn’t be alone? How many times had people offered to set me up with someone while giving me a pitying smile?

And God, the amount of instances where I’d agreed to a date only to realize the person opposite me merely wanted a booty call was plain annoying. As were the occasions on

which people asked why I had such an aversion to relationships. Like they'd assumed I either had commitment issues, preferred to be single, or refused to move on from Lake.

Then there were people who decided I must be determined to put my work ambitions before anything else. They'd tell me that I needed to get my priorities straight; they'd remind me I wasn't getting any younger. Nice.

Dax had offered me a solution. Not only an alternative to playing the dating game, but a way to ensure that my future went how I wanted it to go. And so many of the things he'd said had made sense, just as many of the points he'd made were valid.

No one could deny that he'd mastered the art of persuasion, could they?

I switched on the engine and drove back to my office building. Sabrina immediately leapt on my ass, wanting to know how the consultation had gone. Needing more time to chew on his suggestion alone, I chose not to mention it to her. Besides, I knew what my oh-so-daring friend would say anyway: Something along the lines of *Go for it—if it doesn't work out, you can leave him*.

“He wants to hold a company event to celebrate some key milestones,” I lied as I strolled into my office.

Watching me settle at my desk, she narrowed her eyes. “Something's off with you. You seem distracted.”

“Of course I am. I spent what felt like hours in a confined space with a man who kickstarts my body's motor simply by breathing.” It wasn't a lie.

Her lips curled. “So your hormones didn't react any less enthusiastically to him this time round?”

“No, they didn't. And you're not supposed to find this funny.”

“I don't!”

“You're snickering to yourself.”

“I am not!”

“Liar. Now get out. I have an event proposal to type up.”

I spent the rest of my morning sending and answering emails or making and taking calls. There were always meetings to arrange, appointments to schedule, and vendors or clients that I needed to follow-up with. My focus was somewhat shit, since I had Dax’s words dancing around my head.

That focus didn’t improve in the afternoon as I went scouting venues with Sabrina, or when I later spent more time in my office handling emails and phone calls. Hating that I wasn’t able to fully concentrate, I was glad when my workday reached its end.

Once I’d compiled my to-do list for the following day, I headed home. Walking into the living room, I found Alicia lounging on the sofa, her fingers tapping the keys of her laptop. “I need your help making a pros and cons list,” I said, no hellos.

Her gaze briefly darted to me. “Pros and cons to what?” she asked, resuming typing.

“To whether or not I should marry Dax Mercier.”

And the laptop almost slid off her lap. “What in *the fuck?*” she burst out, her eyes wide. “He proposed to you?”

“Sort of.” I braced my satchel beside an armchair and then sank into it. “Back when I was young and stupid, I laughingly made a pact with him that we’d get married if we were both single when I turned thirty. He’s holding me to it. Mostly because, essentially, he’s done with dating and wants to take control of where his life is going.”

Gaping, she placed her laptop on the coffee table. “And you’re considering this?” The question was empty of judgement.

“I wasn’t at first. But some of the stuff he said and the questions he threw at me really got me thinking.”

She scooted forward on her seat. “What kind of things did he say?”

“He asked where I saw myself in five years, and the question hit me hard. Look, I’m grateful for all I have—my family, my friends, my business, my home. I never take any of it for granted. But what I *did* take for granted was that I’d be married with kids at this point in my life. You know me. I visualize what I want. I work toward it. And I go for it.”

“You usually always get it.”

“Not this time, though. This isn’t something I’ve been able to make happen. I’ve tried. Hard. But it’s something you can’t force.” I rubbed at my temple. “I didn’t realize I’d started to give up on meeting someone until I found myself contemplating going down the sperm donor route.”

Her lips parted in surprise. “You never told me that.”

“I never told anybody that. The point is I’m almost thirty, and I don’t have the things I *really* want in life. Who’s to say my situation will be any different in five years unless I *make* it happen?”

She bit into the inside of her cheek. “You could still meet someone between now and then.”

“I could. But I might not.”

“Wait, I thought Dax doesn’t want kids.”

“It seems he changed his mind,” I said with a slight shrug. “I’m not saying I’ll definitely do it. But I do need to look at this from every angle. I need to identify every pro and con. And I’m really, really hoping you’ll help me with it.”

Alicia slowly dipped her chin. “Then that’s what I’ll do.”

I felt my shoulders droop in relief. “Thank you.” I plucked a notepad and pen from my satchel and then sat beside her on the couch. “Right. To properly do this, we both need to be as objective as possible.”

“Okay. You’ll be doing most of the thinking, because you know him better than I do, so I’ll do the writing.” She



took the pen and pad from me, drew a vertical line, and then added the titles “pros” and “cons.” She cleared her throat and sat up a little straighter. “Let’s start with the pros.”

“I won’t have to worry that he’ll cheat—he’s far too loyal for that, and he’d see it as disrespecting us both.”

She scribbled “trust” on the list. “What else?”

“I’ll finally have the thing I want most without the use of a sperm donor.”

“A true pro,” she said, writing my point down. “Not that there’s anything wrong with using sperm donors. I would just rather you weren’t raising a child alone. Being a single parent can’t be anything close to easy.” A smile tugged at her mouth. “You know, you two would make cute babies. That should go on the pros list. I mean, who wants an ugly baby?”

I frowned. “No babies are ugly.”

“If you say so.”

Once she’d finished jotting down “cute babies,” I went on, “Unlike with some of the guys in my past, it won’t be an issue for Dax that I have money.”

“Yeah, his wallet is thicker than yours. And he’s smart and successful and has his shit together—all bonuses.” She scribbled them down and then said, “Being married to him would sure help your business. I know Sapphire Glade doesn’t *need* help. But let’s face it, people will want to hire Dax Mercier’s wife. Oh, and we mustn’t forget to note that he’s hot as a motherfucker.” She did just that. “Is his dick pretty sizeable?”

I felt my eyes widen. “Seriously, Alicia?”

“What? You can’t say such a detail wouldn’t count as a pro. He walks like a man who’s gifted down south, but I’ve known guys who do that and yet don’t have the big equipment to back it up. Is he well-equipped or not?”

“Not.”

Her face fell in disappointment. “Really?”

No. “Maybe.”

She fired me a look of supreme exasperation. “Forget I asked.”

“Planning to. Now, moving right along ... His family is solid, and our parents get along. That shouldn’t be overlooked—Dad doesn’t like most people.”

“That’s true,” she agreed, noting it. “Another pro is that you can finally be done with the dating scene.”

I nodded. “There’ll be no more pressure to find someone who I could be serious about. Oh, and I don’t have to worry that Dax has an ulterior motive for getting close to me—he doesn’t need anything from me.”

“Except your hand in marriage. But yeah, I get what you mean.” After she’d added the new points to the column, she sat up with a smile and said, “Ooh, I’d get to be a bridesmaid.”

I felt my brow crease as she wrote it down. “This is about pros *for me*.”

“Do you have more?”

“He fucks like a god.”

Alicia chuckled. “Oh, that’s a definite plus.” She noted it and then scanned the list. “You know, this guy is looking more and more attractive as we go on. If you decide you don’t want him, introduce us; I’ll totally consider marrying him.”

I didn’t like how that idea made my stomach hurt. “I thought you were done with men for a while.”

“I could make an exception. Now back to the list ... You marrying Dax would make Felicity’s head explode. She’d hate that you’re her cousin-in-law.”

“I’m bitchy enough to find that a pro.”

Alicia smirked. “Me, too. I’m totally writing it down.” We both fell into a pensive silence. She broke it after a few moments, saying, “*Huge* pro: You’d be moving out, which

means this house would then be vacant and I can buy it from you.”

I sighed at her. “Again, this list is *for me*.”

“Don’t be selfish. I’m important, too.”

I rolled my eyes. “All right, what else?” I twisted my mouth, thoughtful. “I can’t think of any more pros.”

“Me neither. Time to move onto the cons, then.”

“Okay. Well, first of all, we don’t love each other. And I don’t see that changing. He has completely given up on finding someone he can feel that strongly for again. I’m not even sure he actually wants to be in that emotional position a second time. Not that I *need* him to love me, especially when I’m not even sure I could return the favor. I just mean it’s a sad situation.”

“Yeah.” A frown slipped over her face. “Honestly, I’m not a big fan of love, though. I’ve only ever been hurt by the guys I fell that hard for.”

“Yeah, same here. With the exception of Lake, of course.”

“But the point remains—love can be more trouble than it’s worth, right?”

Right. “So this isn’t necessarily a con, then,” I mused.

“No. I’d say it can go on both lists. Because just maybe it wouldn’t be bad to build something long-term with someone who you don’t so deeply adore, because then they don’t have the power to hurt you. Or maybe I’m just being cynical. Whatever the case, I’m writing it down in both columns.”

While she did so, I continued, “A big problem is that Dad and Ollie will probably pop a vein on hearing I’m sticking to a fallback marriage pact rather than marrying for love.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Again, though, is that really a con?”

Considering it for a moment, I hummed. “It *can* be fun to watch them lose their shit. Plop that on both lists. Also add

the con that, since this is a business arrangement rather than a love match, there's a higher risk of me and Dax divorcing."

"Why would there be a higher risk?"

"He could grow to feel trapped, or meet someone who he'd feel suits him better. He wouldn't cheat, but he might want to wiggle his way out of the marriage. The same could apply to me, really." I gave her time to add my new points to the cons column before I went on, "He's bossy and controlling and a total meddler."

"Such is the nature of an alpha male. But you're used to dealing with them, so I'd say you'll handle it fine. Even so, I'll jot it down."

Biting my lip, I searched my mind for more negatives ... and came up blank. "It's worrying me that I can't think of more cons. Why can't I think of more?" There *had* to be some.

"Maybe because you don't want to, so you're indulging in the bliss of ignorance."

That was what concerned me. I sank further into the sofa cushion. "Do you think I'd be stupid to say yes?"

"No. Arranged marriages can work. And we have a list of reasons here why he'd be a good choice of husband for you. Or me."

I huffed and tipped my head back. "He said to ask myself if—should I say no but then my circumstances don't change over the next five years—I'd regret the decision I made."

"And would you?"

I rubbed at my forehead, reluctantly admitting, "Yes. Marleigh talks about soul mates and stuff; about Ollie being hers. She believes everyone's other half is out there to find—plenty of people all over the world do. I don't know if I believe it's real, but I know I clicked with Lake in a way that I haven't with anyone else. And if things keep going that way, I really *could* be alone in five years. At that point, I'd definitely give up and just go find a sperm donor. So would it really

make much difference if I instead married someone for the purpose of having kids and all that jazz?”

“Not really. I’m sensing there’s a ‘but,’ though.”

“*But* if I do say yes, I might spend my life wondering if I made the right choice or if I would have met someone I connected with if I’d only waited. It’d be unfair to Dax if I was doing that, wouldn’t it? Unfair that a part of me was all caught up in what ifs?”

She angled her body toward me. “I don’t think you’d do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because by then, you’ll have babies. And you’d never want to imagine a life that didn’t include them. Without Dax, they wouldn’t exist.”

I did a slow blink. She was actually right. I’d have not one regret, because it would mean wishing away the existence of my kids—that was something I’d never do.

She gently poked my shoulder. “I think you’re more worried that *he’ll* be caught up in what ifs.”

Again, she was right. “He seems so sure about all this. So confident it’d pan out for us both. But I don’t know if he’s really considered what it would be like to share his life with someone he feels no attachment to. He sees the positives, but maybe not the negatives. Or he just didn’t mention the negatives because they wouldn’t add weight to his ‘You should totally marry me’ argument.”

“That’s certainly possible.” She placed the notepad and pen on the table. “Think on all this some more if you have to. It wouldn’t be wise to rush into making such a decision anyway. But if after chewing on it more thoroughly you *genuinely* believe it could be the right thing for you, I see no reason why you shouldn’t do it. In fact, I say go for it.”

“Because you want what’s best for me, or because you want my house?”

“Can’t it be both?”

Rolling my eyes yet again, I gave my head a slow shake.

“A good person to talk to about this would be Brooks,” said Alicia, referring to the friend Dax and I shared. “He knows you *and* Dax well—if there are cons we haven’t seen, he’ll spot them.”

He would. Plus, he often gave good advice. “I’ll call him tomorrow.” Since Brooks now lived in Africa and I wasn’t in a position to go traveling, I couldn’t talk about it with him in person.

“Did you ask for Sabrina’s opinion?”

“I don’t need to. I know she’ll urge me to do this—she’s the opposite of risk averse.”

Alicia allowed that with a tilt of her head. “Harri would be behind you—once she got over the shock, of course. Mom and Dad? Probably not. Ollie will want you to have what he has with Marleigh, so he’ll be against it. But they’ll all support your decision because they love you. Eventually, anyway.”

“I wonder how Dax’s family would feel about it.”

“I don’t think he’ll care how they feel, personally. It’s well-known that that man goes his own way in life. If he’s decided he wants you, no one will talk him out of making you his.” She paused. “Maybe not even you.”

## Chapter Four

Curled up on the plush armchair in my bedroom the next morning, I smiled as Brooks' face appeared on the screen of my phone. "Well, look at you, Mr. Clean-Shaven. When did that happen?" He'd had a beard since he'd first developed facial hair.

Ruffling his reddish-brown hair, he shrugged. "My girl was complaining about rug burn, so—"

"That's really enough detail for me. How are you guys?"

"Good, good." He began talking a mile a minute, his blue eyes alight with pure wonder as he told me about a rainforest tour he'd recently experienced. He'd moved to Kenya only three months ago and he treated every work-free weekend like it was a vacation, exploring everything the place had to offer.

After ten minutes or so, he slitted his eyes as he looked at me. "Is everything all right? You seem tense. And you're not as chatty as usual."

I sat up a little straighter, though I kept my legs tucked under me. "I need your input on something. Something that may sound bizarre. Dax and I, well, we once made a pact." I expanded, relaying the specifics and explaining that Dax wanted me to keep my word.

Brooks' eyes went wider and wider as I talked. Once I was done, he sat back in his seat and whistled. "Wow."

"Yeah," I muttered.

"I can't believe you never mentioned the pact until now. This is juicy stuff."

"I wasn't serious about it, so I didn't feel a need to share it. But now ... I suppose some would say I'm an idiot to even consider this; that I should hold out for something *real*. Meaningful. Special. But I've started to think that my chance at that died with Lake."

He scratched at his jaw and then paused with a frown, no doubt unused to the lack of a beard. “I suppose, given how untraditional this is, I should tell you it’s a dumb idea. But I married my girl after only dating her for a month, and we’re now in a three-way relationship with another guy. I’m in no position to judge anyone on who they choose to spend the rest of their life with.”

The door creaked open as Gypsy padded inside, twitching the tip of her tail. She was also carrying a white shoelace in her mouth. I was pretty sure it wasn’t usual for cats to “collect” and stash objects, but she made a habit of it.

She also made a habit of leaving mauled corpses of dead rodents in my kitchen. Yes, *mauled*.

Adjusting the position of the light-purple cushion behind me—which went wonderfully with the room’s silver-and-lavender color scheme—I said to Brooks, “You know me, so I don’t have to explain why I’d consider this a viable option for me. I came up with some pros and cons when I talked about it with Alicia.” I quickly read the entire list. “There should be more cons, really.”

“There is a con you’re not seeing.” Brooks palmed the back of his head. “You say you think that your chance at something special ended with Lake, so I’m guessing you’re feeling that you don’t emotionally need more from Dax than what he’s offering. Maybe you don’t. But that doesn’t mean it will be easy for you to be with someone like him.

“He’s a great guy, Addie. A sincerely trustworthy person. Hell, I trust him one-hundred percent. But that feeling isn’t mutual, and I know it isn’t a slight to me. He’s just a very guarded person.”

That was something I’d noticed when we first met. Dax didn’t show affection—verbally or physically. He didn’t expose his deeper emotions or talk about his feelings. It wasn’t that he was cold-hearted, just reserved.

But it didn’t bother me that he wasn’t the warmest or friendliest of people, because he was *authentic*. There were too



many fake people in this world. Dax didn't lie about what he thought or felt. He was real.

“When we were kids, all people saw when they looked at him was the step-grandson of death row convict Michael Bale,” Brooks went on. “It made Dax an obvious target, so he had to deal with a lot of shit. Other kids would bully or challenge him. He got into so many fights it was insane. Especially with a particular group of kids—they were sons of cops, judges, and attorneys; the kind of kids who thought they could escape arrest. And they did. The sheriff did *jack*.”

Five years younger than Dax, I hadn't been aware of his difficulties back when I was a child. But I'd later heard plenty of stories about it. I'd also heard how Dax's father, Blake, made those boys pay in other ways, since the law failed his son.

“The press ...” Trailing off, Brooks shook his head in disgust. “Whenever Bale ended up in the headlines again, reporters would lurk outside Dax's house or school. Can you imagine having perfect strangers snap pictures of you and push recorders into your face, asking for comments on what it's like to have Michael Bale as a granddaddy?”

“Making it worse, there were a couple of journalists who *pounced* on how he was always fighting and getting expelled, implying the violence came from Bale's influence; that Dax might even follow in his footsteps. The truth was that Dax was just retaliating, but those reporters made *him* out to be the monster.”

My chest clenched as I pictured a little boy being targeted by kids who tried making him prey; a little boy who'd fought back rather than let those predators break him ... only for him to be blamed for it all. Blamed for being *bullied*. It was fucked up.

“Those same reporters had ‘sources’ who gave them lots of details. It was hard to know who was leaking that stuff, though—it could have been teachers, students, neighbors, friends, family,” said Brooks. “That kind of betrayal, that

feeling of not being sure who exactly you could trust ... it leaves its mark, you know?"

Of course it would. I knew about betrayal, though not quite to this extent. But I was familiar with the wounds it left.

"All of this changed because, over the years, Dax became someone to fear. Notorious in his own right. People don't look at him and see Bale anymore, no, they see someone who'd they be suicidal to fuck with. But Dax pulled inward during that personal journey. He trusts maybe a handful of people. There's only so close you can get to someone like that," Brooks warned, his tone careful.

I slowly nodded. "I understand that."

"You *think* you get it. You think you'll be okay with it because it didn't bother you years ago. But that was a fling—you didn't have to care that it would be shallow and temporary. A marriage isn't temporary. But with Dax, it could still be shallow.

"He keeps his circle small. You'd be part of it if you married him, Addie, but it wouldn't automatically follow that you'd be part of that circle *emotionally*. He has such a defensive internal structure that he's pretty much wired to keep people out."

"You're saying it's not only subconsciously instinctive for him to hold back, he likely wouldn't make any conscious attempt to let me close in even the most basic way," I surmised.

"Yes. He was different with Gracie, but not in the beginning. She had a hell of a time *reaching* him. That's just how he is."

I chewed on my bottom lip. "It's nothing close to a surprise that he'd have such self-defense mechanisms, given all that went on in his life. To have so much negative attention centered on you growing up when you're developing a sense of self ..."

"Caelan and Drey had to deal with some of that crap when kids, too. But Dax had it the worst."

“The media attention eased after Bale was executed,” I remembered.

“Yeah. That led to the family finally getting some peace. And, as I said before, people don’t associate Dax with Bale anymore. Same goes for his brothers. Drey’s talent on the field is admired far and wide. People from all over to get a tattoo from Caelan. But there are times when their connection to Bale leaks onto their lives again in minor ways.

“You may have to deal with that, too, Addie. Not to the same extent. Dax is so much of a powerful presence nowadays that people don’t harass him for fear of repercussions, though he still hears from journalists occasionally. I think you could handle all that. My question is whether you’ll think it’s worth it later on down the line if you feel like an outsider in your own marriage.”

“So you don’t think I should marry him?”

“I never said that,” Brooks quickly clarified. “I just want your eyes to be wide open. Would he make a good husband? Objectively speaking, yeah, I think he would. They don’t come more loyal than Dax. He’s a man who’d do his best to ensure nothing negative touched his woman. He would never purposely put her through any pain. But he also might never give her all of himself. I say *might*, because things could play out differently for you.”

“But you don’t think they will.”

He winced. “Much as I hate to say it, no. You may truly be okay with there never being any love between you. But I would think you’ll want a warm companionship, if nothing else. You might struggle to get it. It’s something you should be prepared for.”

“Okay.” I supposed I should feel put-off by all Brooks said. Even a year ago, I would have been. But as Alicia had speculated, it could be easier to build something with someone who lacked the power to hurt you. Dax didn’t have it, and he’d never seek it.

Would I want the warm companionship Brooks spoke of? Yes. I'd probably have to be patient in my attempts to get it, though. "Any more cons?"

"Yes. You'll have to accept that he won't change in how he deals with issues. The cops failed him when he was growing up. He couldn't rely on the justice system, so he had to seek justice himself. He's used to handling ... personal matters, and doing it swiftly and cruelly."

"You mean he's more likely to beat someone to a pulp than call the sheriff and attempt to have them arrested." I already knew that.

"You have to be able to take him as he is."

"I'd be a hypocrite if I held it against him. My dad is just as bad for disregarding the law when it suits him."

"That's true enough." Brooks poked his tongue into the inside of his cheek. "Do you mind if I call Dax and talk to him? I'd like to feel him out; be sure he knows what he's doing. Or would you rather he wasn't aware you called me?"

"As long as you don't go into specifics about our talk, I have no issues with you letting him know I called you."

He laid a hand over his heart. "I won't repeat any of what you said, just as I won't relay to you any of what *he* says when I talk to him." He paused. "You know, to help balance things out, I have a pro that isn't on your list."

I felt my brows lift. "You do?"

"Yes, and I'm surprised you haven't already thought of it. Unless you aren't aware ...?"

"Aware of what?"

"Dax owns a publishing company. Anyone who married him could probably get their hands on some free books."

The addictive reader in me perked up. "He does? How awesome." And definitely worth writing down.

Brooks tipped his head to the side. “Why do I get the feeling that appeals to you more than pretty much anything on that pro list of yours other than kids?”

I gave an innocent shrug. “No idea. Why do you?”

He only smiled.



Parking in the lot outside Chrome Canvas Bar a few days later, I turned off the engine. Often frequented by bikers due to it being attached to CCC—or Chrome Canvas Cycles, to be precise, which manufactured custom motorcycles—it wasn’t an obvious place to meet for coffee. But it was considered a “gem” by those caffeine-lovers who discovered it, because it couldn’t be denied that they made *real* good coffee. As such, it wasn’t a huge surprise that Ollie asked me to meet him here when he texted me last night.

He first came upon the bar after buying a motorcycle from CCC. Yeah, though he worked for our dad’s massive company, o-Verve, Ollie wasn’t stuffy like many of his colleagues. He didn’t dress in suits and shiny shoes outside of work. He was more a dark tee, jeans, and boots kind of guy.

Having hopped out of my car, I locked it with the key fob and began striding toward the bar, highly curious as to why Ollie had requested we meet—he’d been exceptionally vague in his texts. A few people stood outside CCC’s rolled-up bay door, so I couldn’t see much of the interior. But I did make out a couple of bikes set on raised lifts.

Customers allegedly came from all over. Three generations of Armstrongs—close friends of the Mercier family—worked there. I knew the name of the youngest Armstrong, Maverick, purely because he was often photographed with Drey. Maverick’s aunt, Sarah, apparently ran the bar these days.

Despite the Armstrongs' link to Dax, I doubted I'd bump into him here. I hadn't seen, heard from, or contacted him since our talk at his office. I'd almost emailed him a time or two, whenever a question popped into my head that I wished I'd asked. But I didn't want to hear from Mr. Persuasive—he could too easily influence my decisions; could too easily sway me to his way of thinking. Whether or not I stood at an altar with him needed to be my decision. At the moment, I still wasn't sure what to do.

Reaching the bar, I pushed open the door. The scents of coffee, wood, beer, and spicy food washed over me as I entered. Two very pretty and clearly related brunettes—one older, one younger—stood behind the bar. A “BEER” sign hung over it, a bright neon-blue.

The redbrick walls sported pictures of framed photos of bikes. Said walls were also lined with shelves on which bike parts, helmets, and accessories sat, all for sale. It was only then that I remembered the bar doubled as a store.

The lighting was dim due to the tinted windows, but I easily spotted Ollie. Other patrons were scattered around—some sat at barstools, others at heavy tables. A few played pool while another cursed at a gambling machine.

Smiling at my brother, I crossed straight to him. Five and a half years my junior, he was tall, broad, and dark-eyed. He also very closely resembled Dane, though there were also hints of our deceased great-uncle there who'd died before we were born—we'd only ever seen pictures of Hugh, but Ollie definitely had the guy's smile.

Right then, he stood and flashed that crooked smile at me. “Hey.”

I hugged him tight. “Hey yourself.”

He gestured at one of the two mugs on the heavy table. “A caramel latte awaits you.”

“Thanks.” As he returned to his seat, I claimed the one opposite and asked, “How's everything at work?”

“Fine. I still have zero idea how no one at the company has tried poisoning Dad yet. He can be a total asshole to the staff sometimes. Though not unnecessarily. At least not *all* the time. He just doesn’t handle human error or inefficiency well. As you know, of course.”

I felt my eyes narrow. It was not like Ollie to ramble. Or drum his fingers restlessly on his thigh. Or bite into the inside of his cheek.

I realized, with a start, that he was nervous. It had to be a first. I’d *never* seen him nervous before. He was fearless in just about everything he did.

He cleared his throat. “How are things with Sapphire Glade?”

“All good. But I don’t think you asked me to meet you so we could have an idle chat. Is something wrong?” My chest tightened as my imagination began going wild.

He lifted a hand. “No, not wrong. I have some news. Good news. For me, anyway.” He rested his lower arms on the table. “I wanted to tell you while we were alone.”

“Okay,” I said, wary.

Ollie drew in a long breath. “Marleigh’s pregnant,” he blurted.

I felt my brows hit my hairline. “Really?” Thrilled, I let out a low but very girly squeal as I shot out of my seat and rounded the table. I hugged him again, probably squeezing a little too tight. “That’s amazing news.”

He eyed me carefully as I drew back. “You’re ... you’re okay about it?”

I frowned. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, I knew it would make you think of ...” He trailed off, clamping his lips shut.

As understanding dawned on me, a flood of affection washed through my system even as hurt gripped my gut. “Aw, Ollie.” I dragged my chair over to his and sat back down. “I won’t lie, the pain of my miscarriage will never go away. But

it shouldn't, should it? Something like that *should* leave its mark on you. But that doesn't mean I'm not elated that you and Marleigh are having a baby."

"It's not that I thought you wouldn't be pleased for us," he told me. "I just thought it might hurt you on some level; that it'd be hard for you. I mean, you organize every kind of event imaginable, but never baby showers."

"Not because I'd find it too difficult to be around pregnant women. My clients deserve for me to concentrate on *them* and *their* vision, not for me to be distracted by my personal loss. It isn't fair to them. It's the same reason why a newly divorced event organizer I know often refers soon-to-be wedded couples to Sapphire Glade—she worries her personal feelings would leak through and ruin their big day."

Pausing, I rested a hand on his arm. "Trust me, I am *delighted* for you and Marleigh. I am delighted that I'll soon have a niece or nephew. Please don't doubt that. Please don't think I'd resent you."

His brows pulled together. "I never thought you'd feel any resentment, Addie—that's not who you are. I just worried our good news would remind you of what you lost and that you'd find this difficult. Especially since it was the anniversary of your miscarriage only a few weeks back, so I know that the memories and hurt are kind of fresh right now."

"Let's face it, Ollie, it would be strange if your news didn't make me think of the baby I lost. Like I said before, something like that *should* mark you. But that doesn't detract from how positively ecstatic I am for you."

His lips curled. "Marleigh will be relieved. She was so worried this would wreck you."

I gently squeezed his hand. "I love you both for worrying, and I appreciate that you'd tell me in private in case it hit me hard. But I'm really fine. How far along is she?"

"Almost three months. We didn't realize at first—she had no morning sickness, and her periods didn't stop. But



when she was craving coal, we knew something was going on.”

I almost did a double-take. “Coal?”

“Don’t worry, she didn’t eat any.”

Reaching across the table, I grabbed my untouched latte and then began peppering him with questions—how was she doing? Had they had a prenatal scan yet? Did they know the gender of the baby? And so on and so on.

“Jeez, sis, take a breath,” he said with a chuckle.

“I can’t, I’m excited. Who else knows?”

“No one. You’re the first to hear of it.”

“Mom and Dad are gonna be *psyched*. Everyone will be.”

Humor lit Ollie’s eyes. “Not sure ‘psyched’ is a state Dad is familiar with, but he’ll definitely be pleased for me and Marleigh.”

“That he will.”

“I know the original plan was for she and I to get married next year, but I suggested to her that maybe we should do it before the baby is born. She doesn’t want to, though. She likes the idea of the baby being at the wedding, so ...”

“Aw, they’ll make the cutest bridesmaid or page boy.” Seeing the pride and elation in his eyes, I couldn’t help but think ... *This could be me soon. If I said yes to Dax, I could be feeling what he’s feeling right now.*

“Listen, don’t say anything about the pregnancy to anyone.”

“I had no intention of doing,” I assured him. “It’s your news to share. I’d never take that from you.”

His mouth curved. “Thanks.” He took a swig of his coffee. “Before I forget to ask, how’s Alicia doing?”

“Okay. She still won’t talk about what happened with Dario except to say that they’re definitely a thing of the past.”

Ollie grunted. “I never liked him.”

“Truthfully, neither did I.” I hadn’t anything to her until recently, respecting that he was her choice. “I felt she could do better.”

“She can,” he firmly declared. “And hopefully, she will.”

“Hopefully.”

We talked about this and that as we finished our coffees. Once done, we headed outside together, said our goodbyes, and parted ways. As I was in my car clicking on my seatbelt, I heard the rumbling of his bike engine as he whizzed by me.

Only then did I let my smile drop. I hadn’t lied to Ollie. I was delighted for him and Marleigh. *Delighted*. I didn’t feel bitter, and my loss didn’t—*couldn’t*—take away from the happiness I felt for them. But was hearing someone talk about a pregnancy something of a trigger? Yes. That wasn’t something I could avoid.

Every time it happened, I’d remember how happy I’d been on seeing the word “pregnant” on the test stick. I’d remember the first prenatal scan and how frantic the baby’s heartbeat had sounded. I’d remember the excited reactions of those around me when I’d told them my news.

And I’d remember the incident that had resulted in the miscarriage. Remember the screech of tires, the crunch of metal, the cries of pain, the smell of blood, the civilians who’d tried to help not only me but the passengers from the other cars.

Finally, I’d remember the doctor’s grim expression when he’d confirmed what I’d already known deep down inside before I’d even arrived at the hospital.

A sound snapped me out of the past. Knuckles wrapping on my window, I realized.

I looked up. And there was one of Dax’s brothers, Caelan, staring down at me. I cleared my expression fast, not

wanting him to read my emotions. Only then did I press the button to electronically lower the window.

Planting his hands on the car, he bent and poked his head inside, bold as you please, his gaze flitting all over my face. “You all right, Addison?” A careful but loaded question.

I gave him an easy smile. “Yup. Fine.” I’d first met him back when I had my little fling with Dax. He was just as much an alpha as his older brother, not to mention a walking advertisement for sex.

The brothers looked alike in some ways, but Caelan didn’t have Dax’s mismatched eyes—his were a rich brown, and he also had the powerful build of a cage fighter. Probably because he used to *be* a cage fighter.

Caelan’s eyelids drooped a little. “You didn’t look fine a moment ago.”

“I just got lost in thought, that’s all,” I said with an airy shrug.

His gaze—too perceptive, too knowing—remained locked with mine. I didn’t let my smile falter or allow what I felt to bleed onto my face. But it didn’t appear to be making much of a difference.

He lifted a doubtful brow. “I look like someone you can bullshit?”

“Totally.”

His mouth twitched, but he quickly wiped the almost-smile from his face.

“Caelan?” a voice called out.

Tracking it, I saw an unfamiliar male standing a few car-spaces away.

Caelan inched his head out of my window and lifted it.

“You got a minute?” the stranger asked. “It’s important.”

A rough sigh. “Give me a sec.” Caelan once more inserted his big, nosy head into my car and caught my gaze,

his eyes searching mine. “You sure you’re okay to drive right now?”

“Yes,” I replied, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel. “As I said before, I’m fine. And I really have to get going.”

He let out a resigned sigh that was laced with irritation. “All right.”

I forced another easy smile. “Take care.”

“You too, Addison.” He ducked his head out of the car, straightened, gave the hood a light slap, and then stepped back. “Drive safely. And welcome to the family.” With that, he waltzed away.

I felt my jaw drop. He knew. He knew about the pact.

I supposed I shouldn’t be surprised. He and Dax were very close, so they were bound to share such things with each other. After all, I’d told my sister about it—at this point, she felt certain I’d go through with the wedding. Evidently, so did Caelan.

Driving off, I wondered how they could be so sure while *I* kept bouncing back and forth in my head from *Okay, I’ll marry him* to *I’d be nuts to do this*.

Even though the final preparations for an upcoming wedding I’d organized—one that would be taking place in just two days—consumed a lot of my attention, I found myself constantly chewing on Dax’s proposal and all that Brooks had advised me to consider.

Could I marry someone who took justice into his own hands and who broke the law when it suited him? Well ... I certainly wouldn’t blame Dax for it. What had the law ever done for him? Nothing. But then, I supposed I wasn’t the sort to be fazed by that when I’d been raised by a man who disregarded the law on occasion. So yes, I could handle it.

Could I marry someone whose connection to a deceased death row convict would potentially touch my life at times? I’d be an absolute bitch if I held it against Dax, which I

didn't. It wasn't his choice. Wasn't something he had any control over. So yes, I could handle that, too.

Could I marry someone who I might never get emotionally close to? As it happened ... though it might be incredibly sad, I actually could. This man wouldn't be able to hurt me, because he didn't have that power over my emotions. And if anything tragic were to happen to him, I would of course find it absolutely awful, but it wouldn't destroy me.

They said it was better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. But when you'd lost again and again and again, you started to wonder if maybe that was pure bullshit.

But that was the thing ... I didn't like that I'd emotionally thrown in the towel. I didn't like that I could so easily turn my back on searching for something I'd once treasured the thought of finding. It seemed wrong. Unnatural. Sad.

As such, I was still struggling to make a decision on what to do. Though, if I was honest, the more I thought about it the more I leaned toward saying yes. So maybe Caelan and Alicia were right to be confident I'd follow through with my promise to Dax. Maybe.

## Chapter Five

“The vicar is cute.”

Stood at the back of the church, I frowned as I turned to Sabrina. “What?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

“I’m just saying, you don’t often come across a vicar so young and cute,” she whispered with a shrug. “Maybe you should go talk to him after the ceremony is over.”

“About what?”

“Feel him out. See if he’s single.” She paused. “If you don’t feel any inclination to become a vicar’s wife, you could sniff out what his stance on flings happens to be.”

Adjusting the position of my headset, I sighed. “You think I should suggest a round of *premarital sex* to a vicar? Seriously?”

“Why not? They don’t all frown on stuff like that.”

“Maybe not, but I’ll pass.” I cut my gaze back to the couple at the altar.

It had taken a year of hard work—not to mention numerous meetings, hundreds of emails, and an ungodly amount of phone calls—to get to *this moment*, but finally we were here. And I was loving it. Seeing all our work and creativity come to life, seeing the joy on our clients’ faces as their dream wedding became reality, was like a shot of bourbon every time.

The bride was smiling so wide it surely had to hurt. The groom was looking a little teary—as was her father.

The church décor was perfect—Sabrina and I had made sure of it. We’d come here early and set up the flowers, ivory aisle runner, and the tulle pew end bows. Meanwhile, other members of our team had taken care of setting up the tables at the party venue.

Amped up on caffeine, adrenaline, and sheer determination to ensure all went as planned, I’d been on my

feet since dumb o' clock, going back and forth, doing this or that, and double-checking things. Okay, triple-checking them—I liked to be thorough.

Even now, my focus was split in a dozen directions—the food, the lighting, the band, the table set-up, etc., etc. Luckily, I'd always been a person who thrived under pressure.

So many things, big or small, could make an event go tits-up. Unreliable vendors, natural disasters, family arguments, or even a typo on someone's timeline since it was *essential* that everyone's was in sync. But so far, all was going swimmingly well.

There had been no delays, no mix-ups, no mistakes. Our team, as always, was functioning like a well-oiled machine. And I was doing an excellent job of pretending that Grayden and Felicity weren't sitting in one of the pews.

When they'd first entered the church, I'd unwittingly met Felicity's gaze. Her arm linked through his, she'd shot me a little smirk. Grayden had studiously avoided looking at me, and I knew he'd done it so as not to set her off.

Their young daughters—who I'd met many times while dating him—had subtly offered me weak smiles, as opposed to Felicity's teenage son from a previous relationship. Nineteen-year-old Blaise had sneered at me like I was shit on his shoe. Nothing new there.

I'd smiled at the little girls but blanked the others, having no interest in interacting with them in even the smallest way. They were idiots if they thought some smirks and sneers from them would bother me.

Several of the guests were obviously aware of my history with Grayden—their gazes often bounced from me to the spot where I knew he sat with his family. I ignored it. Ignored as they whispered to others, most likely enlightening them to the aforementioned history.

Instead, I focused on the bridal party, set on ensuring that every phase went smoothly. I'd worked very closely with Kaelie and Theo throughout the entire process of planning

their big day, and I'd grown fond of them. They had been a delight to work with from start to finish.

Some clients had very clear ideas of what they wanted, but those ideas weren't always realistic. I would try to educate and guide them in different directions. The majority of the time, they listened—just as Kaelie and Theo had. Other times, they stubbornly refused to budge ... and I'd find myself wondering why they'd honestly believe I could have elephants brought to a hotel venue for people to sit on for photographs.

“Just so you're aware and it doesn't catch you off-guard,” Sabrina quietly began, leaning into me, “that little witch keeps tossing smug-ass grins at you.”

I felt my smile flicker. “I wouldn't expect anything else, given Felicity's general character. As we've covered, she's a tool.”

Was it difficult to be in the same space as Grayden again while he had another woman tucked up against him? Yes. More than I'd care to admit. Because it was one thing to *know* he was once more with Felicity. It was another to *see* them together.

Not that I stood here wishing he'd chosen me instead of her. It was simply that my annoyance at how I'd invested so much time and emotion in a man who'd so easily walked away ... it lingered like a bad smell.

Initially, I hadn't been able to imagine the two of them being all cozy like this. There'd just been so much animosity between them when I was with Grayden. That was how it had seemed, anyway. Maybe I'd been wrong, though. Maybe they'd reached for anger back then to avoid facing the hurt they felt at being apart. Or something.

If so, it basically meant that what we'd had was a lie. It meant he hadn't truly hated her as he'd claimed, and nor had he really loved me as he'd professed. It meant I'd believed a bunch of bullshit. *That* pissed me off.

Refusing to dwell on it—because what was the point?—I returned my attention to the ceremony. Watching the bride



knuckle away a tear, I smiled. The happy picture before me gave me that usual pinch of envy, but it wasn't as potent this time. Because I could have this, couldn't I? If I just said yes to Dax, I could very soon be in Kaelie's shoes.

Sort of.

I'd likely not feel the dreamy contentment plastered all over her face, because I wouldn't be besotted with my husband the way she was with Theo. But my hormones were besotted with Dax, so there was that.

I still hadn't told Sabrina about his proposal, or anyone else for that matter. Only Alicia and Brooks knew. We hadn't talked about it much since; they both understood me, understood I needed to make the decision on my own. The fact that the clock was ticking away meant I'd better hurry the fuck up with that.

Three days. I had only three days left. And my answer could *not* afford to be half-hearted. Once I'd given my word, I wouldn't be able to go back on it.

Realizing the ceremony was coming to a close, I caught the photographer's eye and gave a firm nod. A member of the groom's family, he'd never done a wedding before and was extremely nervous.

I spent the next few hours floating from person to person—gesturing for the food to be brought out, signaling the band to play, giving the father of the bride an encouraging back-pat before he did his speech. Fortunately, this was one of the occasions where no last-minute challenges cropped up, so every stage seamlessly flowed into the next.

If there were times my chest twanged when I saw Felicity and Grayden either laughing, holding hands, or dancing together—reminding me of what a fool I'd been—I pretended them away.

If there were times she tried approaching me but was neatly intercepted by him, I pretended them away, too.

If there were times when I caught him looking at me, his eyes dull and regretful, I ignored them as well.

I didn't, however, ignore when Blaise accidentally-on-purpose threw a prawn at me—despite that I managed to dodge it. Having used a napkin to scoop it off the floor, I gave him a condescending, pitying smile. “Now I'd expect something like that from an eight year old, not someone of your age.”

His cheeks flushing, he jutted out the dimpled chin he'd inherited from his mother. He also had her wide-set blue-hazel eyes and russet-brown hair. “You shouldn't be here. You're not welcome.”

How devastating.

There was so much I'd love to say to this belligerent little shit who, if what his younger sisters told me was true, happened to be a major bully to them. But I wouldn't be baited into doing that here. I wouldn't spoil the wedded couple's day or damage my company's reputation.

I gave him my back, only then realizing that the bride was hurrying over, her smile wide, her gaze wary as it danced from me to him.

“Hi, Blaise,” said Kaelie. “Enjoying yourself?”

“Whatever,” he mumbled before stalking off with a sulky stride.

“Teenagers.” Sighing, Kaelie turned to me. “Sorry if he's being a pain. I did suggest to *some people* that they not show to make things less awkward, but they chose to ignore that. Which annoys me, because I didn't want you to feel uncomfortable.”

“I adore you for worrying, but I'm truly fine.” I shrugged. “Grayden and I simply weren't meant to be.”

Kaelie gave me a gentle smile. “My opinion? He's a fool for letting you go.” She squeezed my hand. “Thank you so much for making mine and Theo's day so perfect.”

Just as the bride returned to the dance floor, Sabrina materialized on my left and asked, “Everything okay?”

“Yes, Kaelie was just thanking us for making her big day all she’d dreamed it would be,” I fudged, deciding not to mention the Blaise thing for now.

“I’m glad she’s so happy, but I gotta be honest I am so *not* looking forward to tomorrow.” Sabrina’s nose wrinkled. “Clean-up sucks.”

“Yeah.” Venues often allowed us to return for clean-up duty the day after an event, though sometimes they wanted it done once the guests had trickled out. Luckily, this wasn’t one of those times, but that didn’t mean we would arrive home at a nice hour. Our team was always the first to arrive and also the last to leave.

As such, soon after the bride and groom left later on, I asked my team to politely usher the guests out of the venue and into cabs while I dealt with collecting the wedding gifts.

As I was loading them into our company van in the parking lot, I heard heels click-clacking the pavement behind me.

“You know,” began a high-pitched voice that grated on my nerves, “some people were surprised that you didn’t ask another event organizer to take over. *I* wasn’t, though. If there’s one thing I can say for you, it’s that you give your company all you’ve got.”

Turning to face Felicity, I would have thanked her for the compliment if I wasn’t sure she was about to add a bitchy comment.

She smirked. “You gave Grayden all you had, too, didn’t you? And still, it wasn’t enough.”

*And there it was.*

“You couldn’t hold onto him.”

I shrugged and deadpanned, “Your pull is just too strong, he couldn’t resist.”

She pressed her red-painted lips together. She was a beautiful woman—no doubt about it. One of those people who made the size-zero thing look good rather than unhealthy. But

her looks were spoiled by the slyness of her character—it shined through in the cruel curve of her lips, the mean glint in her eyes, the cocky set of her shoulders.

She stuck out her chin, much as her son had done earlier. “I warned you that Grayden would come back to me. I told you it’d be better for you if you let him go; that you’d only get hurt if you didn’t.”

Yes, she had. She’d showed up at my old home twice to make this perfectly apparent. And it turned out that she’d been right. “It was very magnanimous of you,” I said, my voice dry. “I will always appreciate it.”

Her eyes flared. “You think I don’t see you’re bitter that I won?”

“And what did you win, exactly?”

“The man you love.”

Not the man *we* love, I noted.

I could have corrected her belief that I still loved him, but nothing I could say would make her believe anything other than what she wanted to believe. So instead, I pointed out, “But you didn’t really win *him*, though. You merely won the game you played. He went back to you, yes. But not until you threatened to move away with his kids.”

“Is that what he told you?” Felicity huffed. “I suppose he did it to spare your feelings. Well, he lied.”

“He did, huh?”

“Oh, yes, very much so. He never wanted a divorce. He fought it hard. And during the years we were separated, he asked several times for us to reconcile.”

“Let me guess,” said Sabrina, appearing out of the shadows, “he stopped showing any interest in doing so when he met Addison.”

Felicity snapped her mouth shut.

“You didn’t like that, I’ll bet,” Sabrina went on. “Not at all. It showed that you didn’t have the same level of power

over him anymore. *Addison* had it. So you did your best to take it back, only it didn't work. You have him just like you wanted, but the power is still hers. Because he misses her, doesn't he? You see it. I see it. *Everyone* sees it."

Felicity plopped a hand on her hip. "Then why," she snarked, "if he doesn't truly want me, does he fuck me every night?"

Sabrina gave her a pitying look. "Let's face it, sweetie, he's probably picturing Addison."

I winced as Felicity's cheeks went scarlet. The woman likely didn't believe it to be true—actually, neither did I—but the idea that someone else might hold that opinion certainly hit her right in the ego. "Felicity, how about you go back to your family."

"How about *you* not try telling me what to do," she bitchily countered.

I raised my shoulders. "What's the point in this? Really? As you said, you won. Congrats. Go party it up." I turned back to the pile of gifts on the ground.

"Hey, we're not finished."

I didn't respond. I took a neatly wrapped box from the pile and loaded it onto the van.

"I have more to say to you."

And I just didn't care.

"Don't you ignore me."

Fingers wrapped around my arm and pulled hard, nails digging into my skin.

*Oh, the fuck no.* Feeling my face harden, I went nose to nose with her. "Let. Go." My voice was low. Calm. Eerily flat. "You don't want to take me on, Felicity. You see, I wouldn't kick your ass here and now—I'm working, after all. No, but I'd come for you. I'd find you. I would wipe the fucking floor with you, and I think you know it."

Her eyes flickering, she loosened her hold on my arm. Yeah, she knew it. She was full of attitude and snark, but she had no fight in her to back it up physically.

“Last chance,” I warned. “Let go.”

Her expression tightened, but she released my arm and stepped back.

“Felicity!” Grayden called out.

I looked to see him steadily approaching, his apprehensive hazel gaze darting from me to her.

Swallowing, he held his hand out to her. “Come on, the kids are wondering where you are.”

She gave him a dazzling smile that held a bite as she went to his side. “I was just telling these ladies that they did a fantastic job with the event,” she told him, lightly stroking her fingers through the short, cognac-brown strands of his hair.

“And we were just thanking her for her compliments,” said Sabrina. “Bye, bye now.”

Grayden swiftly guided Felicity away. He glanced back at me over his shoulder, but I avoided meeting his gaze, uninterested in interacting with him in even the most basic sense.

Sabrina wrung her hands, as if to shake off her anger. “There’s going to come a day when I slap her super hard, and you’d better not try to stop me.”

I lifted another gift from the pile. “So long as you don’t do it during work hours, I don’t care. She’s not worth it, though. Don’t let her rile you.”

“I can’t always help it.”

I added the box to the van. “Understandable. Now, fancy giving me a hand here?”

Together, we transferred the wrapped gifts and pretty bags—and there was a *lot* of them—to the vehicle.

Hearing my phone beep, I fished it out of my pocket. My lips flattened when I saw it was a text from Grayden: *I’m*

*sorry, I tried keeping her away from you.*

“Why are you making that face?” asked Sabrina.

I showed her the message.

She cursed. “Are you going to respond?”

“No. I never do.”

She did a double-take. “He texts you on the regular?”

“He used to. Now, it’s more like every few weeks. Only ever to say something mundane—he might ask how I am or make a random comment like, *Oh, you’ll love the new Trace Lacroix movie, it’s awesome.*”

Her eyelid twitched. “In other words, he thinks up excuses to contact you but might as well be saying, *Hey, I exist—don’t forget me or move on too fast.*”

“Yes. The only reason I haven’t blocked his number is that I want him to *feel* my utter apathy toward this shit.”

She sighed. “I wasn’t lying to Felicity when I said I could see he misses you. Anytime he looked your way, there was so much longing on his face I could almost feel sorry for him. No way has he been able to hide from her that he wishes things were different.”

I scratched my neck. “I feel sorry for his girls.”

“Me, too. On the one hand, they’ll be glad to have him living with them again. But they’ll see he’s unhappy, and they’ll probably take that on; probably think they’re not enough to make him happy. Kids do that.” Sabrina paused. “I noticed the girls very discreetly waved to you earlier.”

“They’re little sweethearts. The entire time I was dating Grayden, Felicity made them feel so torn, wanting them to hate me. They felt guilty that they didn’t.”

“Her son still isn’t your biggest fan, going by the looks I saw him tossing your way today.”

“Hmm, he threw a prawn at me earlier.”

“What?”

“Are you really surprised, given that Blaise is basically a male version of Felicity? He lives for her approval. He takes on her opinions. If she likes someone, so will he. If she loathes him, he will too. If she doesn’t approve of a girl he dates, he’ll dump her immediately just to please Felicity.”

Sabrina grimaced. “Sad, isn’t it?”

“Very.” Again, my cell chimed once. Glancing at the screen, I saw it was yet *another* message from Grayden: *You looked beautiful today, by the way.* “Unbelievable.”

“What?”

“It’s Grayden again.” I read the text aloud.

Her mouth went flat. “He’s trying to prod you into talking to him.”

“So it would seem.” *Ass.*

She shook her head, her nostrils flaring. “If he really cared for you like you deserved to be cared for, he wouldn’t do this. He’d respect your ‘no contact’ wish and let you go.”

“You’re getting riled up all over again.”

“How can I not? What he’s doing is so fucking selfish. Well, I’m no longer in danger of feeling sorry for him—that ship has sailed.”

I closed the van’s sliding door. “Let’s forget about them. They’re not important.”

“Too right they aren’t. But I’m going to say one last thing before we switch topics.”

“Okay.”

“If he leaves her and comes crawling back to you, you’d be a fool to give him another chance. Don’t get me wrong, you’re my bestie; I’d support you if you made that choice. But I’ll never believe he deserves you, and if you marry him I will wear black to the wedding. And I don’t mean a hot or classy number either. Think *The Woman in Black*. That’s what you’ll be faced with. I will make sure I look creepy as fuck. Small children will cry and run from me.”



I felt my lips quirk. “You have no need to worry. Even if I still loved him, which I don’t, I wouldn’t take him back.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Yes. I don’t blame him for putting his kids first—I never will, never could. For their sake, I’m glad he did. But he’d promised me that, no matter what, he’d never go back to Felicity. I believed him. I believed in him. In *us*. In all the other little promises he made.”

She gave a nod of understanding as she said, “And he broke your faith by so carelessly making those promises without being positive he could keep them.”

“You don’t toss around promises like that so offhandedly. You just don’t. I can’t be with someone whose word I can’t trust. And so I’m done with him. I’ll never, under any circumstances, take him back. I wouldn’t want to.”

Sabrina curled her arm around my shoulders. “He quite simply isn’t good enough for you. You’ll find someone who is, and then everything your exes did will cease to mean anything. I can say that from personal experience. Tamara made me realize all I’d missed in my past relationships—the hurt and regret just vanished like magic. Because if any of those relationships had worked out, I wouldn’t now have her.”

I sent her a playful snarl. “You two are so in love it’s sickening. Ollie and Marleigh are just as bad—I get cavities in my teeth just seeing how sweet they are together.”

“They are beyond cute. And now they’re having a baby! I’m so excited to be an aunt. Hey, just think, when they finally walk down an aisle, you and me will be sisters-in-law.” Sabrina dropped her arm to her side. “She’d better make me her maid of honor.”

“I think Harri will get that privilege—they’re super close. They have been since they were babies.”

“I don’t care. I’m selfish that way.”

I snorted. “Now ... let’s round up the rest of the team. We need to go get some sleep before we embark on clean-up.”

“Oh, I’m all for that.”

## Chapter Six

“Do you recognize him, Miss Davenport?”

Staring at the security monitor the next day, I felt my hands ball up. Oh, I recognized the little shit all right. “Yes.”

This was really not my ideal way to spend a Sunday afternoon. I’d planned to dedicate several hours to basically doing nothing once I’d finished clean-up duty. The call I’d received on my way home had changed that. And now here Sabrina and I stood in the security office of our work building, glaring at the paused clip of a familiar figure graffitiing my reserved parking space sign.

More specifically, he’d sprayed the word “WHORE” beneath my name in red paint.

“That fucker,” said Sabrina, her eyes blazing with fury behind her glasses.

“Want us to call the sheriff?” asked Wayan, one of the two security guards. He stood beside me, his face like thunder.

I forced my hands to unclench. “There’s really no point.”

“Why not?”

“Because he won’t do a damn thing about it. That kid right there is Blaise Buchanan, his great-nephew.”

“Shit,” muttered the second guard, Emile. Leaning back in his chair, he adjusted his dark ball cap. “Lowe’s a good man, but he’ll ... overlook things when it comes to family and friends.”

So I’d often heard. “I’m going to need a copy of this footage.”

Wayan hesitated, scratching at his short mop of thick, black hair. “If you give it to the cops, it’ll probably mysteriously go missing, if you get my meaning.”

“I know, I’m not planning to hand it over,” I told him. “There are other ways to deal with someone like Blaise. But I want to have this evidence in my possession just in case I need it one day.”

“It’s saved on the security system’s cloud,” said Wayan. “Want us to email it to you?”

I gave him a grateful smile. “Please. That would be great.” I rattled off my email address, which he quickly jotted down. “You know, I find the whole ‘whore’ part very original. But it still makes me want to slap him until he cries.”

Emile snickered. “It’d probably do him some good. Cocky son of a bitch didn’t even bother to cover his face.”

“Because he knew the cops wouldn’t hold him responsible,” Sabrina clipped. “Still, maybe we should still call them.”

“There’d be no sense in it,” I told her. “We’d be just wasting time out of our day.”

“She’s right,” Emile said to Sabrina. “I don’t know the boy personally, but I know from rumors I’ve heard that this isn’t the first time he’s vandalized property—Lowe always claims the boy’s got an alibi, he never charges him; he even once went as far as to try and pin it on another kid.”

Sabrina’s jaw tightened. “Blaise can’t be allowed to get away with this.”

“Granted,” I said, raising a placatory hand. “But reporting this to the police won’t get us anywhere.” My phone beeped.

“That’ll be from me, Miss Davenport; I just emailed the footage to you,” Wayan said to me.

Giving both males a semblance of a smile, I said, “Thanks, guys.”

Wayan’s smile was equally weak. “Sorry to have dragged you here on a weekend.”

“No, I’m glad you let me know,” I said. “You both take care.”

I guided a seething Sabrina out of the office and into the hall.

“I’m so mad I could *throttle* Blaise,” she said through her teeth. “What’s your plan?”

Shrugging, I began walking toward the exit. “I don’t really have one at the moment. I thought about emailing a copy of the clip to Grayden, or maybe to Felicity.”

Sabrina let out a *pfft*. “That wouldn’t amount to anything. Grayden won’t be of any use here—he’s never been able to get that stepson of his under control. And Felicity’s likely to pat him on the back, not reprimand him.” She paused. “Do you know what I think we should do?”

“What?”

“We should tell your dad.”

I threw her a sideways look of astonishment. “Not a good idea.”

“But he’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Yes, he will. But you know my dad. You know he’s uber protective and extremely ruthless. He ruins people who wrong him or his family. He digs up their darkest secrets and exposes them to the world. Blaise might be a prick, but he’s also just a kid.”

“A kid who could do with a good scare.”

“My dad would do more than just scare him. He knows that Blaise and Felicity have been pains in my ass, so he has no patience or tolerance for that family. He’d love an excuse to repay them for the upset they’ve caused. Blaise’s life as he knows it would be destroyed, and you can’t deny that that’s disproportionate to his crime.”

Sabrina gave a stiff shrug. “Injustices happen.”

“Forget it, we’re not seeking my dad’s help.” Reaching the exit, I pushed it open and stepped outside, squinting at the harsh brightness of the sun. It was hot out, but the cool breeze provided a much-needed reprieve.

Sabrina kept pace with me as we strode to the parking lot. “The vandalism was an act of retaliation for what happened at the wedding yesterday—”

“Yes,” I began, “and now that Blaise has gotten it over with, he’s unlikely to pull any more stunts.”

“But he might because, as we’ve already established, he’s a little fucker. And if he does decide to make a nuisance of himself again, he could do something worse next time, feeling all emboldened by having gotten away with *this*.”

“If that does happen, I’ll spill all to my dad. I will. Because Blaise will otherwise just keep on escalating. But let’s first give him a chance to back off. He might—you never know.”

“Well, I’m not hopeful.”

Arriving at my car, I glared down at the graffitied sign in front of it, feeling my blood boil all over again. “I hope he falls on Lego. While naked. And cold.”

“One can only dream.” She gestured at the sign. “Do you think Felicity put him up to it?”

“Possibly,” I replied. “It’s not like she’d have had to worry that he’d be arrested or anything. But it’s just as possible that he came up with the idea on his own; that he went through with it to please and impress her.”

“The two of them need their heads examined.” Sabrina shoved a hand through her loose curls. “I can’t tell you how pissed I am about this.”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m not going to let this crap ruin it. I wouldn’t give Blaise that satisfaction.” Or, at least, I didn’t *want* to. But I suspected the chances were low that I would manage to completely put this out of my mind.

“On another note, are you looking forward to your birthday tomorrow?”

“For what reason? I stopped getting excited about them after I turned twenty-two. I am looking forward to the BBQ, though. You and Tamara are still coming, right?”

“You say that like you have any chance of keeping us away. Where there’s free food and free wine, we’ll be there. We can bring Aleksei, if you want,” she said, a twinkle in her eye.

“Don’t play cupid. Just don’t.” Like I’d dally with a man who was practically her brother-in-law anyway.

“I won’t. But I will tease you. It brings me peace.”

“Whatever.” I gave her a gentle shove. “Go home, I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll bring super strong bleach.” She flicked a meaningful look at the graffitied sign. “Scrubbing that paint off won’t be easy.”



A couple of hours later, I lay back on the sun lounger, sighing as the towel—warm from the heat—met my wet skin. “This is everything I didn’t realize I needed,” I said, sliding my sunglasses further up the bridge of my nose.

“Told you it’d be good for you,” said Alicia from the neighboring lounger.

I’d originally intended to chill in my living room and read, but she’d talked me into accompanying her to one of Oakengrove’s outdoor pools. So there we both were, clad in bikinis, an umbrella hovering over our beds and placing us in shadow. It didn’t much spare us from the thick summer heat, though.

Palm trees bordered the entire area, providing an element of privacy. Rows of towel-covered loungers circled the sizeable pool. There were also bathrooms, lockers, and a concession stand.

Plenty of people were around, but not so many that it felt crowded. Most were in the pool, swimming or fooling around. Others sat at its edges, relaxed on loungers, or ate food

in the sitting area. Kids wearing colorful water-wings toddled about, adults walking behind them to supervise.

I closed my eyes, my fingers tapping out the rhythm of the music playing over the loudspeaker. The cool breeze carried snatches of muffled conversation, the laughs and shrieks of the kids, the rustles of leaves, the splashing of water, and the scents of chlorine and concession food.

Hearing Alicia curse, I looked to see she was squirming, her hand beneath her butt. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’ve got a wedgie.”

I snickered and snatched my bottle of water from the small table between our beds.

“You know, I really like it here.”

“The pool?”

“Oakengrove. It’s peaceful. I’m glad I took you up on your offer to stay here awhile.”

“So am I.” I unscrewed the cap from my bottle and then knocked back some water. “I haven’t seen you much over the past two years.”

Her lips flattening, she looked down at her lap. “I should have visited more. But it seemed like whenever I made plans to fly over, something would ‘crop up’ with Dario. He didn’t like coming to Redwater, but he didn’t like *me* coming here without him either.”

I’d sensed as much. “What was his problem with our family?”

“He said that you all made him feel ‘judged’ and that you looked down on him just because he isn’t wealthy—which, of course, was pure bullshit. He *knew* it was bullshit. The reason he didn’t want to visit was he could sense that you, Ollie, and Dad didn’t like him. Dario needs to feel adored and respected.” She rolled her eyes.

“I *wanted* to like him. And I did try pretending that I did. I wasn’t very good at it. You have Mom’s poker face. I



don't.”

Alicia flicked out a hand. “Let’s talk about something else. *Anything* else. Literally anything.”

“Fine. But it’ll do you good to get it all out of your system, you know. I’m here whenever you’re ready to talk about it.”

“I know. I adore you for ...” Grabbing her sunglasses, she raised them slightly. “Whoa, hot guy alert. *Numerous* hot guys, in fact. One of which is Drey Mercier.”

Ah, so it was. You couldn’t miss him, really. Tall and broad, he had the imposing build of a football player. “He has buddies who live here, so he shows up often.”

Others around the pool quickly noticed and recognized the pro athlete easily. It made me smile how so many young women swiftly “readied” themselves—whipping off goggles, removing floppy hats, yanking out nose plugs, tugging off bathing caps, or adjusting their swimsuits. One abruptly tossed an inflatable ball aside, as if not wanting to be seen as childish for playing with it—said ball bounced off the head of her friend, who cursed loud.

“You know,” began Alicia, “he isn’t the type I go for, but I can see why Harri has a little crush on him. He’s nice to look at.”

Indeed. “Blake Mercier and his wife sure do make pretty boys.”

“Don’t they have a daughter, too?”

“Yes. Raven. She’s attends our local college.” I watched as several women began gravitating toward Drey, doing their best to make him notice them.

“Is he always surrounded like that?” asked Alicia.

I nodded. “Whenever he comes here, yes. He’s always friendly and polite, but he bats away most of the attention. I guess we can’t blame them for drooling. As you admitted, he’s nice to look at.”

“But far too old for Harri.”

I smiled. “She’s not a baby anymore.”

“She’ll always be a baby to me,” Alicia maintained, eyeing her wrinkly fingertips.

“Well, that ‘baby’ runs a successful business and is more emotionally mature than some adults twice her age.” I paused as the lifeguard’s whistle split the air. “She’s also supremely confident that she’ll be titled ‘Favorite Aunt’ by Marleigh and Ollie’s baby.”

Alicia let out a *pfft* sound. “Not a chance. That’ll be me.” Rubbing at her arm, she frowned. “I need more sunscreen, but I want to eat before I do anything else. The smell of junk food is calling my name. Nachos and fries work for you?”

“Any day of the week,” I replied. “And can you get me another bottle of water, please?”

“No problem.” She pulled some cash out of the purse she’d placed beneath her lounge, slipped on her flip-flops, and then stood. “I’ll be back in a sec.” With that, she left, the *slap* of her sandals beating at the ground.

An itch coming to life on my shoulder, I lightly scratched at it, wincing at the resulting prickly sting. *Sunburn*. Awesome. As was the smudge on my sunglasses. Tugging them off, I used the towel beneath me to wipe the lenses.

A cooling breeze swept over my skin and caused the umbrella to flap ... just as a shadow fell over me. Looking up, I went still. Because beside my bed was none other than Dax.

My heartbeat did a predictable little stutter as a frisson of sexual excitement arrowed through me. It was instant. Intense. Uncontrollable.

“Hello, Addison,” he said, his beautiful eyes hidden by sunglasses.

“Dax, hi.” Ignoring the rising tension, I cleared my throat. “I’m surprised to see you here. Never seen you hang by the pool before.”

Planting his feet, he twisted his mouth. “Caelan said he spoke to you a few days ago. He told me you seemed upset about something.”

I wasn’t touching that subject. “Did he also tell you he welcomed me to the family?”

Dax’s lips hiked up. “He thinks you’d make a good addition to it.”

The spot between my shoulder blades itched as a sense of discomfort crept up on me. It was a combination of things—that so much of my body was exposed, that he towered over me, that I couldn’t see his eyes, that I wore no makeup, that my damp hair was in a messy bun, that *he* looked like he’d just stepped off an ad for sexiest business moguls.

“Have you made a decision yet?” he asked.

I swallowed, shoving my glasses back on. “Not yet.”

“You only have two days left.”

“I know.” I was vividly conscious of it. “Part of me still can’t believe you want me to keep my word on this.”

“You should know better than to make a pact lightly.” He cocked his head. “What’s currently in the way of you going through with it? Tell me.”

“Why? So you can blow holes in my reservations?”

“Yes.”

I snorted.

“You’d never be in any danger with me, if that’s a worry for you. I may not have a lot of respect for the system, but I don’t dabble in anything dark or ugly.”

He didn’t need to assure me of that. I was very aware he had a code, nontypical as it might be, of sorts. “If I thought differently, I wouldn’t even consider marrying you.”

He hummed, his head moving in an excrementally slow movement that made me tense. The shit was totally eye-banging me.

Fuck, if my nipples hardened, I was gonna *murder* them. “Stop it,” I said.

“What?” he asked in a lazy drawl.

“You know what.”

“Do you remember that night I fucked you in a hot tub?”

A memory of me sitting on the edge of the tub, my limbs wrapped around Dax as he took me slow and hard, surged to the forefront of my mind. I felt my face flush.

“You wore a similar bikini then.”

Uncaring that it would show how unnerved I felt having him loom over me, I swung my legs off the lounge and then stood. “Did I?” I asked airily, turning my head slightly as I flicked a look at my lacy beach wrap.

“There’s little sense in covering up.” He whipped off his glasses, and I almost sucked in a breath. There was a truckload of banked heat in his gaze. It made my skin prickle and my thighs clench. It also caused the tension to kick up.

“I’ve seen you in less,” he went on, his voice dropping an octave. “In fact, I’ve seen every inch of you. Touched every inch. Tasted every inch.”

Cursing my body for turning into a hot mess, I narrowed my eyes. “You’re an ass. You know that, right?”

“I do.” His gaze intent on me, he inched closer, sending a wave of his dark cologne brushing over my senses and making my gut tighten. Something dark moved behind his eyes as they raked over my face. “Do you still care for him? Is that why you’re hesitant to honor the pact?”

I felt my brow furrow. “Care for who?”

“Grayden.”

I almost reared back. “No.”

He gently slipped off my glasses. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely certain,” I firmly stated.

His eyes delved into mine, searching, probing, seeing everything. “Good.”

The continuous slap of flip-flops made me look to see my sister approaching, a tray in hand. She glanced from me to him, a default smile on her face, a pinch of hesitance in her eyes.

“Alicia, I’m sure you remember Dax,” I said.

“It’s good to see you,” she told him.

“Likewise,” he smoothly responded.

I was glad he didn’t do as most guys did and flash her a sexy smile, because I would have later regretted having subsequently kicked him in the junk. Probably.

He resettled his attention on me and handed me back my sunglasses. “Two days, Addison. We’ll talk again then.”

“Living for it,” I quipped.

His lips bowed, and he then stalked toward where his youngest brother stood. It took everything I had not to watch that tight ass as he left.

Alicia set the tray on the end of my lounge and then perched her butt on the edge of her own. “I take it he was wondering if you’ve made up your mind yet. Although that doesn’t explain why your cheeks are all red.”

Having placed my glasses on the small table, I sat back down, crossed my legs lotus-style, and then plucked a box of nachos from the tray. “He used his sex voice on me.”

Her lips twitched into a smile. “Mystery solved.”

Chewing on my nacho, I fought the urge to glance in his direction. I wouldn’t look. I wouldn’t.

“Why didn’t you just tell him that you’ve already decided what you’re going to do?”

“Because I haven’t decided.”

“Liar. We both know you’re going to go ahead with it. You’re just struggling to admit it to yourself. You feel like you

*shouldn't* want to do it, and you're letting that hold you back. Fuck what you should and shouldn't do."

"Dax said something similar," I muttered.

"Great minds think alike." Alicia bit into one of her fries. "Do what you've always done and go after what you want. Or let me have him."

Telling myself that my belly did *not* do a nauseating little roll, I grabbed my fresh bottle of water and opened it. "He's likely got a backup woman in mind," I grumbled, not sure I wanted to know who it was. "He's a guy who always has his bases covered."

"Maybe. But he would obviously rather have you or he wouldn't have suggested marriage to you—pact or no pact." She ate another fry. "Be honest, you're going to do it, aren't you?"

I swallowed a mouthful of water. "Probably."

She grinned. "And I get to keep the house, right?"

"You get that opportunistic streak from Dad, you know."

"I know. It's a flaw, but it works for me, Mrs. Mercier."

Shooting her a dark look, I set the bottle on the table. "Don't do that."

"You'll go by that title soon. Might as well get used to it. It suits you."

I waved a hand. "Whatever. Eat your fries."

"Sure thing, Mrs. Mercier."

"I said, *don't*."

## Chapter Seven

Having been told that I'd find Sabrina in the break room, I walked into said room the next morning. The smells of coffee, toast, and citrus-scented cleaner greeted me.

It was a typical break room. Lockers lined the cream walls near the vending machine. Four plastic lemon chairs gathered around each of the three circular white tables. The contemporary kitchenette featured all the necessary appliances.

Seeing that no others were inside, I asked, "What's the fastest we've ever put together a wedding?"

Pressing buttons on the coffee machine, she slid me a quick glance. "Hmm, I don't know, birthday girl. Probably a week, maybe less. We have a potential client who's in a rush to get married, I take it."

I propped my hip against the black, granite countertop. "He wants the ceremony done asap."

As the machine in front of her whirred to life, she asked, "Anyone I know?"

"Yes. It's Dax Mercier."

She whirled to face me so fast it was a wonder she didn't stagger and fall. Her expression turning all soft, she rested a hand on my shoulder. "Aw, sweetie. I'm guessing that can't be the easiest thing to hear. I mean, I know you're not holding a candle for him, but your hormones must be devastated. Who's the bride? Anyone we know?"

I scratched at my neck. "It's me."

"What's that now?"

"It's me. I'm the bride."

She gawked at me, her hand sliding off my shoulder as her arm flopped to her side. "He proposed to you?"

“Don’t think it was a romantic proposal,” I cautioned. “We made a dumb pact when we were mid-fling that we’d marry if both unattached when I hit thirty.”

Her brows met. “How come you never said anything about it to me?”

“I wasn’t being serious. I didn’t think he was either.”

Her eyes narrowing in suspicion, she folded her arms. “He asked this of you when you went to his office last week, didn’t he? That’s why you were acting weird.”

I braced one hand on the counter, careful not to knock over the box of teabags. “Yes.”

“And you said nothing to me *why*?”

“I hadn’t decided whether I’d go through with it at that point. I told him I needed time to think. He said he’d give me a week. I would have run it by you if I’d thought you’d contribute objective pros and cons. But all you would have done is urge me to go through with it because that’s what *you’d* have done in my shoes.”

“Well, we only live this life once. We might as well pounce on every opportunity given.”

I shot her a meaningful look. “See?”

She huffed. “Did you tell anyone else?”

“Only Alicia and Brooks. I knew they’d keep it to themselves.”

“I’m your BFF, but I’m the third to know?” Looking like she’d trapped a wasp in her mouth, she shook her head hard.

“I needed to talk to someone who’d help me work out what was the best thing for me to do, *not* urge me to push aside my hesitations. But I’m telling you now.” I straightened. “Not even Dax knows I’m going to marry him yet. You’re learning of it before him.”

That seemed to placate her *ever* so slightly. “You’re really going to do this?”



“I might not have if he hadn’t made such a compelling argument as to why I should. But I’ve done a lot of thinking and, well, it boils down to this: Like him, I don’t think I’ll find what I once lost. If that is the case, it means I’ll be ‘settling’ when I choose who to build a life with anyway, so is it worth waiting for this person to appear in my life? Especially when there’s a possibility I might not find them until it’s too late for me to have children?”

“When you put it that way, I guess not.”

“In Dax, I won’t have a husband who loves me. But I’ll be able to count on him in other ways. We have a connection of sorts—it’s only sexual, sure, but maybe we can build on that. Also, we both want the same things, and I know he won’t be a deadbeat dad. And, well, what’s the worst that could happen if we went through with it and it didn’t work out? We’d later get divorced.” That was it. People “in love” did that, too, so ...

A reluctant smile pulled at one corner of her mouth. “I can see that you’ve really thought this through. If it’s truly what you want, I’m behind you. But let’s be honest ... Ollie and your parents won’t be happy about it.”

“No, they won’t,” I agreed. “I’m planning to announce it at my birthday barbecue later.” My parents were holding it at their home. “I have no doubt I’ll receive negative reactions from several corners. But I have Alicia’s support, and now yours. I think Harri will back me, though she might be hesitant at first.”

“Tamara will be behind you, too. Purely because I am. As for Marleigh and my parents? I can’t be sure how they’ll react.”

“I’m not expecting everyone to be all joyful about it. I get why they won’t be. But I’m not going to change my mind—I just need them to respect that and let the situation be.” I’d do the same for them, so it was only fair.

“When are you going to tell Dax that you’ve reached a decision?”

“Tomorrow. He said he’d come see me then.” I was a little nervous about it, despite being sure of my decision. Or maybe it was the mere thought of being in his general proximity that made my system feel unsettled.

“If you tell your family first, you run the risk of them contacting him before you have a chance to give him your answer,” she warned.

“I’m going to make them first promise not to share my news with anyone else.”

“You think that will really stop your dad from contacting Dax to scare him off if it’s what he wants to do?” asked Sabrina, flicking up a doubtful brow.

“Don’t worry, I’ll handle my dad. He’ll be all disapproving, but he won’t interfere once I put things in a certain light.” He’d otherwise be a hypocritical bastard.

She squinted. “You know something I don’t.”

“I do.” And he had no idea I was aware of it.

“Are you going to blackmail him?”

I frowned. “What? No. Do you really think I’d do that?”

She gave an innocent shrug. “You Davenports can be ruthless.”

The door behind me swung open as a member of our team breezed inside, speaking into his phone. He briefly raised his eyebrows at us and then made a beeline for the corkboard across the room.

Sabrina leaned into me. “By the way,” she began in a whisper, “I’m telling you now, you’d better make me maid of honor.”

She’d said the same to Marleigh. “Are you going to insist that everybody around you does this?” I asked, my voice just as low.

“Yes. Tamara isn’t keen on marriage, so this is the closest I’ll get to walking down an aisle in a pretty dress. You

will not take that from me.”

I flapped my arms a little. “Why is everyone trying to benefit from my wedding?”

“It’s your own fault for surrounding yourself with selfish people, so don’t expect any sympathy from me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever. Now let’s get to work.”



Not lacking in either space or style, my parents’ mansion was situated on a sprawling piece of land. It had rooms upon rooms, which had made our childhood games of hide-and-seek interesting. My favorite room was, without a doubt, the grand library. But the outdoor setup sure was sweet, and not merely because of the pool, hot tub, and cabanas.

All of us were gathered around the patio as we waited for the burgers and hot dogs to be ready. Dane and Ollie stood at the barbecue with Sabrina’s parents, Hanna and Kyle. I had no idea what they were talking about, since I sat on one of the long, rattan sofas with Alicia, Sabrina, Harri, and my mom Vienna.

Both Tamara and Marleigh had each claimed a nearby chair. My maternal grandfather, Simon, sat on another sofa with my mom’s foster parents, Melinda and Wyatt—all three had essentially banded together to raise Vienna.

The sounds of chatter, meat sizzling, and the crackling of the firepit laced the evening air, along with the scents of charred food, woodsmoke, and chlorine.

I hadn’t yet mentioned my upcoming marriage. I didn’t want to speak of it until my grandfather was gone. Though Simon had Dissociative Identity Disorder, he wasn’t fragile by any means. Still, he wouldn’t deal well with all kinds of shouting—and there’d for sure be shouting once Ollie and my dad heard my news.

So I'd kept quiet about it, gratefully accepted my gifts and cards, and was now raring to eat. I was also looking forward to getting a slice of my birthday cake—my mom had bought it for me and *damn* it looked freaking delicious, all white frosting and edible roses and swirly thick borders.

Beside me, Alicia growled, snapping me out of my reverie. "God, Sabrina, why do you insist on playing cupid?"

"If I can't match Aleksei up with Addie, it's going to have to be you," Sabrina told her from further along the sofa.

"Why does it have to be any of us?" questioned Alicia.

Sabrina pursed her lips. "I suppose I could try matching him with Harri."

"He's too old for her."

Sat in between the two women, Harri snorted. "Do you even know how old he is?"

Alicia flicked a hand. "Let's talk about something other than him."

Sabrina looked as though she might protest, but then her eyes sharpened on Alicia. "We could finally talk about why you walked away from your life in New York."

"Or we could chat about how your girlfriend looks so very much like a retired Russian porn star."

Sabrina fired her an exasperated look. "I wish you'd stop saying that."

"It's true," insisted Alicia. "Are you sure Tamara doesn't have such an interesting background?"

"Yes, I am. Now, back to the subject of Aleksei, one date couldn't hurt." Sabrina looked at me. "Right, Addie?"

I shrugged. "I guess not. He is hot, if that helps," I told Alicia.

Apparently, it didn't help, because she shot both me and Sabrina a foul look. "How about you two focus on your own lives instead of mine?"

“We can do both,” I told her, stifling a smile.

Sabrina gave a sharp nod. “We’re awesome multitaskers, and we have your best interests at heart. Now stop being difficult and let us rule your life.”

Alicia rolled her eyes with a snort. “I’m thinking you two have *way* too much time on your hands.”

Sat on my other side, my mom leaned into me. “You doing okay?”

I smiled at her. “Of course.”

Vienna tilted her head, studying me closely. “You’ve been quieter than usual.”

Well, I’d been rehearsing in my head exactly how I’d break my news, anticipating the reactions of each person. Also ... “It hit me that I’m halfway to sixty.”

She chuckled. “Did Ashley call you?” she asked, referring to a family friend who had moved to Oregon with her husband to be near their youngest son and his family. Their eldest had soon after moved to Vegas.

“She did,” I replied. “And she wished me a very happy birthday. It was an amusing call, since she had to repeatedly pause to tell one of her grandkids to stop yelling at the other. You’ll be a grandmother soon, too. Looking forward to it?”

Vienna beamed. “Can’t wait. You looking forward to being an aunt?”

“Of course.” Catching the worried glint in her eyes, I assured her, “I’m thrilled for them, really.”

“I didn’t think you wouldn’t be,” she firmly stated. “I just worry that it’s hard for you.”

“Well, it isn’t.”

Just then, Tamara planted herself on Vienna’s other side. “What are we talking about?” Though she’d lived in the US since she was a child, she spoke Russian at home throughout her childhood and so had a slight accent that I happened to adore.

“Your shoes,” I lied. “We want them.”

Tamara sniffed. “That is tough.”

“You have more shoes than I do, and that’s saying something.”

Vienna threw me a frown. “No one has more shoes than you do, Addie.”

Tamara gave a curt nod. “She is right. I have seen your closet. It looks like a small shoe store.”

I snickered. “How’s Aleksei?”

The beautiful brunette inched up her chin. “I don’t know. Don’t care.”

Vienna’s mouth curved. “You love your brother really.”

“Only sometimes,” said Tamara. “Today is not one of those times.”

“Burgers are ready!” Ollie announced.

I helped my mom plate up food for Simon, Melinda, and Wyatt before going to grab my own food.

Hanna tossed me a smile. “We made sure to put aside burgers and hot dogs for the birthday girl before they could be demolished.”

My lips curled. “Thank you, Hanna. I’d plant a kiss on your cheek, but you have mustard on it.”

A frown fell over her face, and she began rubbing at the blob of mustard ... which only succeeded in spreading it along the side of her face. Rolling his eyes, Kyle used a napkin to wipe it off.

We all ate, drank, and gravitated from seat to seat as we joined conversation after conversation. Once everyone was finished their food, I grabbed a garbage bag and started collecting the trash.

Seeing that, Simon frowned at me. “This little gathering is for you. You should be sitting down and relaxing.”

“She can’t help herself,” Melinda told him with a fond smile. “She’s used to being the one cleaning up after gatherings—it’s part of her job.”

“Which is yet another reason why she shouldn’t be on clean-up duty now,” said Simon before sliding his gaze back to me. “Enjoy the break from it, sweetheart.”

Instead, I took his empty plate and trashed it. “I’m almost done.”

Wyatt sighed. “Sit down, woman.”

I shot up a brow. “I don’t see any of you looking to take over. Or am I wrong?”

The two men spluttered while Melinda averted her gaze.

“Yeah, figured you wouldn’t offer,” I said, barely stopping my lips from quirking.

The night soon began to darken, which was when people eventually began to trickle out. Simon, Melinda, and Wyatt left first—apparently, they’d all arrived in the same car. Hanna and Kyle left shortly after. It was when I heard Ollie talking about heading home with Marleigh that I decided it was time to make my little announcement.

I cleared my throat and spoke loud enough to be heard over the chatter: “I have some news to share.” Immediately, the talk died down and everyone’s attention settled on me. “But first, I need you all to promise that you won’t repeat any of what is said here to anyone else. And I mean, *anyone*.”

Aside for Sabrina and Alicia—who sat either side of me on a sofa, pillars of support—people exchanged looks that were either uneasy, confused, or a combination of the two. Each person eventually gave me their word, though my dad and Ollie dragged their heels on that.

I rested my clasped hands on my lap. Seeing no need to beat around the bush, I got straight to the point. “Dax Mercier proposed to me. I said yes.”

Silence reigned. Eyes bulged. Jaws went slack. Backs straightened.

“Since when have you two been an item?” asked Vienna, her voice carefully even. “And why did you keep it from us?”

“We’re not an item,” I said. “We’re just—”

“Oh my God, are you pregnant?” Harri burst out.

*I wish.* “No. Dax and I agreed to a fallback marriage pact years ago and, well, the time’s come for us to honor it.”

There seemed to be a collective intake of breath, and then everyone other than Alicia and Sabrina were speaking at once. Well, they were more *ranting* than anything else—particularly when it came to Ollie and Dane, who both shot to their feet.

I held up a hand, palm out, and said calmly, “I can only answer one question at a time.”

“Why the hell would you agree to something like this?” my dad demanded, his expression hard, his body rigid.

“It’s insane,” Ollie added, his cheeks a worrying shade of red.

“I’m not getting any younger,” I began, “my biological clock is ticking—”

“That’s no reason to marry some random guy,” Ollie insisted, his face scrunching up.

“Dax isn’t a random person. He’s someone I know. Someone I’m comfortable with.” I looked at my dad. “*You* know him as well. You even like him.”

Dane snorted, his head rearing back. “Not now I don’t. He wants my daughter to marry him as part of a *pact*. He’s asking you to throw away any chance you have of finding something more, and he clearly doesn’t give a shit what that means for you.”

Alicia lifted both hands. “I think we should all just take a breath.”



“Take a breath?” echoed Ollie, disbelieving. “Are you even hearing what Addie’s saying? Wait, neither of you two look surprised,” he commented, glancing from her to Sabrina. “You knew?”

Not wanting him to verbally lay into them, I quickly cut in, “Alicia’s right, taking a breath would be helpful. There’s no need to rant at me.”

He threw me an incredulous glance. “No need? Seriously? I feel like I don’t know you right now. Like your IQ dropped overnight.”

Bristling, I raised a warning brow. “Careful, Ollie.”

Vienna slid forward in her seat. “What he *means* to say is that he’s a little too shocked by your news to be calm right now. I’m sure you’ll admit that you wouldn’t be cool and composed if either Alicia or Harri had made this announcement.”

“Probably not,” I readily admitted. “But I’d hear them out and try to understand why they’d reached their decision, not vilify them for it or act like they’re stupid.”

My mom gave me an appeasing look. “No one thinks you’re stupid, Addie. You’ve always made good, solid decisions. We’re all simply struggling to understand what made you reach this one.”

“Yeah, I don’t get it,” said Harri from her spot beside Marleigh, her voice not confrontational, merely baffled. “You’ve always been so determined to find what Mom and Dad have.”

“Which is not this,” Dane practically bit out. “Far from it. I can’t understand why you would even entertain this idea.” His eyes narrowed. “Is he blackmailing you?”

I almost rolled my eyes. “Of course not. He asked. I promised to consider it. Which I did. And this is the choice I subsequently made.”

“I get that you’re hurting over what Grayden did,” Marleigh interrupted. “But this is a bit of an extreme way to respond to it.”

I frowned. “This has nothing to do with Grayden.”

Marleigh gave me a skeptical look. “You’re sure of that? Because it sounds like you’ve taken Dax up on his offer as a fuck you to Grayden.”

I felt my face harden. “You really think I’d do something like that?” I asked, my voice flat. “That that’s the kind of person I am?”

Marleigh winced. “I don’t mean to insinuate that you’re cruel or spiteful—”

“But that’s what you’re doing. Thanks a bunch.”

“She didn’t mean it that way,” Ollie told me, putting a protective hand on her shoulder. “She’s just worried that you’re saying yes for the wrong reason. I happen to agree with her theory. It makes the most sense.”

Sabrina sighed at him. “If you’d only listen to what Addie has to say instead of leaping on her, you’d understand why you’re incorrect.”

“How can you *not* be against this?” he demanded of her, plopping his fists on his narrow hips. “Wait, don’t answer that. I forgot who I was talking to.”

Tamara’s back snapped straight. “It is not wrong that she likes to take risks in life, Ollie,” she said, sitting on Sabrina’s other side. “Do not insult her because you are angry at something else.”

“Really, everyone *needs to take a breath*,” Alicia again declared.

Dane began pacing. “Bottom line, Addie, you deserve better than an empty marriage. Surely you want more for yourself.”

“Unless you’re going to tell us that you and Dax have feelings for each other?” Vienna probed. “That would make it different.”

I could point out he and I had a connection based on sexual chemistry, but I didn’t really want to talk about that *to my parents*. “Such feelings might grow,” I said, though I

figured the best we could really hope for was that we'd develop the warm companionship I spoke of with Brooks.

A muscle in Dane's cheek ticked. "They also might *not*."

Very true, but I wouldn't concede that out loud. "Look, I didn't decide this on a whim. I took an entire week to think about it. To look at it from every angle. There are more pros to this than cons."

Dane's brow knitted as he halted abruptly. "How can there possibly be pros to this? Why marry someone you don't love?"

I glanced from him to Vienna as I said, "People do that sometimes, you know. They marry for other reasons, and they probably don't expect feelings to develop. They likely think it will end in divorce—that may even be part of their agreement when they marry. But it turns out they're wrong, and something good comes of that marriage. Those people would be hypocritical to judge me for this, wouldn't they?"

My parents subtly exchanged a wary look.

I'd once overheard them talking about how their marriage had initially been one of convenience. Dane had needed to marry someone in order to have access to his trust fund and, since Vienna had owed him a favor, he'd requested that she help him. I hadn't mentioned it to anybody else, though. Not even my siblings.

I skimmed my gaze over everyone. "I realize this isn't the traditional reason to stand before a priest. But I'm tired of waiting for the things I want from life to happen—I don't have to elaborate on what those are. This could all go tits-up and end up in divorce, sure. But any marriage can."

"You'd have less chance of it happening if you and Dax were marrying for the right reason," clipped Ollie, sinking onto the cushion beside his fiancée.

I shrugged. "Probably. But I'm still going to take that chance."

Marleigh shot me a pleading look. "Addie—"

“No,” I snapped, my eyes darting from her to Ollie. “It’s easy for you two to sit there and lecture me on this. You have been together since you were teenagers. You’ve always known that you’d one day get to the point you’re at now. You haven’t spent years searching for it, hoping for it, failing over and over to make it happen. You didn’t *almost* make it happen only to then unfairly lose it.”

Ollie rubbed at the corner of his eye. “If this is about Lake—”

“It’s about what I feel is best for me.” Again, I glanced at everyone. “*None* of you can possibly know what choice you’d make in my shoes, because you’ve never walked in them, so those of you lecturing me need to dismount your high fucking horses.”

Sighing, Ollie cut his gaze to Alicia. “Don’t you have anything to say about this? She wants to *marry* this guy. And don’t get me wrong, I respect Dax. But do you really think he’d be good for her?”

Idly stroking her fingers down one palm, Alicia pursed her lips. “Do you remember how the son of one of Dad’s colleagues used to get all up in my space at parties? You said he’d make a good partner for me; that I should give him a chance. I took your advice, and I quickly realized he was using me to get to Dad.”

Ollie awkwardly plucked at his collar.

Alicia placed her hands on her thighs. “Both Addie and Harri have had to deal with that kind of thing as well. You never did, because you’ve always had Marleigh. You can’t know how refreshing it is to be around someone who doesn’t need or want anything from you; who you can be sure is all about *you*. Dax might not love Addie, but he wants her *for her*. And I believe he’d treat her well, just as he did years ago.”

Appearing somewhat irritated that she’d made valid points, Ollie turned to Harri. “What’s your opinion on this?”

Harri tucked her joined hands between her thighs. “I know you’re hoping I’ll back you up, but I agree with Alicia.

Plus, as Mom said, Addie's always made good, solid decisions. If she thinks this is the best thing for her, who are we to tell her differently?"

"Couldn't have worded it all better myself," said Sabrina.

Tamara nodded. "I, too, am in agreement with Harri."

Alicia dipped her chin. "As am I."

Everyone else simply stared at me.

I inwardly sighed. "I'm not asking you all to approve. I'm not asking that you be happy for me. But I am asking that you don't interfere."

"Even if we worry that this is something you might later regret?" asked Dane, his tone clipped.

"Even then," I replied. "You get to feel how you feel but, like it or not, it's not *your* feelings or worries or opinions that are most relevant here. This is *my* life. I wouldn't tell any of you how to live yours, and you don't get to tell me how to live mine. You definitely don't get to shout at me."

Dane rubbed his nape. "We shouldn't have gone on the attack just now," he relented.

Vienna nodded. "You caught us by surprise."

I sniffed. "Well, you'll just need to get over it, won't you?"

Ollie let out a half-hearted chuckle. "You're a hard-ass, Addie."

Jutting out my chin, I went on, "I've made my decision—like it or don't. But do not bother trying to make me go back on it. No amount of objections will do you any good."

"Yeah, I see that," Dane grumbled.

Vienna slid him a dirty look. "She gets it from you."

He frowned at her. "You're just as stubborn—don't blame me."

I cut in, “Very soon, I’m going to be standing at an altar beside Dax. You can all be there for that, or you can miss it to make a statement of disapproval. Whatever. But the wedding will go ahead whether you’re there or not. You’ll achieve one thing only if you miss it—you’ll hurt me.”

Ollie’s shoulders sagged as a pained look crossed his face. “You’re so good at emotional blackmail.”

Dane threw Vienna a quick look. “She gets that from you.”

“I will be at the ceremony,” Harri piped up. “Nothing could keep me away. Though I expect to be made a bridesmaid—just making that clear.”

Alicia smiled. “I told her the same thing.”

“I’m her maid of honor,” declared Sabrina, raising her hand proudly ... like I’d *asked* her.

“Self-proclaimed maid of honor,” I muttered, earning myself a haughty sideways glance from her.

Silence fell for long seconds, but then Vienna blew out a long breath and said, “I might not fully understand why you’re going down this road, Addie, but I’d never miss your wedding day. Neither will your dad. Will you?”

“No,” Dane grunted. “But I’ll be walking you down the aisle under protest.”

“Understood.” I looked from Ollie to Marleigh. “Well?”

They exchanged a resigned look.

“We’ll of course be there,” Ollie told me.

Marleigh nodded. “Please don’t ask me to be a bridesmaid, though—I don’t look good in dresses.”

“You really don’t,” agreed Sabrina. “But Ollie does.”

His eyes went wide. “What?”

“I’ll never forget how cute you looked in the little dress me and Addie put you in when you were a toddler,”

Sabrina teased ... leading to a mini argument.

As the voices went up in volume, Alicia leaned into me and quietly said, "That went better than I thought it would."

"Oh, don't think they've all resigned themselves to this," I told her, my voice equally quiet. "Mom, Dad, and Ollie will do their best to change my mind between now and the wedding."

Alicia's brow creased. "I'd like to be able to contest that, but I can't. They're going to be a problem."

"Yup. They just won't bother yelling again, because they know it won't get them anywhere. They'll try other tactics."

None would work, though. And when they finally realized that, they might well change their minds about attending the ceremony. I supposed that time would tell.

## Chapter Eight

Driving down my road the following day after a grocery grab, I slowed as I approached my house. The scene up ahead made me frown. Even with the large crowd that had gathered, I could see a silver convertible smushed up against a lamppost, which now stood at a wonky angle. Sat on a nearby bench, a young man pale as death held a white, bloodstained cloth to his head.

Riding shotgun beside me, Alicia strained to get a better look. “Doesn’t seem that anyone was hurt, thank God. What do you think the odds are that Thaddeus is completely sober right now?”

“Not high,” I replied, pulling into our driveway. Our twenty-one-year old neighbor was spoiled rotten and impossibly reckless. He’d been pulled over by the cops in the past for driving while drunk. He was never held accountable due to his parents being close friends with the sheriff, and that was part of the problem—he had no incentive to change his behavior.

He was such an idiot at times that he’d actually once heckled my mom while blitzed as he’d seen her exit my home. She’d only snorted at him.

Thinking of Vienna made me remember the call I’d received from her earlier ...

*“How the hell did you know that me and your dad didn’t marry for, shall we say, the typical reason?”* she’d asked.

*“I overheard you both once talking about it,”* I’d replied.

*“And you kept the information to yourself until the time you most needed to use it. God, you are your father’s daughter through and through.”*

She’d then gone on to try to chip away at my resolve to marry Dax, feeling certain I’d otherwise regret it. Keeping her



tone soft and poignant, she'd tossed a bunch of questions at me:

*“Won't you feel sad standing at that altar when you realize how non-special that moment is to you?”*

*“Wouldn't you rather plan a wedding you're elated to be throwing rather than one that's a necessity?”*

*“Do you really want to raise children in a home where their parents feel nothing for each other?”*

*“You won't get the proposal you dreamed of, Addie. You won't experience that moment where the man you love gets down on one knee and asks you to spend your life with him. Won't you lament that at some point?”*

There were more questions where those came from.

I hadn't addressed any of them. I'd merely repeatedly stated that my mind was made up. Eventually, she'd let it go. But I didn't for a moment believe she wouldn't give it another shot.

Snapping me out of my memories, Alicia unclipped her seatbelt and said, “I wonder if anyone has bothered calling the cops to report Thaddeus' stunt.”

“I doubt it. They'll know the sheriff won't do anything about it.” I exited the car and did a long stretch.

“One thing's for sure,” began my sister, meeting my eyes over the hood of the car, “Dax won't take too kindly to the damage here. Oakengrove is his now.”

My stomach did an annoying somersault at the sound of Dax's name. He'd emailed me earlier to say he'd be at my house sometime within the next hour or so.

“Maybe he can get through to Thaddeus,” added Alicia as we made our way to the rear of the vehicle.

Using my key fob, I opened the trunk. “Maybe.” But I wasn't hopeful.

Thaddeus was too used to people bailing him out of trouble. I knew from what I'd seen in Blaise and others like

him that a lifetime of not facing consequences could erode a person's moral base. Thaddeus might fear Dax enough to better his ability to escape detection, but he likely wouldn't alter his behavior. At least not initially, anyway.

"Stranger things have happened," said Alicia as she snatched two bags. "Like you getting married to an old flame as part of a pact."

Not wanting to discuss that in public, I said, "Let's just unload the car, shall we?"

"Sure."

I grabbed a bag. "Appreciated."

"Hey, need a hand over there?" asked a male voice.

I froze, and my sister quietly groaned in an exasperation I shared. Looking behind me, I forced a smile for our neighbor. "We got it, thanks."

But Jenson strutted over, his smirk as slimy and cocky as always. Ugh.

He often "helped" us, using any opportunity to enter our home, essentially ignoring our boundaries and invading our personal space like we had no right to it. Which was why my smile wavered when, ignoring my response, he came to my side. "Really, it's fine," I told him.

Using his thumbs, he gestured at himself. "What kind of man would I be if I let two ladies struggle?"

"It's genuinely no struggle," Alicia assured him, clutching the handles of her bags tightly, as if he might otherwise rip them from her.

Disregarding her statement, he grabbed the last two bags from the trunk and then closed it. "Lead the way," he said, still smirking.

Locking my car with the fob, I subtly exchanged an *I'm gonna stab him one day* look with Alicia. She let out a low grunt.

As we crossed to our front door, I said, “You can just leave the bags on the doorstep.”

But he didn’t. The moment the door was open, he swanned right inside like it was his own home, calling out, “That would just be lazy.”

*Motherfucker.* Gritting my teeth, I turned to Alicia. “Do you think anyone would notice if he mysteriously ‘disappeared?’”

She pursed her lips. “Yes. But I also think they’d be relieved.”

It really wouldn’t surprise me.

I didn’t mind a *little* arrogance in a man, providing it was one he’d earned through accomplishments and that he didn’t treat others as less. But Jenson was full of his own sense of self-importance and thought of himself as somewhat superior to all us mere mortals. As if being good-looking, rich, and a sales director put him a step above the rest. He considered himself an alpha but had no real clue what that meant and merely exuded an insecure-wannabe vibe.

Resolved that I’d get him out of the house quickly, I followed him into the kitchen, where he’d set the bags on the island. “Thanks for the help, we appreciate it. Have a good evening.” I swept my hand toward the door.

He didn’t leave, though. He headed over to the coffee machine and pointed at it. “You know, I have the same one. How about I make you both a coffee?”

“No, thanks,” I said, feeling my jaw harden.

Alicia plopped her bags on the island a little too roughly. “I’m good.”

He rubbed his hands together. “Well, I could sure do with a latte right now.”

“Then you should go home and help yourself to one,” I said, feeling my patience dwindle *fast*. “My sister and I are really busy. We can’t sit around and chat.”

His mouth curved. “Don’t worry, I don’t expect you to entertain me. I just want to spend some time with you girls.”

Okay, I was done. “What I *meant* to say was that we want you to leave now. So leave.”

His smile faltering, he raised his hands, palms out. “Hey, I didn’t mean to make you ladies feel uncomfortable—I’m horrified if I have. I realize you don’t know me well and so might not be comfortable having a stranger in your home. But the only way we can fix that is if we get to know each other so I’m no longer a stranger,” he said, all reasonable.

I planted my hands on the island. “What I said still stands. We want you to ...” My words trailed off as I heard footfalls enter the house. Alicia had left the front door open in a gesture that Jenson wasn’t invited to stay.

Moments later, Dax loped into the room with a masculine grace, each stride slow and confident. My pulse thudded and spiked. Excitement burst to life in my belly. And everything feminine in me woke right up and rose to greet him.

My hormones started fanning themselves as they drank him in. God, he was too freaking gorgeous for it to be real. I was sure he must have made a deal with Satan or something, because no one could *naturally* be that striking. No one.

He didn’t look in the least bit hesitant or awkward about breezing into a kitchen that wasn’t his own. He gave off his usual air of unwavering cool, looking perfectly at ease and comfortable. As if he belonged here.

His mismatched eyes zeroed right in on me, unreadable and unflinching. “You left your front door open.”

“For Jenson,” I explained. “He’s not staying, so ...” I was totally going to reward myself later for how unruffled I sounded.

“I see.” Dax’s gaze briefly skipped to my sister. “Alicia,” he greeted, who only smiled in response. He then honed in on our neighbor. “I hadn’t expected to see you here, Jenson. How’s the ankle?”

The creep straightened. “Better, Mr. Mercier, better,” he replied, his top-dog act shrinking under the weight of Dax’s presence.

“And your parents?” asked Dax. “How are they doing?”

“Fine, absolutely fine.” Jenson cleared his throat. “I was just helping Addison and Alicia carry their shopping inside.” He didn’t say it, he *bragged* it. Like he’d done his country a service.

Dax glanced at the bags. “And you’re all done, I see.”

“Yes, I ...” Jenson trailed off. Possibly because he couldn’t offer a *good* reason for why he hadn’t yet gone home, given I’d told him to go.

I caught his eye. “You were just about to leave, weren’t you?”

“I was.” He hesitated a moment but then flashed my sister and I a courteous smile. “Remember I’m always next-door if you need anything.”

“We’ll remember,” I said.

“Sadly can’t forget,” Alicia muttered only loud enough for me to hear.

I had to clamp my lips together to hold back a snort.

Jenson pretty much sashayed out of the room—it was honestly sad to watch, not to mention uncomfortable.

Dax fixed his gaze on me again. “Does he do that often?”

I inched up a brow. “Strut like a peacock?”

One corner of his lips twitched. “Overstay his welcome.”

I guessed he’d overheard me telling Jenson to leave. “He tries. We always manage to shoo him along. Eventually.”

Dax hummed, his lips setting into a displeased slash. “I’ll have a word with him.”

“We’d appreciate that,” said Alicia. Looking from me to him, she pointed upward. “I’m going to head upstairs. I have a call to make. Several, actually.” She scampered, leaving me alone with the bane of my hormones’ existence.

As Dax and I clashed gazes once again, the air began to hum and thicken with sexual awareness. It made my pulse have a meltdown.

He took another step into the room. “How did your birthday go?”

I shrugged. “Same old, same old.”

Just then, Gypsy leapt onto the kitchen counter and sauntered over to him.

As he reached out to stroke her, I grimaced. “She’s really not very ... Huh.” The little feline melted into his hand as he petted her. Typical. Even the cat wasn’t immune to his charm.

He lifted her with both hands and smiled into her eyes, his mouth curved slightly ... and I wasn’t ready for how that image hit me right in the ovaries. Now I got why my mom always smiled whenever my dad gave their new cat, Artemis, some attention.

I swallowed. “You like cats?”

“I like most animals.” Dax gently placed her back on the counter and then once more pinned his gaze on me. *Wholly* on me. And with such devastating intensity it made my mouth dry up. “Well, do you have an answer for me?”

I licked my lips, my stomach fluttering when his eyes lowered to them. “Yes.”

He arched a brow. “And?”

Swallowing, I gave a slow nod. “I’ll do it. I’ll honor the pact.”

His expression didn’t change, except for the pure male satisfaction that crawled into his eyes. “Good decision.”

“We need to get a few things straight, though,” I said, dragging a grocery bag toward me. “First, do you want coffee?”

He gave his head a brief shake as he settled on a stool at the island. “I’m guessing one of the points you wish to address is the matter of a prenup. I’m aware that your parents and your family attorney will insist on one. Mine will as well. I have no issue with that. You?”

Opening a cupboard, I replied, “None at all.” It made sense to ensure that we were protected that way. And if we didn’t, it would only cause our immediate relatives to put up a supreme protest to the marriage—they were already opposed to it.

“Then we’ll each have contracts drawn up and get them signed.” He rested his hands on the island, his fingers linked. “With regards to the wedding ... I have no preferences when it comes to the particulars. All I ask is that it be put together swiftly. I don’t want to wait.”

“I can make that happen,” I said, stacking tinned goods in the cupboard.

“We can hit Vegas, if that will be easier.”

“Nah, I’ve got this.” Given my contacts, experience, and my amazing team, I wouldn’t struggle. “You really don’t care about the venue, theme, music, location, nothing?”

“I’d like it to be local. I have no interest in throwing a big production and inviting all my business associates—I’d prefer something that includes only friends and family. As for the rest? I’ll leave it to you.”

It wasn’t rare for soon-to-be-grooms to have so little involvement. But, given Dax liked control and had strong opinions, I’d thought he’d contribute to the plans. Then again, why would it matter to him when he had a complete lack of emotional investment in our upcoming marriage?

“I’d prefer something small and local, so I’m good with that.” The grocery bag now empty, I set it aside and grabbed a full one. “I know you co-own a security firm, so I’m

assuming you'll take care of security yourself? We'll need it." Our families were each, in their own way, high profile. People would gatecrash the wedding for sure if they could, even if only to snap pictures.

Dax dipped his chin. "I'll have that covered."

"Okay," I replied, pulling the fridge door open. "I can take care of the logistics of the wedding, but I'll need your guest list." I paused as I began placing vegetables in one of the fridge drawers. "Email it to me when you can."

"I'll get it to you tomorrow."

"Do all your family members know about the pact?"

"Only my brothers." Unlinking his fingers, Dax began tapping them gently on the island. "They're supportive of it. Now that I know we're definitely going ahead with the wedding, I plan to tell the rest of my family. Probably tomorrow."

I slid a tray of eggs onto a fridge shelf. "How do you foresee them reacting?"

"They'll no doubt be surprised. Maybe even disappointed, to a certain extent. They'll want more for me than an arranged marriage. But they'll understand and respect my reasons, and they'll accept you just as Caelan did. It's how they are."

Personally, I thought it was possible that he was being a little too optimistic. But I didn't know any of them well enough to be sure. I'd only met them a few times.

I carefully positioned a milk jug in one of the side compartments. "I told my family yesterday, because I knew then that I'd give you a yes. There was some ranting and raving, but they calmed down and swore they'd support me in this." I nudged the fridge door shut with my elbow. "I warned them before I left that if they felt the need to contact you they needed to wait until this evening so I had a chance to talk to you first."

"Dane will probably ask that I reconsider this."



“Several times,” I hedged, moving onto the next bag of groceries. “He’s persistent. I don’t doubt that he’ll pester me the same way during the run-up to the wedding. Others will as well—possibly from both my family *and* yours.”

“It will be a waste of their time.” He gave me a pointed look. “I won’t change my mind.”

“Neither will I.” I placed the loaf in the bread bin, stupidly almost trapping my fingers. “What exactly do you want out of this marital arrangement? Just to be clear.”

His gaze snared mine, a warning and a promise there. “It may be an arrangement, Addison, but we’re not going to have separate bedrooms or any of that shit. You’ll sleep next to me, where you’ll belong.”

As thoughts of what would happen in his bed—well, it would be *our* bed—slinked through my mind, butterflies took wing in my stomach. “I had no intention of doing anything else.” I paused. “We’re both busy people, but I think it’s important we spend time together at home the way any normal couple would.”

“Agreed. You’ll be my wife, not my housemate. Our behavior should reflect that.”

Relief fluttered in my chest. It was only then I realized I’d worried he had some notion that, to a large degree, we’d live separate lives. I wouldn’t want any children we had to think *that* was what a relationship should be. “So we can be friends, then?”

“Friends?” he echoed, tasting the word. “Yes, we can be that. It wouldn’t have worked before.”

Back when we weren’t “involved” with each other, he meant. And no, it wouldn’t have worked, because we’d have crossed platonic lines for certain. “Good. If we’re going to parent children together, we should at least be friends. How many kids do you want?” I really hoped they had his mismatched eyes—a silly thought, maybe, but I loved them.

“I don’t have a specific number in mind.” He twisted his mouth, his expression thoughtful. “Two at a minimum.”

“Works for me.”

“I suggest we don’t try to conceive straight away. We should take at least eight months to get settled and find our balance.”

“I agree.” It would be both stupid and selfish to bring a child into the kind of situation we’d be navigating until, as he’d said, we found our balance. “Where is it exactly you want us to live?” I asked, placing some spices on the counter rack.

“My villa here in Oakengrove. Come visit me there tomorrow evening. We’ll have dinner. I’ll show you around. You don’t like it, we’ll move.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. I wouldn’t live in a place I didn’t like. Do you think I’d ask it of you?”

“No, I guess not.” I shoved tins of cat food into one of the lower cupboards, which reminded me ... “I’ll be bringing Gypsy when I move. My cat.”

“Not an issue. Anything else you want to get straight?”

“I think it’s important that we be honest with each other. Good communication will be key for us, considering we don’t have the emotional connection most married couples do.”

“Yes, honesty is important.” An odd glint entered his eyes. “A point which, in fact, brings me to what I meant to ask you after we’d finished our discussion, but now is as good a time as any.”

I threw him a wary glance. “What is it you want to know?”

“Why your parking sign near your office building was graffitied.”

*Motherfucker.* “How did you hear about that?”

“I have my sources. One notified me of it earlier.”

Knowing it could cause inter-family trouble, I hadn’t intended to tell him about Blaise’s stunt. The last thing I

wanted was for Dax to be at odds with his cousins. Not merely for his own sake, but because it wouldn't exactly endear me to his immediate relatives.

When moments of silence went by, he flicked up a brow. "You want honesty, remember?"

Holding back a petulant sigh, I none too gently perched a box of cereal on the counter, making a mental note to transfer the contents into one of the storage containers later. "It was Blaise."

"Felicity's son?"

"Yes. It was easy to ID him. He didn't bother covering his face. Probably because he knew that being caught on CCTV wouldn't lead to an arrest. You know how the sheriff is when it comes to friends and family."

Dax let out a knowing, annoyed grunt. "How did your father deal with Blaise?"

"I didn't tell him. My dad's reaction would have been overkill."

He shot me a *So?* look.

"Blaise is only nineteen. He did something stupid. Most kids that age do. Don't get me wrong, if he does anything like that again, I *will* turn to my dad." I was no sucker.

Dax's chin inched up slightly. "That won't be necessary. I'll deal with Blaise."

I was afraid he'd say that. "Let my dad handle it."

"Why would I do that?"

"It would be better for you to stay out of this. Blaise is your second cousin."

"And you're my fiancée."

My pulse did a little tap dance. Weird as it might sound, I hadn't really considered that I was now technically his fiancée. This was a business deal, not a romance.

“Did he graffiti the sign in a stupid response to something, or was it a random act?”

Frustrated I'd have to also reveal yet *another* thing that could result in inter-family issues, I pulled the freezer door open harder than necessary. “I had a little spat with his mom the day before the vandalism.”

Dax's eyes flared. “A spat?” A carefully neutral response.

“It was really nothing. She's smug that Grayden went back to her, and she wanted to rub it in my face, thinking I'd be jealous.” I stared Dax right in the eye. “I'm not, to be clear. I see you doubt that, despite what I said to you at the pool the other day. Did I love him once? Yes. Does that still apply now? No.” I wouldn't want the guy I was marrying to think I was hung up on another.

Dax watched me for a long moment, emotions working behind his eyes that I couldn't quite make out. “I'll contact Felicity, make her aware of the situation, and be very clear how much of a mistake it would be for her or her son to bother you again.”

“She'll likely *freak* when she hears I'll soon be part of the family,” I said, putting away the frozen meals. “I almost wish I could be there to see it.”

His lips curled just a little. “If either of them ignore my warning and approach you again, I want to hear about it.” It wasn't anything close to a request. It was an order, plain and simple.

Ugh. “I don't want to cause trouble between you all.”

“Any such trouble would be on them, because they'd be the cause of it. Not you. By keeping me informed, you'll merely be doing exactly what you said it's important for us to do—you'd be being open and honest with me. I need that from you, just as you need it from me.”

I exhaled heavily. “All right.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “I'm serious, Addison.”

“I see that, Dax.” I couldn’t keep the note of impatience out of my voice. “If they do anything else, I will tell you.”

He gave a satisfied nod.

My grocery bags now empty and tucked in a drawer, I walked to the opposite end of the island from which he sat. “There’s one last thing I want to cover. We might not be all wrapped up in each other. But for me, cheating will still be grounds for this to end.”

His eyes cooled. “You think I’d do that to you?”

“Actually, no. I just want to be clear how important an issue this is for me. Some guys in my past were shocked that I wouldn’t forgive such a ‘slip in control.’ Guys who thought that getting a hand job doesn’t count. In my books, it does. Touch another woman in any kind of sexual context, and we’re done.”

“That would never happen. I expect the same loyalty from you.”

“You’ll get it,” I swore. “I wouldn’t ask anything of you that I’m not willing to promise in return.”

“Then everything is settled.” He dipped his hand into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a black, velvet ring box.

My heartbeat stuttered, and I swallowed so hard I was surprised it wasn’t audible. He slid the box across the island toward me. My nerves scrambling, I picked it up, lifted the lid ... and almost lost my breath. A sparkling round diamond lay at the center of a white gold band into which little pavé diamonds were set.

“It’s beautiful.” *Understatement.* It was stunning and elegant and absolute perfection. Swiping my tongue over my suddenly dry lower lip, I met his gaze. “You’re sure this is definitely what you want?”

“Positive.” He gave me a look of pure challenge. “Are you?”

“Yes.” To prove it, I plucked the ring from the box and slid it onto my finger. It fit a little too perfectly. “How did you so accurately guess my ring size?” I almost smiled at how offended he looked by the question, as if it should be obvious that he would guess correctly.

“I’ll take care of acquiring the wedding bands as well. How fast can you put the wedding itself together?”

“How fast do you want it done?”

“As soon as possible.”

I chewed on my lower lip, pensive. “Providing we keep things small and simple, we could have it a week from Saturday.” I had work commitments to stick to, and I wasn’t going to shove them all aside.

Dax briefly considered it. “An eleven day wait is acceptable.”

I almost snorted at the oh-so-imperious response.

He rose to his feet. “My villa is at the opposite end of the village. Number sixty-five. Can you be there for dinner tomorrow at six?”

I skimmed through my mental to-do-list. “Six works.”

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow evening.” He turned and stalked out of the room as slowly and purposefully as he’d entered it.

I trailed after him as he headed to the front door, unable to resist admiring that firm butt of his.

Dax pulled open the door and then half-turned to lock those incredible eyes on me. “Don’t take the ring off.”

I blinked. “I wasn’t planning to, but ... why?”

He glanced down at it. “When you slid it on your finger, you sealed our deal. I want you to have that reminder that there’s no going back now. I also want anyone who thinks to interfere to see for themselves that they’re wasting their breath and the deal is done.”

People *were* likely to take it more seriously on seeing me wearing an engagement ring. Dax wouldn't exactly go to the trouble of buying one unless he meant business, and I wouldn't bother wearing one unless I was sure of my choice. "Okay. Just to say, I don't need a reminder that I've given you my word. I don't intend to break it."

"You gave me your word when we made our pact, not taking it seriously."

"That was different. I thought we were both kidding. Now, I don't."

He gave a satisfied dip of the chin. "Good." Then he walked out.

Puffing out a breath, I resisted the urge to watch him stalk to his vehicle and instead closed the door.

Alicia skipped down the stairs, her eyes bright. "Well, how'd it go?"

"Fine. We covered everything that needed covering and now, well ..." I held up my hand.

Her lips split into a gorgeous smile at the sight of the ring. "Oh my God, it's beautiful. The man has taste."

"Sure does." I dropped my hand to my side. "I would have been disappointed that he hadn't let me choose my own, but it's exactly what I would have gone for."

She eyed me carefully. "I thought you two would, you know, *celebrate* your decision, but you don't look like a girl who just got railed."

I felt my brows draw together. "Dax wouldn't risk muddying the waters by bringing sex or emotion into the mix. To him, this is predominantly a business deal. He'll ensure he's pulled it off before he touches me. He won't even do so much as kiss me until we're pronounced man and wife."

"Which will be when?"

"Next Saturday. I have eleven days before I'll be pledging vows in front of a priest." My stomach promptly began fluttering again.

“Luckily for you, you have the entire team at Sapphire Glade at your disposal to help make this wedding happen. If you need me to chip in, let me know—I’ll help in whatever way I can. You could let me and Harri choose the bridesmaid dresses,” she suggested, a note of excitement in her tone.

I sighed. “Fine, you do that.”

She beamed at me. “You know, I have to salute you for marrying someone like him. He’s just so ... *everything*. In a good way. But it’s intimidating.”

For sure.

“I totally admire the people who work directly beneath Dax—I’m not sure I’d be all that productive if constantly around him. He *demand*s attention with his presence alone.” Her gaze fell to my hand. “And God, I want that ring. Can I at least try it on?”

“No. Now let’s eat. In fact, you can look at bridesmaid dresses online while I cook. Just don’t pick anything too *out there*.”

“Why would you assume I might?”

“To poke at Harri, because you’ll get a kick out of seeing her panic that she’s got to wear some godawful monstrosity.”

“You know me so well.”



## Chapter Nine

The next morning, after my team was finished cooing over my engagement band like it was a newborn kitten, I headed into my office.

Sabrina followed me, her smile bright. “That has got to be one of the most exquisite rings I’ve ever seen. The dude’s not playing around, huh?”

“Nope. Thanks to the amount of weddings we’ve helped organize, I know enough about rings to know that this wasn’t at all cheap.” I pulled my laptop out of my satchel and then set it on my desk. “Still, it won’t have put a dent in his bank balance.” It would be pocket change for someone like him.

“He didn’t need to spend that kind of dough on you, though. I suppose his intention is to make a statement that he has truly claimed you and is taking this seriously. I mean, it would be easy for people to assume that, because you’re both sticking to a pact, he won’t consider you a real wife. That ring says different.”

It did indeed, since ... “He wouldn’t do something just for appearances.” Dax wouldn’t buy me an expensive ring simply because it would be expected of him. He didn’t give a damn what others expected.

Sabrina folded her arms. “So, what happens now?”

“Now, with the help of you and the rest of our team, I plan the wedding.” After placing my phone on my desk, I rested both my satchel and my purse against the wall. “We don’t have long to put it together.”

“We’ll make it work. Booking venues for a July wedding would usually be tricky at such short notice. But we have plenty of contacts who are chummy enough with you to be happy to take part in making your big day a reality, even if it means working at a faster speed than usual.”

“Hopefully. We’ve done the same for some of them in the past.”

“I can’t see them not returning the favor. And I don’t envision many companies turning down the opportunity to have some part in the wedding of Dax Mercier anyway, particularly when his bride-to-be is the daughter of Dane Davenport. If that means shuffling some things around, they will.”

“Fingers crossed.”

Unfolding her arms, she cocked her head. “Are you going to tell people outside your family about the pact or let them assume you and Dax have been dating in private?”

“The latter. It’s no one’s business but mine and his anyway.”

“Too true.” She rubbed her hands together. “I suppose we should get started on the wedding details asap. I’m rather looking forward to it.”

“First, coffee.” I switched on the machine and then pulled two mugs out of the cupboard above it. “I already called my attorney. He’s going to draft up a prenup.”

“Smart,” she said with an approving dip of her chin, taking the pod seat opposite my chair. “I figured you would.”

“Alicia and Harri are going to choose bridesmaid dresses, which gives me one less thing to have to decide.”

“I’ll choose my own, if you’re good with that—it gives you another less thing to think about.” At my nod of consent, Sabrina went on, “I can’t quite believe you’re getting married.” A soft smile graced her features. “What are you doing about the honeymoon?”

“He made no mention of it, so I doubt we’ll be having one. At least not yet.” I crossed to my desk and booted up my laptop. “We’re both super busy people. I wouldn’t be able to just take off for a couple of weeks when we have so many events scheduled. It’s going to be hard enough to squeeze in the wedding.”

Her brow creased. “Everyone should have a honeymoon, though.”

“Maybe we’ll have one later in the year or something. It’s really not my top priority.” Once I’d prepped both coffees, I placed the steaming cups on my desk coasters. “Come on, let’s get working on—” I stopped talking as my phone began to ring. Glancing down at the screen of my cell, I exhaled heavily and rubbed at my face.

“What’s up?”

Irritation buzzing in my blood, I sat down and wheeled my chair closer to the desk. “It’s Grayden. This is the third time he’s tried calling me this morning. I haven’t answered.”

Her nose wrinkled. “What could he want?”

“I’m not sure, but ... Dax heard about the parking sign being graffitied and asked me about it last night. I told him it was Blaise and explained how he and Felicity can be a little problematic. Dax said he’d be warning her that they best leave me be and he would make her aware of our personal situation. Knowing him, he didn’t delay with that.”

“Ah, so there’s a good chance Grayden knows you’re now engaged to Dax, since Felicity would definitely pass that on?”

“Yup.” Tension slipped from my shoulders as the phone finally stopped chiming.

“It would explain why he wants to speak to you. If I was Grayden, I’d have questions for you. And I wouldn’t be happy to hear you’re wearing another man’s ring. He’s probably seething, not to mention brimming with jealousy.”

I frowned. “I think he’ll be more baffled than anything else.”

She snorted. “He might have reconciled with Felicity, but he isn’t in any way over you. He’s going to hate this.”

“Maybe.” Another woman might have smirked at the idea, but seeing him jealous wouldn’t assuage my ego. It

would simply annoy me, because he'd given up the right to feel any such jealousy when he walked away.

Sabrina lifted her mug and blew over the rim. "I doubt he'll stop calling. Texts will come next. He'll want to have his say."

*True*, I thought, chewing on my lower lip. It might be best to block his number.

"Personally, though I understand why you didn't want to do it before now, I think you should just go ahead and block his number."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "You're inhuman, I'm sure of it—I don't care what you say."

"Does this mean I read your mind again? Has it ever occurred to you that it could be the other way around and *I* just blurt out the words first?"

"No." I grabbed my phone and quickly blocked Grayden's number. "There. Done. Let me just answer some emails and then we'll get started on arranging the wedding."



Slipping out of my car later that day, I caught sight of Jenson standing near his front window, talking into his phone. The creep didn't give me his usual sleazy grin, he merely gave a polite nod and turned around. Huh. That was a first.

All I could think was that Dax had done as he'd said and had "a word" with Jenson. Either that or the sleazeball was simply leery of bothering me again when it was evident by Dax appearing at my home that we were associates of a sort.

Due to the amount of calls Sabrina and I had made to enquire as to what companies could take part in making the wedding happen, plenty of people were now aware of my engagement to Dax. It wouldn't be long before news of it circulated around Redwater.

Having locked my car, I walked toward my front door, thinking of what I might wear for my upcoming dinner with Dax. Probably something—

*Shoes scuffing pavement behind me.*

“Addie?”

I halted. Fuck, no, he was *not* here.

I very slowly turned. Annoyance whipped at my skin and made my nostrils flare. Oh, he was here all right.

Grayden stood a few feet away, his trim body tense, his hazel eyes dull, his lips set into a flat line. At one time, the sight of him would have made my mouth reflexively curve and my heart go all gooey. Those days were over.

I balled up my hands. “You shouldn’t be here.” There was no sign of his car, which meant he’d likely parked it elsewhere so that no one he knew would see it outside my home.

He shoved a hand through his short brown hair. “We have to talk.”

“No, no, we don’t.” Again, I made a beeline for my front door.

“I have to know if what I heard is true,” he said, catching up to me. “I won’t believe it unless I hear it coming from you.”

I spun to face him with a hiss. “You don’t get to just turn up here. We agreed we would keep a distance from each other. Remember?”

“I had no choice but to come, you blocked my number.”

“Because I don’t want to speak to you.” *Obviously.*

He flinched. “And I don’t blame you, but I need to know if Dax Mercier was bullshitting Felicity when he told her that you’re his goddamn fiancée. Are you seriously going to marry him?”

I stood tall, holding my head high. “I am, yes.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me.” His brows squished together. “Why, Addie? Why would you do this?”

“Because I want to.”

“But *why*?” He threw up his hands. “You guys weren’t dating. You had nothing to do with each other.”

“And how would you know?”

His lips flattened. “So, what, you two have been sneaking around, seeing each other in secret ... and now, all of a sudden, you’re *engaged* to him? Engaged to someone you couldn’t have been dating for more than a few months?”

“Well—”

“That makes no sense. Unless you’re saying you’ve both been harboring deep feelings for each other all these years? Is that what you’re telling me?”

If he thought I was going to stand here and justify myself to him, he was high. I folded my arms. “For the life of me, I can’t work out why you think I need to explain any of my choices to you.”

“This isn’t me being nosy, I’m concerned about you.”

“I don’t need your concern. Now please leave.”

“But—”

“I asked nicely,” I gritted out.

He pressed his lips tight together. “Just help me understand. You’re not a person who’d marry someone you’ve only been seeing a short length of time. Neither is he—I know Dax well enough to be sure of that. What you’re doing ... I don’t get it.”

“It isn’t necessary that you get it. This is my life, my business, *Dax’s* business. Not yours.”

He cursed beneath his breath. “Wouldn’t you have the same questions in my position?”

“Maybe. But I wouldn’t for a second think I had any right to *ask* them.”

Closing his eyes, he tented his hands and placed them against his mouth. “Felicity thinks ...” Letting the sentence trail off, he lowered his arms and met my gaze. “She thinks you’re doing this to get my attention. To make me jealous. Hurt me.”

I went still. “Is that what *you* think as well?”

“No. You’re not a person who plays games. But why else do this?”

“You don’t seem to be getting that I don’t have any interest in explaining myself to you.” The concept wasn’t rocket science.

Grimacing, he showed me his palms in a universal gesture of peace. “I’m coming across as a dick right now, I know, but I don’t mean to. I’m not trying to piss you off. I’m not of the opinion that you owe me anything. It’s just ... the image of your bucket list popped into my head. On the list of stuff you wanted to do before you died was get married.”

Realization dawned on me, and I looked away with a heavy sigh.

“When I heard you’re not only engaged to Dax but gonna marry him *very* fucking soon completely out of the blue”—he grabbed a clump of his hair and raised his shoulders—“I started panicking, okay. Please tell me that’s not what this is about.”

Oh, the idiot. “I’m not dying.” When he only stared at me, his expression dubious, I added, “Really.”

Relief flickered in his eyes, and a long breath whooshed out of him. “If it’s not that ... I can’t figure this out,” he said, a lot calmer now. “You and Dax aren’t each having a premature middle-aged crisis, are you?”

I frowned. “If I was having one of those, I’d do something a lot more creative. Like get a llama and start dressing as a fairy or something.”

The smallest, amused snicker left him. “Yeah. Yeah, knowing you, you would.” He glanced down at my hand, and

his throat bobbed. “Nice ring,” he said, the slightest quake in his voice.

I flexed my fingers. “Yep.”

“White gold?”

I nodded.

He gave me a wan, trembly smile. “Just like you wanted.”

When we’d talked of our plans for the future, I’d described my dream engagement ring. He’d flashed me a smile full of promise and then planted the softest, sweetest kiss on my mouth. It was about a week later that he went skulking back to Felicity.

Hinges creaked as my front door swung open.

Alicia blinked at us in surprise. “Oh. Hey.” Her forehead creased as she focused on Grayden, and I sensed she was about to give him an earful.

Not wanting a scene, I returned my gaze to him quickly. “You should go now.”

Taking a step back, he sucked in his lips. “Yeah. I’ll say things that I shouldn’t if I stay any longer.” He went to turn away but then stopped. “I’m not sure why you’re doing what you’re doing, but ... he’s a lucky man.” With that, Grayden stalked down the driveway.

I wasted no time in shrugging past Alicia, who shut the door and examined my face closely, asking, “Everything okay?”

My chest expanded as I drew in a long breath. “Fine.”

“What the hell was that fool doing here?”

“He heard about the engagement from Felicity, who heard about it from Dax. Grayden’s naturally confused and he hoped I’d explain.”

Alicia frowned. “It’s none of his damn business what you do.”



“That’s pretty much what I said. Like with everyone else who I don’t intend on telling about the pact, I let him make his own conclusions.” Placing one hand on my hip, I swiped the other hand down my face. “It was stupid of him to come here. Felicity’s got friends around these parts. If they saw him, they’ll tell her, and she’ll go psycho on his ass.” Maybe even on mine, though I would like to think she’d be too scared of Dax to dare.

“Why didn’t he just call you?”

“He did try to. I didn’t answer. *Then* I blocked his number.”

“Which clearly delivered the message that you didn’t want to speak to him. But I’m not exactly surprised that he didn’t let it hold him back—he doesn’t respect your ‘no contact’ wish.” She sniffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “If he knows what’s good for him, he’ll stay away from now on. Dax isn’t gonna be okay with his fiancée’s ex coming around.”

“Speaking of Dax ... I have to get changed. I’m having dinner with him tonight. And I’ll get a tour of what might be my new home.”

“The villas here are awesome, so you’ll probably love it.”

“We’ll see.”

## Chapter Ten

*Wow*, was my only thought as I parked in Dax's driveway and took a good look at his home. The modern, flat-roofed, two-story villa was all alabaster paint, tall reflective-glass windows, and pure unadulterated opulence. The small courtyard added to the opulent feel, along with the pretty fountain bordered by topiaries.

The lot on which the villa was built wasn't expansive, but the heavy use of tall trees gave the building a secluded feel. It looked calm. Tranquil. Idyllic.

Dax's car—a sleek, black vehicle that had “style” metaphorically written all over it—was parked off to the side. I'd seen it around, but not the town car that was situated beside it.

Exiting my own vehicle, I was immediately greeted by the scents of greenery and clean air. Beneath them hovered the barest smell of wet stone emanating from the fountain.

I smiled as I again took in the villa. Damn, this could be my new home. Unless the interior was an absolute dump—which seemed supremely unlikely—I'd have absolutely no issues living here.

Not at any point in my life had I imagined myself marrying Dax Mercier, let alone moving in with him. He was just so elusive. You couldn't lay a claim to a guy like him. Not unless he allowed it. But I'd have one when I became his wife—there would be a band on his finger to prove it.

Although ... there was a possibility that he wouldn't want to wear one. Not all guys did, and he'd once told me he didn't like wearing rings.

He *had* mentioned that he'd buy our wedding bands, but it could be that his only intention was to use them for the exchange-of-rings part of the ceremony. If I was honest, I wouldn't be too pleased if he afterward removed his band. Maybe it would be different if we were all wrapped up in each other—I'd feel secure in my claim to him. But we weren't, and

so his refusal to wear a ring would feel like a rejection; like he didn't really see me as his wife.

Jesus, I was going to become his wife. At least in the legal sense of the word.

There were moments when it felt so surreal I wanted to laugh. At the present moment, I didn't feel the need to laugh. I felt the need to give my heart a slap, because it was beating a little too fast at the mere thought of seeing him.

I locked my vehicle and then headed for the entrance, marveling at the peaceful feel to the pocket of land. There was no noise other than for the sprinkling of the fountain, the light breeze sliding through the trees, and the clicking of my heels against the stone walkway.

Noticing a chauffeur sitting in the town car, I felt my brows lift in surprise. I gave him a brief wave, which he easily returned. Huh. Since it was highly unlikely that Dax would have a chauffeur sitting in a car outside his home, it seemed more probable that said chauffeur had driven someone here.

I pressed the doorbell and waited, my nerves a little too tetchy for there to be anything patient about that wait. He opened the door, his eyes fixed on mine, and my entire system—every cell, every hormone, every nerve-ending—quite simply went *zing*.

“Addison,” he ever so smoothly greeted. Backing up, he opened the door wider. “Come in.”

Clutching the strap of my purse unnecessarily tight, I walked inside, my body brushing his. Catching movement in my peripheral vision, I twisted my head slightly. It was a battle not to tense. I easily recognized the tall, dark, far too good-looking Sicilian male who stood there. Anyone in Redwater would.

Dax sidled closer to me. “This is a friend of mine, Rafael Cabello. Rafael, this is my fiancée, Addison.”

A corner of Rafael's mouth tilted upward. “I've heard plenty about you.”

Given the guy ran a crime syndicate ... “I can certainly say the same.” The rumors were plentiful.

“Thank you for the invitation to the wedding,” he said with a short, gracious nod. “I’ll be there.”

I’d emailed the invitations earlier today after booking the church and securing a venue—it was faster than dishing out physical invitations. When I’d seen Rafael’s name on Dax’s guest list, I’d almost fallen off my damn chair. I knew they were acquainted, but I hadn’t thought they were close friends. There’d been a few other names that had taken me by surprise.

I gave him a polite smile. “In that case, I’ll see you then.”

He and Dax exchanged goodbyes, and then the Sicilian male elegantly breezed out of the villa with an animal grace.

Once Dax closed the door, I said, “You have interesting friends.”

“So I’ve been told.” He tipped his chin, gesturing for me to follow him as he added, “Come.”

“Your place is bigger than I thought it’d be,” I said, trailing after him.

“I’ll give you a quick tour before we eat.”

The sound of our footfalls echoed along the marble flooring as he showed me around first the living area and then the dining room. Both were spacious and elegantly furnished, as was the room he said I could use as a home office if I wished.

The scent of various foods reached me before we entered the top-of-the-range kitchen. Three plates covered in stainless steel toppers waited on the small dining table there, and I guessed one of Oakengrove’s chefs had prepped the meal. Residents could order food to be delivered from a central kitchen, and most took advantages of the perk.

Next, Dax ushered me upstairs. There were four bedrooms in total, all en suite—one of which he used as an

office. The largest was, of course, the master bedroom. Taking in the sight of his bed, I almost whistled. Now *that* was a bed. A big-ass one that could sleep at least four people. *If* those four people were snuggly sleepers, that was.

I doubted Dax was a nighttime cuddler. I, personally, was not. Nor did I move much in my sleep. I always picked my own side of any mattress, and I rarely left it—no matter how big the bed, no matter if I was alone in it or not.

The room boasted other features, such as a massive walk-in closet, a jacuzzi, and also a large balcony that overlooked a pretty garden, modern patio area, and sizeable swimming pool. Again, there was a feeling of seclusion due to the amount of trees—they apparently didn't only border the front of the lot, but the whole of it.

As I again stared down at the bed, my belly did some pathetic fluttering as I imagined rolling around in it with him. But then my stomach dropped as it occurred to me that *other* females had no doubt done some rolling in it.

Dax stalked closer to me. “I bought it new when I moved here not so long ago. The only women who've been to the villa other than you are my mom and sister.”

I arched a brow. “In other words, you haven't fucked anyone in this bed?”

“Not yet,” he said, pinning me with a heated, meaningful look that promised all sorts of pleasure and made my hormones a little dizzy. “I fully intend to wreck you in it.”

A flush of warmth bloomed in the pit of my stomach.

“But not until you have two rings on that finger.”

Not until he'd closed our “deal,” he meant. “Are *you* going to wear one?”

“Of course. Why wouldn't I?”

A feeling of relief fluttering over me, I gave a slight shrug. “I remember you once saying you didn't like to wear rings.”

“Generally, I don’t. But”—he narrowed his eyes—“you and I would have serious problems if you refused to wear your wedding band. I can be a selfish asshole, but I’m no hypocrite.”

Yeah, I’d never be able to describe him as “fair.” He could be as ruthless as any business mogul. But he had a deep sense of integrity and held himself to a certain standard—he avoided doing anything that seemed beneath him, as if refusing to disrespect himself.

“Come on, time for us to eat.” He turned away and headed for the door.

My gaze admittedly straying to his rather perfect ass, I followed him out of the room, across the landing, and over to the staircase.

As we descended it, he very briefly glanced at me over his shoulder. “So, what do you think of the place?”

“I like it.” It was bright. Airy. Elegant. Bigger than we’d need initially, but that wasn’t exactly a con. There seemed little point in requesting that we get a place elsewhere, particularly since I loved Oakengrove itself so much. “I could see myself living here.”

Reaching the foot of the stairs, he slid me a satisfied look. “Then we’ll move your things here the day after the wedding.”

“Why not before?”

He didn’t peer at me over his shoulder as he responded, “Because there’s no chance of us sharing a bed without me fucking you raw.”

My step faltered at the flatly spoken statement.

“As such, it’s best that you don’t officially move in until we’re married. Do you have a lot of things that will need bringing here?”

The way he so easily switched from making heated comments to asking casual questions was enough to unbalance a girl. “Not really. I don’t see the point in hauling all my

furniture here when yours suit the place better, so I'd rather leave the bulk of it with Alicia—she'll be buying my house." It would mean she didn't have to go through the trouble of furnishing it. "But there are some items I'll want to bring."

"There's no lack of space here, so you won't have a problem finding places for any of them to go."

That was a fact.

He strolled into the kitchen and gestured for me to take a seat at the table. I guessed that he'd had someone set it for him, because I doubted he'd have personally gone through *this* kind of trouble. There was a soft white tablecloth, crystal glasses, stylish dishware, votive candles, and a small floral centerpiece. It was all set neatly, the two sides of the table symmetrical in their layout.

I wasn't surprised that we weren't eating in the dining room—the table there was long. Sitting at the small table here in the kitchen made the meal more intimate.

As Dax removed the covers from the plates, fragrant steam rushed up from my food to greet me. Taking in the sight of the chicken fried steak, cream cheese, mashed potato, and green beans, I glanced at him as I sank onto a chair. "Who told you this was one of my favorite dishes?" It was too much of a coincidence for him to otherwise have ordered it.

Placing the covers on the counter, he replied, "Brooks. He called me this morning to congratulate me on our engagement. He said you told him about it."

"He was on my ass first thing demanding to know if we'd be going ahead with the wedding or not." He was also devastated that he'd be unable to make it—he wasn't able to get the time off work. Lifting my cutlery, I asked, "Can you cook?"

"Yes. My mother insisted all of us learn so she didn't have to worry we'd live on junk food when we moved out." He grabbed a bottle of red. "I know you're driving, but you can have one glass, yes?"

I nodded. Even if I hadn't been driving, I would have stuck to one to ensure my inhibitions behaved themselves. The kind of attraction I felt toward Dax was the type that could cause a person to give their hormones too much control if they weren't careful.

After tipping wine into both our glasses, he took the seat opposite me. "Did you get started on the wedding preparations?"

"Yes, they're well underway." With the help of my team, I'd ironed out the budget and settled on an event concept. All the logistics of the planning were done, and I'd determined the timelines in addition to booking the venues. It was now simply a matter of securing vendors and negotiating with suppliers etc. None of which I told him, because I suspected he wouldn't be interested in specifics. "Thanks for sending the guest list so quickly."

He cut into his steak. "I said I would." He seemed offended that I'd doubted he'd come through.

"I wasn't thinking you'd let me down," I clarified, slicing into my own steak. "It's just that I'm aware you're uber busy, so I knew there was a chance there'd be a delay."

"This is a time-sensitive matter, so of course I'd prioritize it. I don't put my business life before my personal life in any case, irrespective of how busy I am."

That was good to know. "Have you told the rest of your family about our engagement yet?"

"I have." He ate a mouthful of food. "My sister, Raven, very much wants to have her own family before she reaches my age, so she can understand why I might choose a fallback pact over taking the risk that my situation will remain unchanged as time goes on. She came round to the idea fairly quickly. My parents aren't exactly keen on it for obvious reasons but, after a long discussion during which their attempts to talk me out of it failed, they agreed to go along with it."



“Do you think they meant it, or is it possible that they’re giving up *for now*?”

He gave a slight shrug and then lifted his glass. “I believe my mom meant it. As for my dad, he probably holds out hope that he can change my mind.”

“At least your sister is behind you. On the subject of Raven, do you want to have her as a bridesmaid?”

“I offered, but she’s hesitant.” He sipped at his drink. “She thinks you might not want that, since you don’t know her well.”

I frowned. “I’m more than happy to include her in the wedding party. Give me her contact details and I’ll hit her up—which reminds me that you and I should exchange numbers.” We hadn’t done so yet.

He inclined his head. “I appreciate you involving her.”

“Back to the subject of my family ... I don’t know if you know much about Dissociate Identity Disorder.”

A surprised frown slipped over Dax’s face. “It’s where a person develops additional personalities, generally in response to trauma, yes?”

“Pretty much, yeah. My maternal biological grandfather, Simon, has DID. None of his alters are, like, evil or something. They’re essentially his protectors. Maggie is a sweet, fiercely maternal forty-year-old. She’ll likely say hello to you, and she’ll probably be nice so long as you don’t swear. Freddie is eight, pretty shy, and not at all trusting, so I doubt you’ll meet him anytime soon. Or Deacon, for that matter—he isn’t shy, but he only really comes forward at times where Simon feels threatened.”

“And you’ve met each of them?”

“Yes. They’re all very loving toward me. It might sound strange to an outsider, but they’re family. I only wanted to give you a heads-up so you’re not confused if Maggie says hi to you at the wedding.” I paused. “The disorder is heavily sensationalized and misrepresented in movies and books, so I can understand if you’re weirded out or—”

“I’m not at all. I may not know much about mental disorders, but I know they’re no reason to look at people differently in negative ways. If Maggie says hello, I’ll be sure to say hello back.”

Relief was a warm flame in my belly. “Okay. Good. She’ll be polite, though she texted me to say she has strong reservations about the marriage. That doesn’t exactly set her apart. Most of the attendees have reservations. Speaking of, I noticed you didn’t put Felicity on your guest list. That’s a shame. I was hoping to have her as a bridesmaid.”

His mouth bowed. “In the spirit of being upfront and open, I called Felicity earlier and made the situation clear. She and Blaise now know to leave you alone.”

Forking some mash-covered steak, I said, “In the spirit of being equally upfront and open, I figured you’d told her, because Grayden showed up at my house earlier.”

Dax went very still. “What did he want?”

“To understand why I was marrying you. I mean, he assumes we’ve been seeing each other on the down-low, but he struggles to buy that either you or me would get hitched to someone we’ve only dated a few months. He was worried I might be dying.”

Setting down his glass, Dax frowned. “Dying?”

“Getting married was on my bucket list, so he wondered if maybe I was now close to kicking said bucket.”

“I see,” Dax drawled, his voice toneless with a dark edge. “What else did he have to say?”

“Nothing, really.” I chewed my forkful of food. “He complimented the ring, and called you a lucky man. That’s pretty much it.”

Dax’s eyelids lowered. “He didn’t try to talk you out of marrying me?”

“No.”

He hummed. “That’s more than I can say for your father.”

I almost dropped my cutlery. “He called you?”

“We knew he likely would,” Dax reminded me. “He turned up at my office to see me, but I wasn’t there. So he settled for speaking to me over the phone.”

I winced. “Let me guess. He asked what was your price for walking out of my life?”

Dax dipped his chin. “It was a test to see if I had a hidden agenda.”

“What did you tell him?”

“The same thing I told your brother when I found him waiting outside the villa earlier.”

“Oh, God,” I muttered, flicking my gaze up to the ceiling.

“I made it clear that you’d be safe with me and that I wanted nothing from your family.” Dax cut into his steak again. “It didn’t placate them much, however. I made it clear that there wasn’t a thing they could do or say to make me call off the wedding. They didn’t like that.”

“I’ll bet.”

“I was originally going to suggest that we gather both our families together prior to the wedding so they could all get well-acquainted. You’ve met all members of mine, but my parents haven’t met your siblings, and I’ve never spoken with your youngest sister. It would have been good to get such introductions out of the way. But there’s a chance it wouldn’t go smoothly.”

I nodded. “Those from both our families who don’t support what we’re doing could either band together and give us shit, or arguments might start between those who are behind us and those who aren’t.” I was pretty sure that if Blake started complaining, my sisters would butt in and tell him to get a handle on his issues. Likewise, if my dad and Ollie began whining, it could set off Dax’s siblings.

“My thoughts exactly. So I say we scrap that idea. Our parents know each other well enough anyway.”

True. Dax and his parents had actually attended Vienna and Dane's wedding reception, though Dax had been a toddler at the time so didn't remember it.

"My baby sister, Harri, is looking forward to meeting you and your family." More particularly Drey, but I'd keep that to myself.

I grabbed my glass and tipped it back, letting the red wine slide down my throat. Hmm, not bad. I lowered the glass ... and realized that Dax's gaze was locked on me with lethal focus. "What? You're staring."

He gave an unrepentant shrug. "I like to look at you."

I snorted. "You like to unnerve people, so you sometimes stare at them until they get so uncomfortable they look away."

"You don't look away. Never did. You were always frustratingly difficult to ruffle." It was an amused statement, not a complaint.

"Why bother trying to ruffle anyone?" I tilted my head. "Let me guess, you do it your employees to keep them on their toes."

He pursed his lips. "I find it makes them more productive."

I'd imagine it did.

"The only time I could really keep you off-balance was when we were in bed." A dark heat crept into his gaze that made my stomach twist. "Do you still have that navel piercing?"

I flexed my grip on my fork. "Maybe." I remembered how much he'd liked it, traced it, licked around it. I had the feeling *he* was recalling that as well.

"You used to have a little hip chain that you hooked on the piercing." His eyes went hooded. "Just looking at it made me want to bury my cock in you."

My thighs clenched. Well, since we weren't actually going to end up in bed, I needed to get this conversation onto a

playful track. “Stop with the smolder. My hormones can only take so much, and I don’t want my hand aching from too much self-love.”

He let out a wicked laugh. “You know, Addison, not many people make me laugh. But you could always manage to do that.”

I lifted and dropped one shoulder. “I’m gifted that way.”

We spoke of general things as we ate the rest of our meal. It was an hour or so later that he walked me out of the villa and over to my car. He held open the door as I slid behind the wheel and then clicked on my seatbelt.

“I have a request,” he said.

I eyed him warily. “What?”

Bracing one arm over the top of the car door, he bent over and planted his free hand on the vehicle roof. His gaze delved into mine, a dark glint there. “Wear whatever kind of lingerie you want for the wedding night, but I want your pussy completely bare. No little strip of hair here or there. I want not one thing between my tongue and your flesh.”

Fuck if my nipples weren’t tightening. “I’ll take that into consideration.”

A corner of his lips tipped up. “Appreciated.” He straightened, closed the door, and stepped back.

Subtly puffing out a heavy breath, I reversed the car. Well, I’d learned three things tonight. One, my soon-to-be-new-home was awesome. Two, the Oakengrove chefs he used were cooking angels sent from heaven and each deserved a damn halo. Three, my vibrator was gonna get some serious action between now and the wedding if Dax kept up with his little comments. Which, knowing him, he probably would.

The next day, I was in the middle of placing an online order for rental equipment for an upcoming event when a curt knock came on my office door. I looked up from my laptop. “Yeah?”

Sabrina opened the door and poked her head inside. “You have a visitor,” she said, her smile a little strained.

I felt my brow crease. I’d checked my schedule earlier—there were no appointments listed for today here at my office. “Visitor?”

She tucked a curl behind her ear. “It’s, um, Dax’s mom.”

I tensed, my gut twisting. “Oh.” Shit, this might not be good. Dax had said that he believed she truly was behind him as she claimed, but that wasn’t to say she hadn’t changed her tune. “Send her in.” I sat up straighter and closed my laptop.

It was mere moments later that a super pretty dark-haired woman with mismatched eyes entered the room. Her posture wasn’t tense or confrontational. But her steps were a little uncertain, as if she felt somewhat awkward.

*Samesies, lady.*

I pushed out of my chair, rounded my desk, and held out my hand with a smile. “It’s good to see you again, Mrs. Mercier.” Unless she was about to ream my ass, though it wasn’t the impression I was getting.

She shook my hand. “Kensey is fine.”

“Call me Addie or Addison, whichever you prefer.” I gestured at the chair Sabrina often claimed. “Have a seat.” I returned to my chair and rested my clasped hands on the desk.

Her gaze fell to my hand. “That’s quite a ring,” she said, her smile weak.

I looked at her own ring finger. “Right back at you.” Her wedding band was just as exquisite. “So, what can I do for you?” I asked, proud of how remarkably at ease I sounded when, in fact, I felt the complete opposite.

She sat up a little straighter. “I was hoping we could talk.”

“Of course.”

She raised one hand slightly. “Don’t take this the wrong way ...”

“But you’re struggling to support Dax’s choice,” I guessed.

She gave me a sheepish look. “That’s the crux of the situation, yeah.”

“I get it. He’s your son. You’d rather he marry for the more obvious reasons. You’d rather have a better guarantee that he’ll be happy with whoever he ties himself to. I don’t at all blame you.” I’d feel the same if it were my son.

Her head tipped to the side. “Dax wasn’t clear on what your reasons are for marrying him. I mean, I know about the pact. But you’re not required to stick to your word. Why do it?”

“Because his persuasion techniques are off the charts,” I muttered.

She chuckled with a slow nod. “He’s always been good at getting his way.”

“My reasons ... I don’t know if I can make you fully understand. To many others, my decision probably seems like an overreaction to my circumstances. But, to put it simply, I’m tired of waiting for what I want to come to me. It hasn’t happened. Maybe it would one day if I held out longer, but then it might not.”

Of all the men in my past other than Lake, only one stood out; only one never let me down; only one made their mark on me. That was Dax. If it hadn’t been for that, I might not have agreed to keep my word—I couldn’t be sure.

“I did some research on marriage pacts recently,” I told Kensey. “I saw plenty of success stories. I’m hoping that can apply to me and Dax.”

“I hold that same hope, but at the moment I’m kind of skeptical. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not here to ask that you call off the wedding. You’re both adults. Your choices are your own. And I do understand why he’s choosing to do this. But ... I suppose I’d just like to hear that you feel *something* for

him. Even if it's only plain regard. Which may be unrealistic of me, but I hate the thought of him being stuck in an empty marriage."

I sat back in my chair. "I won't lie to you, I can't claim to love him. But I trust him. I respect him. I would never deliberately hurt him. And I hope we can build something good and strong. Like him, I don't intend for this to be a cold marriage."

"That does make me feel a little better." She sighed. "I worry that you two are making a mistake but, as I told Dax, I'm fully behind him if this is truly what he wants. I mean it. I'm telling you this because I think, in your shoes, I'd worry that his family was against me. We're not. We're *all* on the same side."

I gave her a grateful smile. "Thank you." I had been fretting that his parents would give me the cold shoulder.

"Not that I can honestly say Blake isn't finding this hard to understand. But he has no issue at all with you. Only with the situation. He doesn't fully get why Dax would consider this his best option."

"If it wasn't me he was marrying, it would be someone else. The impression I got is that he's given up on trying to build a real relationship."

"Yeah, I sensed that, too." She took a moment to study me as intently as her son often did. "Are you sure this is truly what you want? I don't only ask that as Dax's mom. I ask it as someone who—being so happily married—knows what you could be missing out on by committing to someone you might never love."

I really did like this woman. "It's what I truly want."

"Then I hope everything works out the way we want it to." She got to her feet. "Take care, Addison."

I rose from my chair. "You, too."

No sooner had Kensey left than my best friend rushed inside, a hand on her chest.



“What was that all about?” asked Sabrina. “Did she come to talk you out of marrying Dax?”

“Actually, no.” I sank back into my seat. “She pretty much wanted the reassurance that I wasn’t utterly indifferent toward Dax. She was a lot nicer to me than what I suspect my dad and Ollie have been to him. Both sought Dax out yesterday to press him into backing out of the pact.” They’d also called me late last night to take another shot at making me reassess whether I was truly doing what was best for me.

Sabrina let out a loaded sigh. “I suppose we should have expected that.”

“I did expect it. I know how they are. Dax made it clear they were wasting their time, but I doubt they’ll so easily give up. It’s not in their nature.”

“Don’t be surprised if they give you a recommendation for a divorce lawyer as a wedding gift.”

A surprised chuckle bubbled up. “I wouldn’t put it past them. I’d make them pay for being interfering busybodies by forcing them to wear weird-ass buttonholes, but there’s no way to force them to do anything they don’t want.”

“You’re really no different in that respect, you know.”

“I do know. I’m fine with it. On a whole other subject, did you get Tamara to agree to be a bridesmaid?”

“No.” Sabrina’s lips thinned. “I tried. I really did. She wants to support you on your big day, but she has unflattering views of marriage and thinks the concept of it is bizarre and outdated. But hey, you’ll have Alicia and Harri.”

“*And* Raven, Dax’s sister. I called her earlier. She wants to be included.” She’d been so sweet about it. “I emailed her a picture of the dress Alicia and Harri chose—she gave it a thumbs up.”

“Awesome. We totally need to bring her into the fold. Who’s the best man?”

“Dax’s brother, Caelan.”

“What about the rest of the groomsmen? Who are they?”

“Drey and two guys who seem close to all three brothers. Jagger—or Jag, as he’s mostly referred to—is the son of Kensey’s best friend and also a tattoo artist who works for Caelan. Maverick works at CCC, the place that builds custom motorcycles.”

Sabrina hummed. “I’ve heard plenty about CCC. And I think I’ve seen pictures of Maverick—he’s always photographed with Drey, right?”

“Yes, those two are pretty tight. I haven’t officially met Maverick, but I did meet Jag once—they’re cousins. And equally pleasant to look at.”

“So, basically, there’ll be a hot guy buffet at your wedding.”

“Essentially, yes. I offered for Ollie to be one of the groomsmen. He stiffly but politely turned it down.” Which wasn’t a surprise.

“Because it means he’d otherwise have to give the marriage his stamp of approval.”

“Exactly. But it works out okay, actually. It means I have an equal amount of bridesmaids and groomsmen.”

Sabrina grinned. “You’re going to pair Harri up with Drey when it’s time for them all to walk down the aisle, aren’t you?”

“Well, of course. What kind of sister would I be if I didn’t?”

“The kind who doesn’t want to see Alicia turn a frightening shade of red at the sight of her baby sister linking arms with someone who’s ‘too old’ for her.”

I felt my mouth curve. “And why wouldn’t I want to see that?”

## Chapter Eleven

Mouthing the lyrics to the song playing on my tablet, I smoothed my hand along the brown parcel tape, pressing it firmly against the cardboard box to help it stick. Satisfied it was well wrapped, I grabbed the black marker from the hardwood floor beside me and then scribbled, “BOOKS” on both sides of the box.

I’d spent the past two hours sitting on my bedroom floor packing my belongings, and my butt was beginning to hurt. Luckily, there wasn’t much left to do, because I couldn’t afford to stay up late.

I was getting married tomorrow.

I would have thought I’d be a nervous wreck, but I was the most relaxed I’d been since Dax emailed me out of nowhere to ask for a client consultation. No doubt I’d have a bad case of the jitters in the morning, though. It wasn’t every day a girl exchanged vows with a man before a priest, was it?

Organizing the wedding had gone more smoothly than I’d expected. There had been some glitches here and there, but all were quickly fixed. The entire team at Sapphire Glade had been determined to ensure that nothing got in the way.

They were also determined to ensure that every step of the wedding itself was flawlessly executed. Sabrina had put them all under strict instructions to not let me try interfering tomorrow—it would be too easy for me to let my organizational instincts take over even on my own “special day.”

News of the upcoming wedding had spread fast. People often asked me if it was true, naturally somewhat shocked by how the engagement had come out of nowhere. Like with Grayden, I hadn’t corrected their assumptions that Dax and I were secretly an item and nor did I tell them about the pact—I doubted many people would truly understand why Dax and I had stuck to it, and we could really do without the negativity.

We had enough negativity from our families. Though, to be fair, they *were* easing up on their attempts to be problematic. Both Dane and Ollie had finally ceased badgering me and Dax to back out of our agreement, though they still weren't happy about it. In fact, Ollie had taken to sulking—something made apparent by his one-word text-responses and his insistence on dodging my calls.

I hadn't heard from Kensey again, nor had I seen anything of Blake. According to Dax, his father wasn't keen on the marriage but had stopped commenting on it.

Melinda and Wyatt weren't pleased about it either. They hadn't reacted too well on learning of it. In fact, they'd come to my home and dedicated several hours into trying to make me reevaluate my outlook on the subject. But, of course, it came to nothing. Eventually they'd thrown their hands up and let it go.

Simon was a little more supportive, though evidently worried I was making the wrong choice. His concern was that it would all go tits up and I'd later feel hurt and trapped. Sabrina's parents harbored that same concern but, like Simon, were supporting me.

Pushing aside the box of books, I squirmed slightly to ease the ache in my butt. There wasn't much left to pack at this point. Mostly yet more books, along with some leftover clothes I hadn't gotten round to boxing up yet.

I'd left out the things I'd need for tomorrow, of course. I was planning to get ready here, as were the rest of the bridal party, including Raven. I didn't worry she'd feel like an outsider. When we'd all met for our gown fittings, she'd slotted right into the group with total ease. Mostly because she and Harri had hit it off instantly. Honestly, you'd think they'd known each other for years.

Bopping my head as yet another song began to play, I grabbed a flattened box from the nearby pile and began putting it together. The singer, Inaya Rose, happened to live in Redwater. She was married to an equally famous rock legend, Kaiser Wolfe.

I'd caught glimpses of the couple here and there, and they were seriously cute together. She was a huge smiler while he was a total grump who liked very few people. Even as he wore his default frown, he looked at Inaya as if she were his own personal sun. And if my chest panged at the thought that no one other than Lake had or would ever look at me that way, I set that little titbit aside.

I hadn't seen much of Dax over the past week. I'd gone to his villa again only twice. The first time it had been because I'd needed to drop off my post-wedding bag that included all I'd need for the morning after—I wouldn't have the rest of my stuff until I moved in. The second time I'd gone to his home was because he'd wanted me to officially meet Maverick, so he'd invited him to the villa for dinner, along with his brothers and Jag.

All six males were currently enjoying a meal together at one of Oakengrove's top restaurants—Dax's version of a bachelor party. He'd had the restaurant close to everyone but them, so it would be a private celebration.

He'd offered to arrange something similar for me and my bridal party but, to be frank, I didn't have the time to hold a bachelorette do of any sort. I had to work hard to not allow my wedding to cause me to neglect other events I was arranging.

Hearing my doorbell ring, I frowned, not expecting any visitors. Dropping the parcel tape to the floor, I pushed to my feet and winced. Damn, the ball of my back was stiff as a mother.

I paused my music, headed out of my bedroom, and skipped down the stairs. Opening my front door, I blinked at the sight of my mom waiting there. "Oh, hi." Stepping aside so she could enter, I tucked my hair behind my ear. "I didn't know you were coming." Hopefully she wasn't here to make one, last-ditch attempt to talk me out of marrying Dax. I had too much to do to humor her.

Her brow creased. "I did text you to let you know I was on my way."

“Sorry, I mustn’t have heard the phone chime,” I said, closing the door. “I had music playing while I packed.”

I padded into the living area, conscious of her following me. On the sofa, Gypsy—who was curled into a ball—lifted her head and let out a fussy little chirping sound at my mom. Vienna crossed straight to her, sat down, and began petting her while muttering sweet nothings.

I scratched my cheek. “Want a drink or anything?”

“Nah, I’m fine.” She glanced around. “No Alicia?”

I shook my head. “She went to grab us some takeout food.” Before that, she’d been helping me box up my things.

Crossing one leg over the other, Vienna smiled up at me. “You all set for tomorrow?”

“Yup.”

“Nervous?”

“No, but that’ll probably change in the morning.” I cocked my head. “So, what brings you here?” I asked, keeping my voice casual.

She reached into her purse. “I have something for you.”

Surprise flickered in my belly. “Oh, okay.” I walked to the sofa and sat beside her.

“As you know, I married your dad in Vegas and then we later held a reception in Redwater.” She held out a small, white box. “Your grams gave this to me for my wedding reception, and now I want to give it to you.”

Removing the lid, I felt my brows lift. It was a large safety-pin that sported four tiny charms—a horseshoe, a sixpence, a blue heart, and a photo frame. Inside the frame was a picture of my mom cradling a newborn-me while my dad hovered over us.

“Old, new, borrowed, and blue,” I uttered to myself, having seen other brides with similar pins.

“Yes. Obviously, the photo isn’t the same. The frame originally held one of me and Simon. I changed it for you.” She lightly touched the pin. “I clipped it to my bouquet. I thought you might like to clip it to yours.”

I licked my lips and met her gaze. “Thank you.”

“There was another thing your grams gave me at the exact same time she gifted me this pin.”

“What?”

“An apology.”

I double-blinked, straightening in my seat.

“You see, she found out after I’d married your dad that he’d needed a wife to access his trust fund—I won’t go into how she learned of it, it’s a long story,” Vienna added with a flick of her hand. “She rightly assumed that was why he married me, but she thought I didn’t know that; thought he’d tricked me into believing he loved me when, in fact, I was very aware he didn’t feel that way about me.”

It was genuinely hard to picture him *not* adoring my mother—she was his world.

“Because Melinda had doubted his feelings for me, she’d acted a little cold and stiff toward him for a time.” Vienna’s gaze dropped to the pin. “But the day she gave me this, she apologized; explained she’d reacted that way because she’d been terrified I’d be hurt ... and that’s basically where I am with you now. I’m scared that this won’t work out the way you hope, but I shouldn’t have let that fear get in the way.”

Not liking the heap of guilt in her voice, I gave her arm a little squeeze. “It’s okay. I get why you did.”

“It’s not okay. With the exception of your sisters, we’ve all been a little pessimistic about you marrying Dax. I should have made more of an effort to be the opposite, because I know better than anyone that you can grow to love someone who you never expected would become important to you.”

“So you hadn’t cared for Dad when you married him?”

She gave her head a small shake, her mouth curving. “I liked him. I respected him. I thought he was too gorgeous for his own good. But I married him only as a favor, and I didn’t plan to be his wife for more than a year. That was our agreement. He hadn’t wanted any part of marriage back then.”

I would never have guessed he’d been so averse to it.

“I know it’s different with you and Dax. The marriage won’t be fake or temporary. You’re determined to make it work. But still, you’re going into this without the main ingredient that keeps couples together. That initially worried me. You were right that feelings can grow, though. Me and your dad are evidence of that—something I’ve repeatedly pointed out to him over the past week while pushing him to kick his overprotectiveness aside and give the marriage a chance.”

“But he’ll still walk me down the aisle looking like he’s chewing on a lemon,” I said, feeling my mouth kick up.

She sighed. “Probably. He’s not exactly pleasant in the best of circumstances.” She stroked a hand over my hair. “I’m sorry that I reacted the way I did initially. I’m sorry that I made this about how I felt rather than about how you felt.” She made a face. “I totally pulled a Melinda.”

I felt my smile widen. “It’s all right. You’re forgiven,” I said, putting the lid on the box.

“Anyway ... there’s no way someone can’t love you, Addie, so I don’t see why feelings won’t develop in the case of you and Dax.”

I wasn’t so confident of that, but I quipped, “What’s not to love?”

“I know!” Vienna chuckled. “If Dax doesn’t at the very least grow to care for you, there has to be something wrong with him.”

I snickered and carefully put the box on the coffee table. “If he doesn’t, well, at least I know I can trust him. That’s not something I take for granted. Not after the past relationships I’ve had.”



She angled her body toward me. “As someone who walked into a marriage with a man they weren’t first dating, I’m going to give you some advice that will hopefully help.”

All ears, I cocked my head.

“Regular couples can read each other well; they each know the other’s patterns, hot buttons, triggers, thought processes, etc. You two don’t. It’s going to be vital that you’re straight with each other. Don’t make assumptions—that’s how misunderstandings form, and suddenly you two won’t be on the same page anymore.”

“We promised we’d be honest,” I assured her. “He’ll work with me, not against me.”

Vienna nodded in satisfaction. “Good. You might not be a couple *as such*, but you’ll be a team. Stand together. Back each other. Be willing to hear the other’s side to a story—there are *always* stories with people as high-profile as Dax. I know that from my relationship with your dad.”

Even today, articles were printed that featured rumors of Dane’s alleged “infidelity.” Anyone who knew him would know he would never disrespect himself or my mother that way even if it weren’t for the fact that he had eyes for no one but her.

She dug her teeth into her lower lip. “I want to say one last thing. If you find yourself unhappy in this marriage, if you later feel that you need a way out, it won’t make you a failure.”

“I wouldn’t think it did,” I denied.

She rolled her eyes. “Apparently you’ve forgotten that I know you.” She gently poked my shoulder. “You don’t like to give up on anything; it makes you feel like you’ve failed. It’s why you granted the guys in your past *way* more chances than they deserved. Don’t doom yourself to a cold marriage out of that kind of stubbornness.”

Knowing I was in fact guilty of what she accused, I promised, “I won’t.”

She flashed me a winning smile and opened her arms. “Good. Come here.”

I hugged her tight, leaning into her.

She patted my back. “Your dad will come round. He’s already gone from planning to shoot Dax to merely imagining it.”

Drawing back, I said, “That’s progress.”

“I think so.”

The sound of the front door opening made us both turn slightly. Moments later, Alicia entered the room, carrying takeout bags. I was guessing she’d noticed our mother’s car parked at the curb, because the vision of Vienna on the sofa came as no surprise to her.

“Hey, Mom.” A hint of unease flickered in her eyes. “Whatcha doing here?” It was a casually spoken question, but I heard the worry there.

“I haven’t come to pester Addie to call off the wedding, if that’s what you’re thinking.” Vienna gestured at the box on the coffee table. “I brought a gift for her.”

Alicia grinned. “Ooh, let’s see.”

I retrieved the box and gently pulled off the lid. “Grams gave it to Mom for her wedding reception, and now she’s giving it to me. It’s to clip on my bouquet.”

Delight lit Alicia’s eyes. “That’s so precious.” Her gaze cut to our mother. “What did you bring me?”

Vienna’s brow furrowed. “Nothing. *You’re* not getting married tomorrow.”

“I don’t feel like that needs to be relevant, but fine.” Alicia lifted her bags. “There’s plenty of food here. Want to eat with us?”

“Yeah, go on. I can’t stay long, though. I need to have an early night so I’m fresh for tomorrow.” Vienna looked at me. “So do you.”

“I will. First, food. Then I have to finish packing.” And hopefully I wouldn’t lie awake for hours—it tended to happen when I knew I *needed* sleep.

It was going to be a long day, and I’d be exhausted by the end of it. Then again, maybe not, since I’d spend the entire time thinking about what would come when Dax and I retreated to his villa. Or, more to the point, thinking about how *I* would come. Hard. No doubt more than once, if he hadn’t lost his touch, so to speak. The latter didn’t seem probable.

## Chapter Twelve

“It’s not too late to back out, you know.”

I frowned at my dad. “We’re *literally* about to walk down the aisle.” The freaking wedding march had just begun to play behind the double doors of the room in front of us.

“Not too late,” he reiterated.

“Dad, you promised me earlier that you wouldn’t again try to change my mind.”

“And I’m not,” he said, widening his eyes in innocence. “I’m just pointing out that the option is there.”

“Well, it’s not an option I want to take.” I smoothed a hand down the side of my floor-length, sleeveless dress—an ivory satin, it boasted a V neck and also a few embellishments in the back straps. It was as elegant as it was stunning. “Let’s get moving.”

My arm linked through his, I urged him toward the doors. Tall with beautiful carvings, they suited the stately building so well. It was like something from a Jane Austen novel. Magnificent, regal, and timeless.

Dane shoved open a door and we walked inside the room where rows upon rows of padded chairs were lined up. The guests stood, but I didn’t glance at them. I immediately fixed my attention on Dax, who stood at the altar looking good enough to goddamn eat in his dark suit complete with a gold cravat and waistcoat.

His lips tipped up on one side as we locked eyes. There was so much in that hint of a smile—pride, satisfaction, male appreciation, a dare to come closer.

My grip flexing on my bouquet of white roses, I walked toward him, my gaze clinging to his. I didn’t want to look at the guests. Didn’t want to chance that I’d catch anyone pulling faces or whatever.

Having practiced walking in them many times over the past week, I didn't teeter as I strolled down the aisle in my ivory high heels. The diamanté ankle-straps had annoyed me the first time I wore them, but they no longer chafed.

Dane leaned into me. "You look beautiful, by the way," he said, his voice too low to carry to others. "Way too good for Mercier."

I felt my eyelid twitch. "Would you consider anyone good enough for me?" I asked just as quietly.

"No," he grunted. "But you'd be better off with someone who—"

*"You promised."*

"I'm not attempting to change your mind, I'm merely making a point."

"Stick that point up your ass and let. It. Go."

A few footsteps later, we finally reached Dax. The music stopped, and there seemed to be a boom of silence. I went to stand beside him ... but my dad didn't let go of my arm.

Unimpressed, I widened my eyes at Dane. His mouth set into a harsh slash, and he shot my fiancé a foul glare. I heard a male snicker that I was pretty sure came from Drey.

From her seat in the front row, my mom exchanged an eye roll with me and then cleared her throat loud. At that, Dane let out a displeased grunt, reluctantly released me, and finally stepped back.

A pinch of amusement dancing in Dax's eyes, he took my hand in his. As one, we turned to face the priest. Rather than release my hand, he tightened his hold—not to the point where it hurt or felt uncomfortable. No, it was a firm grip that screamed "there's no backing out now."

He really didn't need to suspect I would. Because as the officiant began to speak, I realized with a start that I harbored absolutely no doubts or uncertainties about marrying the man beside me.

We might not be loved-up, might not even be an actual couple, but that didn't seem so important right then. I felt at peace with my decision; felt I'd chosen the right path for me, even if it wasn't a path that many others would properly understand. I didn't feel even the slightest bit nervous about this at all.

Maybe it was just because I was finally in control of this aspect of my life. Or maybe someone had slipped me a Xanax or something.

As the priest talked, I snuck the occasional, superfast glance at Dax. Most often, he was looking at the officiant. On other occasions, our gazes momentarily clashed.

When it came time for us to say our vows, he turned to fully face me. It wasn't his words I latched onto—I knew he couldn't truthfully mean *all* of them, more specifically the whole “to love and to cherish” part. I focused on the intensity in his gaze and the seriousness of his tone; mentally *heard* his promise to stick by all that we had agreed on during our talks.

I recited my own vows in much the same way, conveying that same message to him. He must have received it loud and clear, because a flash of something warm and a little smug washed across his face.

I switched my gaze back to the priest as he once more began to speak. It wasn't long later that the part arrived where he appealed for anyone who objected to the wedding to speak up. I tensed, not trusting that *someone* wouldn't say *something*.

I heard slight mutterings coming from Ollie quickly followed by my mother hiss-whispering, “Feel how you want to feel, but hold your fucking peace.”

I bit back a smile and looked at Dax to see a glitter of humor in his eyes. Yeah, he'd heard.

Once the time to exchange rings rolled around, I carefully handed my bouquet to a waiting Sabrina, who beamed at me. She looked stunning in her gold satin gown—it was similar to those worn by my three bridesmaids.

Dax's best man, Caelan, doubled as our ring bearer. He handed over the white gold wedding bands. Dax and I slid them on each other's fingers, spouted more ceremonial words, and were soon after pronounced man and wife.

My pulse kicked into high gear when Dax dipped his head and lowered his lips to mine. Warm and soft, they brushed over my mouth ... and then claimed it. I felt only the barest flick of his tongue against the tip of mine, but it didn't matter—that lingering, shallow, slow-motion kiss was woven with such a deep sensuality that my body lit up and I almost did a head-to-toe shiver.

Yes, he was *that* good.

He pulled back, a gleam of carnal promise in his eyes. And then it was done. Over. I was officially Addison Mercier—a thought that was somewhat surreal.

All that happened next went by in a blur. Paperwork was signed, pictures were taken, confetti was thrown, more pictures were taken. Before I knew it, everyone had poured into the larger room where the reception would take place. Guests found their tables easily and quickly due to the seating chart.

As I took my seat at the head table, Dax put his mouth to my ear and said, “Part of me doubted you'd go through with this.”

Affronted, I frowned as I laid down my bouquet. “I gave you my word,” I said, my voice low.

“And I was certain you intended to stick to it. I simply wasn't sure if, when the day arrived, you'd find that you couldn't.”

I sniffed, placing my clutch beneath the table. “Well, you were wrong.”

Leaning forward a little, I glanced past him to check on Sabrina. She sat at the end of the table, gabbing away to Blake—most likely about me, since she'd told me in advance that she meant to “big me up” to my father-in-law so he'd come round to the idea of the marriage.

In between him and Dax sat Kensey, who was gently stroking the white roses woven into the table garland, likely trying to determine if they were real or artificial. They were actually synthetic, as was the rest of the floral décor, but they looked astonishingly real.

Turning my head to check out the other side of the table, I noticed that my parents were having a whispered argument—I made out the word “speech,” so I was guessing Dane was again complaining that I’d wiped the speech-part of the events from the reception. He’d no doubt intended to publicly threaten Dax with bodily harm if he hurt me.

At the far end of the table, Caelan was mouthing something to his younger brother, who sat at the table closest to this. Drey merely stared at him, his expression one of blank incomprehension.

I did a quick scan of the room, noticing that people were casually chatting—some sipping at the champagne that was currently being served. I threw Dax a sideways glance and asked, “When do you want to do the introductions?” I hadn’t before met many of his guests, and vice versa. We’d agreed we’d do it at some point on the wedding day.

He leaned into me. “Some time after we cut the cake.”

So—after we’d downed our meal, had our first dance, performed the parents-dances, cut the cake, and then officially kicked off the party—that was what we did.

Together, we went from table to table where we said our hellos, thanked people for coming, and each introduced the other to unfamiliar guests. Everybody was polite and friendly, even Ollie—though not until Marleigh dug her fingers into his thigh hard enough to make him wince.

Dax and I then separated as I joined my family and friends on the dancefloor. He wasn’t much for dancing. I soon learned his father was like him in that respect. Not his mom, however. Kensey spent a fair amount of time on the dancefloor with Vienna, Hanna, and also Jag’s mom Sarah as the hours went on.



I occasionally attempted to chat with members of my team, but they scampered fast when they saw me coming—likely not trusting that I wouldn't try to take over.

At a later point, as I exited the restrooms with Harri and Raven, I asked them, "Are you having a good time?"

Blowing out a breath, her eyes lit with a smile, Harri nodded hard. "Yes. Your husband is a dish. Really."

Raven chuckled. "I could say the same about your brother—I'm kind of bummed that he's taken."

If he hadn't been taken, he would have for sure looked twice at Raven. The girl was so beautiful she could stop traffic. Tall and willowy, she had the same mismatched eyes and dark hair as her mom and oldest brother.

I gave Harri a playful nudge. "You seem to be getting along well with Drey." I'd noticed them talking often. Not flirting, but jabbering away like old friends.

"I thought I'd be nervous talking to him, but he's so easy to chat to," said my sister.

"Kind of like you, then." Harri made everyone feel immediately comfortable with her.

The three of us went back into the room where the reception was being held. The music was still blaring, and everybody appeared to be enjoying themselves.

A guy I recognized as Maverick's younger brother—Jameson was his name, if I remembered rightly—appeared in front of us, his attention on Raven. "How about a dance?" he asked.

I expected her to snap up his offer—he was super good-looking. But her smile faltered, and she slid her eyes to her left. I tracked her gaze, noting it had landed on Rafael ... who was not only staring right at her but gave her a minute shake of the head.

*Well, now.*

Raven swiftly resettled her eyes on Jameson. "Thanks, but these shoes are hurting my feet. Ask Harri. She loves to

dance.” The girl practically shoved my sister toward him. Harri happily went off with him, having missed the byplay.

I inched closer to Raven. “Is something going on between you and Rafael?”

She tensed, her eyes widening. “No, of course not.”

“I noticed the look you two just exchanged—he didn’t want you dancing with that guy, and you obliged him when he basically told you not to.”

She sighed, her cheeks reddening. “Nothing is going on, I swear. He’s one of my brother’s best friends. And thirty-three. A little old for me, right?”

“I don’t know. That’s like, what, a thirteen-year age gap? It’s not terribly bad. But the fact that he’s deep in illegal crap? Well, that’s different.”

She let out an amused snort. “You do realize my brother is no saint in that respect, right?”

“Oh, I do. But he doesn’t run a crime syndicate.”

Just then, Sabrina and Tamara materialized ... and Raven made a quick escape while I was distracted. My lips thinning, I resolved that I’d speak to her about Rafael again at a later point.

“I love this dress so much,” Sabrina practically cooed as she stared at my gown. “I knew as soon as I saw you slip it on at the bridal shop that this was *the one*.”

“I know. You yelled it.”

Tamara’s mouth curved. “That does not surprise me.”

“I’ll tell you what is surprising,” I said. “That your brother brought a female guest—I thought he was single.”

“So did we,” said Sabrina, pouting. “I was going to set him up with Alicia.”

“I don’t think you’d have been very successful at it. She’s too busy giving the stink-eye to every male that looks in Harri’s general direction. That’s when she’s not eyeing up Jag.”

Tamara hummed. “I noticed that. He is eyeing her up right back. Or he does when she is not looking.”

I nodded. It was strange to be at a wedding I wasn’t organizing. It meant I saw things I might have otherwise missed. Juicy stuff. Like how one of Dax’s cousins kept mooning over an oblivious Maverick. Like how waitresses kept slipping bits of paper into Drey’s pocket. Like how one of Rafael’s bodyguards watched Raven with a protective eye—I’d initially thought he was interested in her, but now I was thinking that maybe Rafael had asked him to keep watch over her.

As Caelan walked past us—giving me a brief tip of his chin—Tamara leaned into me and said, “Now he is a fine specimen. They all are, really. Objectively speaking.”

“Gossiping?” asked Ollie, sidling up to me.

“Nope,” I said. “Perving. In my case, anyway.”

He arched a brow. “I would think your new *husband* won’t like that.”

I felt my brow crease. “Why do you say the H word with sarcasm?”

Ollie sipped at his drink. “Because he isn’t your real husband, is he?”

“I intend to fuck him every which way to consummate the marriage tonight so, yeah, he will be my real husband.”

“La, la, la, I don’t want to hear about it.” Draping an arm over my shoulders, he pressed a kiss to my cheek. “Love you. Sorry I’ve been a dick.”

I smiled. “Love you, too. I’ll let it lie if you be nice to Dax from now on.”

A pained look fell over his face, and he tugged at his tuxedo bow. “I’ll give it my best shot.”

Simon sidled up to him. “What’s with that look on your face?” he asked him in a soft, lilting voice, his air warm and effeminate. *Maggie*.

Ollie rubbed at his shoulder. “Addie wants me to be nice to Dax.”

“Hmm.” Maggie slid her gaze to me. “I said hi to Dax just now. I must admit, he was very courteous.” Her eyes filled with worry, she gave me a very motherly look. “I hope you know what you’re doing, young lady.”

“I do,” I told her.

She exhaled heavily. “Well, he’s certainly handsome; I’ll grant him that much. *Love* those peepers of his.” She sighed. “Deacon likes him.”

“Deacon would,” Ollie muttered teasingly. “He likes anyone with an edge of danger about him.”

Maggie smiled. “That is true.”

A short while later, more food was served. People ate and drank and danced and laughed. I couldn’t include my dad or Blake in the latter, but their glowers melted away and they started to enjoy themselves eventually.

It was when I was draining my flute of champagne—I had a nice buzz going on at this point—that Dax appeared at my side and spoke into my ear. “It’s time for us to leave.”

My stomach clenched. His words were practically coated in liquid sex. I met his gaze, finding his own dark with want. Setting down my glass, I swallowed. “All right.”

We said private goodbyes to our nearest and dearest, made our grand exit, and hopped into a waiting limo. The venue had plenty of bedrooms, including a honeymoon suite, but he’d said no to using the latter with no explanation why. Since I wasn’t too bothered and he hadn’t made many demands, I’d respected his wish.

The moment the car doors were shut, closing us in a confined space, the air began to thicken with tension. Neither of us spoke. Or touched. Or even looked at each other.

I rubbed at my thigh, my free hand gripping my clutch tight. It was probably weird that I was nervous, right? It wasn’t

as if I was a virgin. Plus, we'd had sex before. Lots of it. We weren't strangers to each other's bodies.

And yet, my central nervous system was hyper.

Maybe it was due to the knowledge that the next step would solidify everything. There had been a surreal quality to the day's events; to the concept of us now being man and wife. Consummating the marriage would make it real.

Or maybe my system was so hyper because he had such a powerful impact on my body. *Too* powerful an impact. He had more control over it than I did, and that was an unsettling fact.

The closer we got to his home, the more taut the air in the vehicle became. Until my skin prickled and my muscles went tight. Excitement was a fever in my blood, and it took everything I had not to tap my heel restlessly.

Eventually, we reached his home. Exiting the car, I subtly drew in a steadying breath. We entered the villa in relative silence.

"Bedroom," he said, his voice low and deep, his eyes glittering with intent. It wasn't an order; it was a declaration that held a taunting pinch of challenge.

Remembering the way, I walked past him and headed for the staircase, conscious of him trailing behind. Fisting my dress, I lifted it slightly so I wouldn't trip as I ascended the stairs. Even as my pulse went nuts and my stomach kept clenching and unclenching, I went straight into the master bedroom. There, I dropped my clutch on a shelf, moved to the foot of the bed, and then turned to fully face him.

Halting a few feet away, Dax gave me a lazy eye-bang, the glow of possession in his eyes. He tugged off his cravat and dropped it on a nearby chair. "Did I tell you that you look fucking breathtaking in that dress?"

No, but he hadn't needed to. Dax could communicate so much with a single look. *When* he felt like it, that was. Other times he'd wear an inscrutable expression that kept you guessing.

He shrugged off his jacket, tossed it on the chair, and then deftly unbuttoned his waistcoat—each movement smooth, fluid, unrushed, ramping up the tension still humming between us.

“Don’t,” he said when I went to lower the side zipper of my dress. “I’ll take it off myself when I’m ready.”

It was probably for the best, since my hands were trembling—knowing my luck, the zipper would get stuck.

After adding his waistcoat to the pile, he began tackling his shirt buttons. “Do you know why I didn’t want to use the manor’s honeymoon suite?”

No, I didn’t. Nor did I particularly care at that moment. Because he was baring inches of sleek, tanned, inked muscle that I really wanted to lick. His body was a masterpiece. Screamed strength and power.

“Because”—he threw the shirt on the pile—“I only intend to fuck my wife for the first time in *our* bed.”

My heart slammed against my ribs. I licked my lips. “We’ve had sex before.”

He dropped his hands to his belt and undid the buckle. “Not while you were wearing my rings on your finger.” He whipped off the belt and placed it on top of the clothes he’d shed. “This is different.”

My pulse did a little skip as he slowly came toward me. The rush of exquisite excitement that swept over me left goosebumps in its wake. I felt my breathing speed up as the tension in the air snapped taut.

He stopped directly in front of me, so close our bodies touched and I could feel his hard cock pressing against my stomach. “Don’t move unless I tell you,” he said. Didn’t order, no, just *said*. And yet, the pull to comply—more, to please him—was right there.

While I’d often bristled when other males tried dominating me in the bedroom, I’d never reacted that way with Dax—he was just so different. He didn’t *boss* me. Didn’t

dish out orders. Didn't voice his directives with an expectance of obedience.

He asserted himself, owned his personal power, with such *ease* and calm. The ease and calm of a man for whom being so authoritative was just a basic part of his personality. All that strength and self-possession made me feel safe rather than disrespected; made following his directives feel natural and even a little compelling.

Dax lightly rested his hands on the sides of my face, letting his gaze roam over it, stroking his thumb along the corner of my mouth. "Beautiful." He dipped his head, touching the tip of his nose to mine for the merest moment before drawing back. "And now all mine again."

He skimmed his hands upward, brushing them over my ears, gently thumbing the lobes and skimming over the shells—the fluid move woke up so many nerve-endings it was crazy.

He started carefully removing the pins from my hair, his face so excruciatingly close I felt every soft pulse of air he exhaled. His dark, spicy scent seemed to slink its way into my system and root itself in my lungs. Like it imprinted itself on me.

I remained still, drinking in the delicious energy arcing between us. Flutters of anticipation yo-yoed around my stomach. But I wasn't experiencing any urge to fidget. I felt too relaxed, too comfortable. Also too needy.

Basically, endorphins and dopamine were having their wicked way with me.

I'd missed this. Missed this combined feeling of supreme safety and hyper-arousal that came from being under the decadent direction and intent care of someone so strong and powerful and implacable. I'd never found it with any other man.

Pulling out yet another clip, Dax brushed his lips lightly along my temple and gently nuzzled me there. My heart jumped at the unexpected touch, like I'd been zapped by static

electricity. My facial nerve-endings were just so excruciatingly *aware* and sensitive right then.

A whisper-soft, butterfly kiss passed over my forehead as my hair tumbled down my back. “That’s what I want.” Breezing a featherlight kiss over my cheekbone, he added the last of the pins to the nearby dresser.

Already damp, I flexed my fingers. “I don’t suppose there’s any point in me asking you to speed things along, is there?” It wasn’t really a question. When Dax got it in his head to take his time, all you could do was enjoy the ride—and you would. Very much so. But the wait was almost painful.

A dark intensity swallowed his pupils. “Oh, this isn’t going to be a quick fuck, Addison. Far from it.” He slithered his hand up the back of my neck, gathered a fistful of my hair, and wrenched my head back.

I gasped, my inner walls contracting.

He softly dragged the tip of his nose down the side of my neck. “Shall I tell you what’s coming?” he asked, his tone low, deep, conversational. “I’m going to explore, use, and defile you. Every inch, Addison. Every fucking inch of you will ache for what I can give you. By the time I’m done here, your body is going to know exactly who it belongs to.” He pulled my head up, his gaze locking on mine. “And it’s never going to forget.”



## Chapter Thirteen

If he was aiming to make my brain short-circuit, there was a good chance he'd succeed.

I didn't mind slow and gentle, but it wasn't my preference—I was too impatient. This wasn't a mere leisurely seduction, though. This wasn't a prelude to a soft, easy fuck. This was Dax doing what he did best—messing with my mental equilibrium by making my emotions spin and keeping me off-balance.

I knew he could make the switch any moment from gentle and sensual to rough and aggressive. The anticipation of that was both maddening and intoxicating.

My breaths turning short and rapid, I fought the urge to reach for him. Which became so much harder when he traced the outline of my lower lip with his tongue—the nerve-endings in my face weren't doing so well under the force of the sensory overload.

“Arms up,” he said. “Good.” He lazily lowered my zipper and then gestured for me to return my arms to my sides. He gently tugged my straps over my shoulders and allowed my dress to slither down my body and puddle at my feet.

His eyes flared with carnal heat as he took in my corset and lacy panties—both were the same shade of ivory as my gown. He dropped to a crouch, taking me by surprise. I inhaled sharply as he ghosted the tip of his nose over the strip of panty-covered skin above my clit.

His hand went straight to one shoe strap. He deftly undid it before then doing the same to the other. “Step out of them.” As soon as I did, he set them aside and then straightened in a move so fluid it was almost snake-like.

Dipping his head to mine, he skimmed the length of his finger along the underneath of my jaw, took my bottom lip between both of his, gave said lip a tug ... and then drew back, depriving me of the kiss he knew I craved.

*This motherfucker.*

“Bed.” His tone—so velvety, so deep, so confident—effortlessly compelled me to comply.

I walked to the bed and slid onto the mattress, positioning myself flat on my back. The bamboo sheets were cool and soft against my skin.

“Now stay there just like that.” He unzipped his fly and then shucked his slacks and underwear. His dick was full and aggressively hard. At least nine solid, thick inches. It was really no shock that my nipples tightened and my inner walls clenched.

Dax stalked to the foot of the bed, making my heartbeat lose its steady rhythm all over again. He leaned forward, gripped the waistband of my panties, and then drew them down my legs. His gaze darkened to flint as he stared at my pussy. “Bare, just as I requested.”

Well, I’d known I’d benefit from it.

He tossed my underwear on the floor. “I was going to wait until I was inside you before I let you come. But now ...” He splayed his warm, strong hands on my legs and shoved them apart with such effortless strength and entitlement that it made me a little dizzy. “Now, I think I’ll reward you by letting you come when I eat you out.”

Awesome. The sooner we got to that part the better. I was already wet and ready. My body was suspended in a devastatingly high state of anticipation that was becoming increasingly intolerable.

Kneeling between my thighs, he said, “I hope you’re not attached to this.”

I frowned. “To what?”

He tore open my corset, making several of the little hooks hit the floor with a *ping*.

I dragged in a stunned breath, and his eyes dropped to my breasts. Stared with such unwavering intensity a self-conscious flush raced up my neck. His gaze lowered even

further, taking in my navel piercing and also the Aztec flower tattoo that spanned the left side of my lower stomach.

He traced the tattoo with his fingertip. “This is new. I like it. Is this Caelan’s work?”

I shook my head. “I had it done while on vacation years ago.”

Dax skated his fingertip away from the tattoo and up to circle one nipple. “I’m going to spend some time with these pretty breasts.” He curled his body over mine and planted a fist either side of my head. “First, though”—he sucked at the curve of my mouth—“there’s something I need to do.”

I slid my hands over his solid shoulders. “What’s that?”

His lips came down on mine. *Finally*. He kissed me with a sensuous, mind-numbing, sexual expertise—the familiarity of it caused a hundred memories to rush at me full-force.

With each skilled stroke of his tongue, I felt myself sink deeper and deeper into the moment. Until my focus centered so fully on the kiss—on the warmth of his lips, the velvet feel of his tongue, the nip of his teeth—that the world around me faded away.

I felt like I was drowning in the chemical bliss that assaulted me. My head spun. My thoughts went fuzzy. My body heated and trembled.

I clutched at his shoulders, pricking my nails into his skin, desperate for more even though my lungs burned for air at this point. My clit tingling, I arched into him, all but molding my body into his, grinding against his cock.

Breaking the kiss, Dax skimmed his lips down my throat as he rested his weight over me, forcing my body to sink into the mattress. Gasping for air now that my mouth was free, I wrapped my legs around his hips. I couldn’t arch or grind again—his weight pinned me in place.

He nibbled at my little “happy” spot between my neck and shoulder, making tingly sparks of pleasure dart to my clit.

Then he bit down. *Hard.*

I hissed. “Ow. That hurt.”

He lapped at the bite and then blew air over my now-wet skin. A little shudder rode my spine, and he let out a pleased hum. “Still so very sensitive there, I see.”

He kissed his way down my chest and licked along the slope of my breast. A breast he proceeded to lavish some *serious* attention on—squeezing, nipping, suckling, palming. And I very soon realized that his “*I’m going to spend some time with these*” comment had been no exaggeration.

He went hell for leather on both, and he didn’t rush; he went at his own lazy, sensual pace. When he wasn’t using his hands on my breasts, he was skating them over my ribs, stomach, arms, or thighs.

My nipples were soon so sensitive and tight they throbbed with pleasure/pain, which was right when he trailed kisses down my stomach. He explored my tattoo with his tongue before settling his attention on the skin around my belly button—licking, nipping, suckling.

Then he went lower still, until I felt the wash of his warm breath over my pussy.

*Thank the good Lord.*

He nuzzled me. “I remember your smell, your taste.”

The first swipe of his tongue lashed my clit. The second zigzagged over my folds. The third licked at my slit ... and then I lost track as he got right down to business.

His fingers dug into the globes of my butt, holding me in place as he gorged. I sank under the thrashing waves of sensation. There was just *so much*.

Pleasure swam through my veins, arching my neck, making my thigh muscles quiver. Tension coiled low and deep—one that wound tighter when he wrapped his lips around my little bundle of nerves and suckled gently.

Shit, marrying him was worth it just for this. Seriously. He ate pussy like it was a delicacy he wanted to savor and

relish.

I choked on a moan as the velvet softness of his tongue rasped over the entrance of my pussy. And then it was inside me. Stabbing deep, swirling around, flicking at my g-spot.

I grabbed at his hair as I rode the pulses of his tongue. He kept them shallow. On purpose. And it drove me nuts.

I gave his hair a demanding tug, letting him know that

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A hand sharply came down on my inner thigh.

I jumped with a gasp. The sting of his punishing slap radiated right to my core, and the tension within me snapped. I shattered, my head tipping back, my pussy rippling, a hoarse cry crawling up my throat.

Dax let out a speculative hum. “That answers my unspoken question.” He skulked up my body until he was once more blanketing me, his broad shoulders blocking my view so that all I saw was him.

Breathing through my fast-subsiding orgasm, I rapidly blinked. “What?” I asked, my voice a little raspy.

“I wanted to know if riding the edge of pain still gets you off. It turns out it does.” He reached down and wedged the thick head of his cock inside me.

*Well, hello.* I dug my fingers into his sides because, yeah, ow. Not that he was monstrously big, but I hadn’t had sex in months and he boasted some *serious* girth, so there was always at least a small burn.

He swept his hand along my outer thigh and palmed my butt. “Wrap me up.”

I curved my legs around his hips and glided my hands up his back to hook onto the backs of his shoulders.

“I remember fucking this pussy for the first time,” he said, grazing the rim of my ear with his lips. “You were tighter than anything I’ve ever felt. But you took every inch, even though it hurt you.” He began to slowly push inside me and groaned deep in his throat. “Still so snug.”

I bit my lip at the fiery burn that streaked up my core. “Wait, I need a second.”

“You can take it, we both know you can. Just a little more ...” He sank deeper still, forging his way past swollen, stubborn muscles. Finally, he bottomed out. “There, that’s a good girl.”

Uncomfortably full, I shifted slightly ... which only made him slide deeper inside me. *Shit*. It was both good and bad, both pleasure and pain.

He braced his elbows on the mattress. “Your hands. Give them to me.”

I pressed my palms to his, and we linked our fingers. He twisted my left hand slightly so he could get a good look at the rings there. An intensity gathered in the backs of his eyes like the beginnings of a storm. Those eyes flew to mine as he stretched my arms so far above my head I felt the wrench in my shoulders.

I hitched in a breath, my nipples tightening painfully, my inner muscles spasming around him.

Grinding his teeth, he reared back in a slow retreat. “I’ve been wanting to do this since you first walked into my office.” He started slamming into me, his hips furiously snapping forward. I felt the slap of his balls with every deliciously deep thrust.

“Slow and gentle” vanished fast, and now he was sheer unadulterated sexual aggression. Loving it, I curled my legs even tighter around him.

He dragged his teeth down my throat, and the minor sting was a flick to my clit. Tightening my hold on his hands, I tilted my head to give him better access to my neck. A low growl vibrated along my skin, and then he sucked at my pulse hard. All the while, he kept powering into me at an insanely savage pace.

I couldn’t lie, being held down this way made my body sing. It wasn’t merely about being helpless. It was about having all that male contained power—one he usually kept so

tightly leashed—directed at me. Only one thing would have made it better. Only one.

His perceptive gaze arrowed on mine, seeing too much. “I know you want to struggle. So struggle.”

I bucked my hips and strived to pull my hands free. He only groaned and took me harder. I bucked again. Writhed. Twisted. Hissed. Yanked against his hold. The more my struggles came to nothing, the closer I came to imploding—if that made me weird, so be it.

The friction building within me soon became too sharp, too tight, too static. “Dax ...”

“It’s okay, baby, you can come.”

Hot sparks of pure bliss cracked through my system like lightning rods. I ignited, soared, drifted. I thought I screamed, but I wasn’t sure—too consumed by the release that lit up my body like a goddamn firework.

Dax grunted as he rammed harder and faster, each forward roll of his hips heavy and frantic as he chased his own orgasm. Then he found it, jamming his cock impossibly deep as jets of come burst out of him.

He collapsed on top of me, burying his face in my neck, his breathing as ragged as mine. God, if I could bottle up what I was feeling now I’d be a gazillionaire. Truly, I felt boneless. Depleted. Giddy. At peace. Totally relaxed.

And possessed. Purely and utterly possessed.

I’d give the guy a gold star if I had one. Maybe even a ribbon, too.

This marriage thing was working out so far. *May the good sexual fortune continue.*



Looking in the mirror of the en suite bathroom the next morning, I grimaced. Ugh, I looked as fatigued as I felt. At

least there were no bags under my eyes.

I'd had little sleep. Dax hadn't been content with one round of sex. No, there'd been more.

He'd fucked my mouth. Like *literally* fucked it. And my throat. He'd also roughly taken me from behind while he had two fingers buried in my ass.

Basically, he hadn't lied when he'd said he meant to use and defile me.

As such, I was sore in a few places, but not so sore it hurt to walk or anything. Which was good, because I had a long day ahead of me.

After doing my morning business, I padded into my new bedroom. Dax was nowhere in sight, but I could hear him pottering around downstairs. It hadn't been a surprise to wake to an empty bed—he was a busy guy with several businesses to oversee. I knew from personal experience that it was tricky enough managing one.

I retrieved my morning-after duffel—which I'd brought here earlier this week—from the closet. As I plonked it on the bed, I heard my phone chime with yet another incoming text message.

I often woke to find dozens of work emails waiting for a response, but generally not a plentiful amount of texts from friends and family. However, I'd received several messages from various people this morning—some “checking in,” some asking how my wedding night went, some thanking me for inviting them to the event and telling me they had a great time.

The “checking in” emails were sent by my sisters and mom. Really, they wanted to hear that I was fine and not experiencing any regrets, so I'd assured them they had no need to worry. Sabrina had merely wanted to know if Dax liked the corset. I'd told her it was a hit, not mentioning that he'd torn it.

Deciding I'd read my new text in a little while, I pulled on some clothes, dabbed on a bit of makeup, and then made my way downstairs with my cell in hand. Following the sound



of a muffled voice, I found Dax sitting at a table on the patio. He was speaking into his phone, an almost-empty plate and a half-full mug in front of him.

And he looked fresh as a damn daisy, *not* like someone who'd spent most of the night awake.

God clearly had favorites, and Dax was one of them.

Spread around the table were dishes covered by stainless steel domes. An un-used plate also waited, along with cutlery, a cup, a coffee jug, and creamer. That explained why the scents of coffee and food were heavy in the air.

He looked at me and tipped his chin in greeting. Though his eyes heated, he made no attempt to touch me. Didn't flash me a soft smile or pause in his conversation to speak to me. But I hadn't expected anything different, given he wasn't affectionate or tactile by nature. Plus, we might be legally bound by marriage, but we weren't emotionally bound.

Responding with a quick smile, I took the seat across from him, delighted to find it warm. The pergola provided plenty of shade, but the sun's heat had nonetheless seeped into the chair fabric.

I could understand why he chose to eat breakfast out here. It was incredibly peaceful. There was so little noise. Beneath the sound of Dax's voice, there was only the chirping of birds, the slight creak of the tall trees, and the very distant whine of a lawnmower.

Hungry and curious, I lifted each of the dome covers one by one to see what selection of food awaited. I loaded my plate with pancakes and blueberries, topped them with maple syrup, and then prepped myself a cup of coffee.

When I placed my first forkful of food in my mouth, I almost groaned. Damn, those pancakes were good. As I chewed, I checked the text I'd received mere minutes ago. It was from Ollie, asking if I needed help moving my things to Dax's place. I felt my face soften. I knew it was his way of telling me that, in spite of his reservations, he was fully behind me from here on out.

I sent him a text, thanking him for his offer but assuring him I had it covered. Dax had already informed me that he, his brothers, Jag, and Maverick would take care of it.

As I wolfed down my breakfast, I scanned through my emails. I'd notified my clients that, due to my getting married, I'd be unavailable from the day prior to the day after. Though I'd told them to forward any queries to Sabrina, I still had a shit-ton of emails and voicemails—none of which I'd respond to until tomorrow.

Finally, Dax ended his call. Resting his phone on the glass table, he said, "Morning."

"Morning," I greeted, lowering my own cell to the table. "How long have you been up?"

"About an hour and a half, but I didn't have the food delivered until I heard you moving around upstairs."

An hour and a half? I gave him a dirty look. "Must be nice to be the picture of alertness when you had so little sleep."

His lips quirking, he hiked up a brow. "Are you saying you would have preferred sleep to orgasms?"

"No." I forked the last piece of pancake and dipped it in what was left of my syrup. "I just resent that you appear all sharp and on the ball while I look like I could drift off any second." It quite simply wasn't fair.

"What you look is well-fucked," he corrected, his tone casual. "Nothing wrong with that."

I blinked, pausing in chewing my food. Only he could talk about sex with the same nonchalance he'd also use when speaking of the weather.

He picked up his mug. "Maverick, Jag, and my brothers will meet us at your house in an hour so we can transfer your things here."

"I'm assuming one of them will be driving something big enough to carry furniture," I said, lowering my cutlery to my plate.

“Maverick’s going to borrow his dad’s van.”

“Ollie offered to help, which is really him extending an olive branch.”

“Good. I would rather you weren’t at odds with your brother.” Dax took a swig of his coffee. “Speaking of olive branches ... Grayden emailed me this morning.”

I stilled while reaching for a wet wipe.

“He claims to regret how he’s behaved recently—more specifically his defense of Felicity and Blaise.”

I felt my brow furrow. “Defense?”

Dax knocked back more of his drink. “Sometime after I called Felicity to warn her how exceptionally stupid it would be for her or her son to fuck with you again, Grayden contacted me, insisting that I was overreacting and there’d been a ‘misunderstanding.’ He swore that Blaise hadn’t graffitied the sign, and he maintained that Felicity had only been rude to you because she was drunk.”

What an asshole. Grayden *knew* she was a bitch to me in general, and he *knew* Blaise was a regular vandal. Then again, Grayden was bound to stick up for his family, wasn’t he?

Sniffing, I tore open the wet wipe wrapper. “Making light of their behavior was a shitty move, but it’s only natural that he’s protective of them.”

“I don’t think it was a matter of protectiveness. I think he was angry at me for making you mine, and he used my warnings to Felicity and Blaise as an excuse to reproach me.”

I felt my brows dip. “What makes you think that?”

“There was bitterness in his wording. The emotion was out of place. Why be bitter that I’d issued warnings to his woman and stepson?”

Why indeed. Cleaning my sticky fingers, I tilted my head. “What did you do?”

“I sent him the CCTV footage showing Blaise clearly vandalizing the parking sign. That spoke for itself. I wasn’t going to be baited into engaging in an argument just so Grayden had an excuse to vent.”

If my ex had aimed to wrench a real reaction out of Dax, he’d taken the wrong route. You couldn’t hope to play a master manipulator unless you had some serious game of your own. Grayden did not. “What was his response to the footage?”

“There wasn’t one. I didn’t hear from him again until this morning. He apologized for how he’d acted.” Dax paused. “He also suggested that you and I go to dinner with him and Felicity sometime soon.”

“What?” I blurted on a humorless chuckle of pure disbelief. “Why? I mean, I know you two were once friends, but that was in high school, right?”

“Yes. We lost touch once he went to law school. I think he wanted to distance himself from me due to my reputation for fear that no law firm would otherwise employ him.” He shrugged, unbothered. “Proposing we have dinner is more or less a peace offering. He probably hopes he can smooth things over.”

“Probably. I wouldn’t want my family to be in your bad books.” I dropped the used lemon-scented wipe on my plate. “If you want us to go make peace with them, I’ll do it. As I’ve said before, I don’t want you to be at odds with your family.”

Truthfully, though, I wasn’t confident that it would help much. Felicity would be seething that I’d married her cousin. Seeing Dax and I together wouldn’t be something she’d enjoy, let alone take with grace.

“And as I’ve explained to you before, Felicity and Blaise might be my relatives by blood, but we have no relationship.” Dax set down his cup. “You, on the other hand, are my wife. I’m not going to place you in an uncomfortable situation of any kind. Nor would I expect you to make peace with someone who quite frankly doesn’t deserve it.”

Oh. Well. All right, then. “Have you replied to his email?”

“No. Nor do I intend to. He’ll get the message. But if he chooses to ignore it and contacts you about this—whether by phone or email—tell me.”

“He won’t be able to contact me by phone. I blocked his number recently. I should have done it months ago rather than put up with him calling and texting at his leisure, but I didn’t want to give him that satisfaction.”

Dax’s brows dipped. “Calling and texting about what?”

“Nothing. Random, unimportant stuff. Which was shitty, since he promised me no contact.” But Grayden had a habit of breaking promises where I was concerned. “He’s likely scared enough of you to leave me alone from here on out.”

“If he doesn’t stop, I want to know about it,” Dax told me, a warning in his gaze.

“Okay,” I acceded, more than willing to hand the problem over to him if it meant finally getting some damn peace from my ex.

Dax pushed out of his chair. “I’ll ask for someone to come collect the dishware and leftovers. After they’re done, we can leave. Unless you need more time?”

“No, I’m ready whenever.”

A short time later, I was walking toward my front door—well, it was now more or less *Alicia’s* front door, since I would be moving out today and she would soon own the house. I blew out a breath, not fond of the sun’s heavy heat pressing down on my skin. Pulling my keys out of my pocket, I glanced back at Dax. He was still in his car, his lips moving rapidly, so he obviously hadn’t finished his business call yet.

There was no van or unfamiliar vehicles parked nearby, so my helpers clearly hadn’t yet arrived. Unless they were running late, they should be here in the next fifteen minutes or so.

Striding into the house, I called out Alicia's name. Rather than close the front door behind me, I left it ever so slightly ajar so that Dax could enter when ready.

She padded out of the living room, a huge grin on her face. "Well, hello, Mrs. Mercier. How's holy matrimony?"

"So far, so good." I gave her a quick hug. "People will be arriving soon to help me move my stuff."

"Yes, I remember you saying that Dax, his bros, and two of his buds would be here. I'll keep everyone plied with drinks. Why shift boxes when I can instead watch their muscles ripple and bunch? That's not a show I care to miss."

I snickered. "Did I miss anything interesting after I left the venue last night?"

She pursed her lips. "Harri and Drey exchanged numbers, but not as two people looking to date. He wants her to give private lessons to his dog—apparently the canine is a lunatic who's been so far impossible to train."

Huh. "What about you and Jag? Were numbers exchanged?"

"I won't lie, the dude is hot as a motherfucker. But Raven told me he's dating someone. She works in the same tattoo shop as him. The one Caelan owns."

I felt my shoulders sag. "Bummer."

"All the pretty ones are taken lately."

The door hinges creaked as Dax walked inside.

My sister waved. "Hello, brother-in-law."

He tipped his chin. "Alicia." Having gotten a good look at the stacks of boxes waiting in the hallway, he slid his gaze to me. "Do you realize that almost half are labeled 'books?'"

I tugged at the bottom of my tee. "Yes, I do. I'll make no apologies. It's a harmless addiction."

He hummed. "My mother has an awful lot of books, but I think you may have her beat."

“Don’t worry, they’ll all fit in my bookcase.”

His brow dented. “There’s a bookcase big enough to hold *that* many novels?”

Alicia chuckled. “Yup. It has ladders and everything.”

“It’ll fit perfectly fine in the sunroom,” I assured him. It was the room he’d cleared so I could set up a home office.

Right then, a knock came at the front door. Our helpers were finally here. Dax welcomed them inside, and Alicia took orders for drinks. I didn’t miss that a long, heated look passed between her and Jag.

I tried to help move the boxes and furnishings, but the guys refused, saying I’d have enough to do once it came to unpacking. Maverick also claimed their mothers would kill them if they heard that their sons hadn’t done the heavy lifting for me. As such, I mostly stood with Alicia and silently objectified the living shit out of them.

Don’t get me wrong, I had no eyes for or interest in anyone other than Dax. That didn’t mean I couldn’t acknowledge when another guy was hot. And oh, I acknowledged.

Despite being cousins, Maverick and Jag didn’t look much alike, though they were both tall and edgy. Lean and toned with a silver tongue, Maverick sported choppy hair the color of faded gold and light-hazel eyes that held a permanent “up-to-no-good” gleam. Jag was a broad, muscled, dark-eyed, tattooed slice of bad-boy heaven who didn’t talk much—he was more of a grunter, but in an inexplicably appealing way.

I found it interesting that, after their initial clash of gazes, Jag made a point of not looking in my sister’s general direction. Similarly, though she took the occasional sneak peek at his ass when he bent over to lift stuff, Alicia otherwise paid him little attention.

Handing a glass of water to Drey when the guys took a quick break, I said, “I hear my baby sister is going to help you train your dog.”

He flashed me a dimply smile. “That’s my hope. But other trainers have failed, so I’m not optimistic—and I mean no disrespect to Harri. He’s just a nut.”

“He really is,” agreed Caelan, taking a cold glass of lemonade from Alicia. “And he’ll eat *anything*.”

Maverick nodded, his eyes gleaming with both humor and frustration. “He tried chewing the wheel of my bike. And my phone. And my oil rag.”

Drey sighed, carving his fingers through his short dark hair. “I’m starting to think he has no sense of taste.”

“Who?” asked Jag as he strolled into the hallway having exited the half-bath.

“Sabre,” replied Dax.

Jag grunted. “Yeah, any creature that will willingly try to eat a bottle of antibacterial gel either can’t taste shit or ain’t right in the head.”

“Could be both,” said Dax. “It’s lucky for him that Drey swiped the bottle from him before his teeth could pierce it.”

Drey’s eyes, their color a dark midnight blue that was exceptionally striking, settled on me again. “Don’t get us wrong, Sabre’s a great dog. He just also happens to be a pain in the ass to train.”

“If anyone can help, it’s Harri,” declared Alicia.

“Definitely,” I agreed. “She’s magic with dogs.”

Once their break was over, the guys began shifting the last of my things to the van. Meanwhile, I—after a long and arduous struggle—managed to get Gypsy into her pet carrier while Alicia bagged the few kitty things I’d left lying around, such as the bed and food bowls.

Eventually, all was done. I said goodbye to my sister, whispered a mental farewell to the house—telling myself I was *not* feeling teary—and went back to Dax’s villa.



Since I needed to keep Gypsy indoors for a few weeks so she'd accept this was her new home, I didn't let her out of the carrier until the guys were done bringing everything inside. She all but flew out of it with a yowl of complaint and then disappeared into the kitchen.

Leaving her to explore, I went straight to the master bedroom, where many of my boxes waited. Others were in what would be my office, where the men were setting up my bookcase—they'd had to take some of it apart just to get it out the house and into the van.

I played some music on my phone as I unpacked. Dax had already cleared out a dresser for me, along with half the closet. There were also now free drawers for me in the bathroom. As such, I didn't struggle finding places for everything.

When I was finally done, I searched the house for some sign of Gypsy. She was nowhere to be seen, so I put out some food for her and then joined Dax and our helpers on the patio. They were sitting around, talking and drinking beer.

Dax looked up at me. "I'm going to order dinner for us all. What do you feel like having?"

I didn't even have to think about it. "Pizza. I don't care what toppings you—" I stopped talking as a knock came at the front door. When I opened it to find Sabrina stood waiting, dozens of gift bags at her feet, I remembered she'd promised to drop off the wedding presents on behalf of our team.

Her mouth thinned. "You forgot I was coming, didn't you?"

"No. Sort of. Here, let me help." I grabbed some of the bags and, together, we carted them all inside and plopped them in the hallway.

Spotting the guys through the living room doorway, she waved. "Hello, pretty boys." After they'd called out their own greetings, she took a long look around. "Hello, pretty house."

"I told you it was the shit."

She rubbed her hands. “So, what’s it like being a wife?”

“Not much different, if it makes you feel any better about Tamara’s distaste for marriage.”

Her upper lip curled. “It doesn’t.”

“Be honest, what is it that you actually want most—to be married, or to have a wedding?”

“The latter,” she admitted.

Unreal. “Well, how about I throw you a birthday party next year that is wedding-themed and you’re basically a bride for the day?”

Her eyes lit up. “Oh my God, I would *love* that.”

“There. Problem solved.” I slanted my head. “You want to stay for pizza?”

“Ooh, definitely. I want a tour of the villa first.”

“Then let’s go.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Feeling my nose wrinkle, I shook my head. “I don’t think we can make this work.”

“Me neither.” Sabrina waved a hand at the function room we stood in, which was much like a contemporary ballroom. “This place is perfect for their vision, but it doesn’t have ample space for seating—they have a huge guest list.”

I nodded, worrying my lower lip. “If they’re willing to shorten the list, we could make it happen. I’m just not sure if they’ll agree to.”

“They might. I mean, it seemed like they had their heart set on throwing the party here.”

“That’s true.” A set of three siblings wanted to throw a wedding anniversary shindig for their parents, and they hoped to hold the event here, where their parents’ wedding reception took place. “I’ll call them later and see in what ways they’re willing to compromise.”

As we exited the room and began a slow walk down a very grand hallway, Sabrina said, “It is a beautiful venue. It reminds me a little of where you got married.”

“It has the same timeless vibe,” I agreed.

It would be exactly three weeks ago tomorrow that I made my vows to Dax. At this point, I was settled in my new home—as was Gypsy, though she sometimes visited Alicia.

Dax and I had fallen into a steady routine. We ate breakfast together, went to work, came home, had dinner while sharing anecdotes about each other’s day, and then generally indulged in some alone time to wind down.

I usually watched TV in the living room or did a little reading in my office. He typically either went for a swim or spent time on his laptop while relaxing on either the patio, our bedroom balcony, or his own home office.

Then we'd go to bed, and he'd fuck me like he had no other purpose in life.

"I haven't yet convinced Marleigh to let me name her baby," said Sabrina, pulling me out of my thoughts.

The absurd statement made me smile. "I doubt you will."

"We should remain hopeful."

"Why would I hope she allows you to do it?"

Sabrina threw me an "Are you dumb?" look. "You know how she and Ollie are. They'll name the baby something boring and old people-y. Like Bessie or Reginald." She shuddered.

"There's nothing wrong with those names."

"Boring and old people-y," Sabrina repeated. "She and Ollie should leave it up to me—I will give the baby an *awesome* name."

"I really don't see them handing you that power, but keep nagging them if you must."

"I must, or the child will be bullied for life."

"Speaking of your sister ... Don't forget we're taking her shopping for baby stuff this weekend." Alicia and Harri would also be coming with us.

"There's no chance of me forgetting it—I'm looking forward to it." Sabrina grinned, joining her hands together. "I can't wait to be an aunt. It'll be—"

"Well, look who it is."

I almost stumbled on hearing the familiar male voice. No. No, not that creepy dick.

Clad in a tailored suit, Jenson was strolling out of a room up ahead where a cocktail party appeared to be taking place. A cluster of just-as-smartly-dressed males followed behind him.

Sabrina quietly groaned. “I can’t stand this weirdo.” She’d come across him a few times while visiting me in what used to be my home.

“I don’t know anyone who can.” As he was blocking my path, I reluctantly slowed to a halt and gave him a sedate smile.

His own smile, by contrast, was wide and intimate. “Addison, how’re you doing?” he asked, moving closer.

“I’m fine.” I tensed when he draped an arm over my shoulders—I repeat, *draped an arm over my shoulders*—as he turned to his pals.

“This is Addison Mercier, Dax’s wife,” he told them with the familiarity of someone introducing their sibling. “I have the pleasure of saying they’re both friends of mine.”

Friends? *Snort*. Not even close.

Sabrina bugged humor-filled eyes at me and then looked away, most likely struggling to hold back a laugh.

See, this was a “thing” now. People who I only peripherally knew would not only act over-the-top friendly with me, they’d introduce me as their buddy to others—always being sure to add that I was Dax Mercier’s wife. Basically, they liked to insinuate to others that they had a connection of sorts to him.

Sabrina had been right when she’d predicted that my marrying Dax would positively impact Sapphire Glade. It was nice and all, but I wanted people to hire us because we deserved it, not because they wanted to score points with Dax. Some would even enquire as to whether he’d turn up at their event.

Why the hell would he?

I smoothly stepped out from under Jenson’s arm and gave his associates a polite smile. “It’s nice to meet you all. This is my friend, Sabrina.”

The men greeted us both warmly, and two seemed somewhat amused. I got the impression that they knew Jenson

was full of shit.

He refocused on me. “How is Dax? He looked well the last time I saw him.”

“When was that?” I asked.

His mouth bopped open and closed. “Recently,” he finally settled on.

“Ah. Well, he’s doing just fine.”

Sabrina pointed at Jenson. “You look familiar ... Were you at their wedding?” she asked, knowing full well that he wasn’t.

Jenson parted his lips to speak ... but didn’t say a word. Well, to deny his presence would beg the question of why he didn’t get an invite, being our “friend” and all.

“No,” I replied for him. “He’s my old neighbor.”

Sabrina clicked her fingers. “Ah, that’s right. I knew I recognized him from somewhere.”

I patted his arm. “It was good seeing you again, Jackson.”

His eyes flared. “Jenson.”

I gave a fake wince. “Right, sorry.” I flashed his friends a brief smile. “Enjoy the rest of the party.” I quickly made my escape.

Beside me, Sabrina huffed. “Name-droppers are just plain sad.”

“At least he’s stopped being creepy—small mercies and all that. Alicia said he doesn’t bother her anymore.”

“Well, that’s something.”

Outside the beautiful building, I practically wilted under the August heat. Both of us eager to get out of the sun, we strolled down the path that cut through the manicured lawn and then hopped into my car.

Folding her arms, Sabrina angled her body to face me better. “So ... now that our workday is pretty much over ... I

think it's a good time to bring this up."

Reversing out of the parking space, I shot her a confused glance. "Bring up what?"

"The thing is ... I think Dax might have something against gay people."

I brought the car to an abrupt halt. "*What?*"

"He turns down my every 'let's go on a double-date' suggestion."

Sighing, I drove forward. "It's not about you, let alone the fact that you're gay. He gives not one fuck about that."

"So what's the problem, then?"

My hands flexing on the steering wheel, I elaborated, "He simply has no interest in going on dates."

Sabrina stared at me for a long moment. "I don't get it," she finally said, her hands slipping to her lap. "Why not? It's not as if he's a hermit or social nightmare."

"No," I agreed, pulling out of the lot and onto the main road, "but we don't do couple stuff."

"No couple stuff?" Sabrina's voice rang with astonishment. "At all?"

"You do remember our marriage is no more than a business arrangement, yes?"

"Well, yeah. But he promised that you wouldn't have a cold marriage."

"He swore that we would spend time at home together like a normal couple, and we do. As we pre-agreed before marrying, we eat together, we talk, we have sex. He's living up to his end of the bargain, just as I am mine." It wasn't exactly his fault that—with the exception of when we were in bed—it all felt forced and sometimes even awkward. "He didn't promise me romance, and I didn't ask for it. We agreed we'd be friends, though."

"And *are* you friends?"

“Yes. Sort of. Okay, not really.” We didn’t joke and laugh together. Didn’t have meaningful conversations. Didn’t reach out to each other throughout the day by phone. “But we’ll get there eventually.”

I’d made the occasional overture, but he begged off whenever I suggested we go for a meal or to the movies. He didn’t accept my invitations to watch TV with me. He redirected the conversation if I brought up a too-personal subject matter. And if I texted him during the day with random news, he never texted me back; he waited until we were both home and then responded verbally.

In other words, at the moment, we were pretty much bed-buddies who lived together.

“Maybe things will change once you’re more comfortable with each other,” Sabrina suggested. “You’ve only been married, what, three weeks? Not that it isn’t possible to build a friendship within that timeframe, but it often takes a lot longer.”

“Yup, especially when you’re dealing with someone as insular as Dax.” Stopping at a red light, I cast her a sideways glance. “Did you really think he was homophobic?”

“No, I thought he probably just didn’t like either me or Tamara.”

I frowned. “Then why didn’t you just say that?”

“I felt like being dramatic. You know how I am.”

I rolled my eyes. “You were never right in the head. Even when we were kids, something was wrong upstairs. We all saw it.”

She smiled. “You love me anyway.”

“I don’t know what it says about me but, yeah, I do.”

Once I’d dropped her off at the parking lot outside our office building, I drove straight home. Pulling up outside the villa, I saw a familiar car parked beside Dax’s vehicle. I knew the car belonged to Blake, so he was either here alone or with Kensey.



They came to visit regularly, as did my own parents. They were all basically keeping an eye on things and making sure Dax and I weren't already on the path to divorce.

My sisters—who loved the villa and were thrilled whenever I invited them over for a girls' night in—also came often to check how I was doing. But, unlike my parents and Ollie, they didn't come expecting to discover that the marriage was beginning to go sour. My sisters were far more positive about the whole thing.

Entering the house, I heard muffled voices coming from further inside. I tracked them to the kitchen. Both Dax and Blake sat at the table, a steaming mug in front of them.

As they looked my way, I smiled and said a simple, "Hey."

Blake's answering smile was strained and distant. "Hello, Addison," he greeted politely. "You look well."

"As do you."

"Want coffee?" Dax asked me.

I gave a brief shake of my head. "I'm good, thanks." I would have stuck around and chatted with Blake awhile if his body language wasn't so stiff and ... not quite unwelcoming, but unreceptive. He might be perfectly civil toward me, but he hadn't quite accepted me yet. "I'll be in my office if you need me," I told Dax. With a quick wave to Blake, I left the room.

In my office, I set down both my satchel and purse and then roughly kicked off my shoes. Though I'd known to expect this, it was somewhat annoying that both my father and Blake persisted on withholding their blessing when it came to the marriage. What was the point in it? Any silent protests would amount to absolutely nothing—the deed was done, the papers were signed, the vows were taken. *Done deal.*

I reached into my purse to dig out my phone ... and failed to find it. Remembering I'd left it in one of my car's cupholders, I padded out of the room. As I neared the kitchen, Blake's voice drifted to me ...

“I don’t have a problem with her, son. She seems like a nice girl.”

I stopped where I was, placing my hand on the hallway wall.

“My problem is you’re both stuck in a marriage where you’re each competing with a ghost,” Blake added.

I frowned. Uh, I wouldn’t have said that. I didn’t compare Dax and Lake at all. I didn’t cling to Lake to avoid moving on. But ... I couldn’t be sure Dax operated the same way, could I?

“That’s not good for either of you,” Blake went on.

“Neither is wandering through life alone,” said Dax.

I silently winced. His failure to deny the whole “competing with a ghost” thing ... yeah, ouch.

A sigh. “Couldn’t you have at least picked a woman from your past who actually feels something for you? Like Angel, or maybe—?”

“Dad, what’s done is done. There’s no point to this conversation.”

Absolutely no point. And who the hell was Angel?

“It can be undone,” Blake persisted. “There’s such a thing as divorce, you know.”

“Yes, there is. But I don’t want one.” A long pause. “What’s your real issue with Addison being my choice?”

“Look, Dane doesn’t have a healthy respect for all laws, but can we say the same about his daughters? Your mom gets that I’m never going to turn to the cops for shit. She accepts it. She accepts that there are things I won’t tell her—whether it relates to my businesses, my contacts, or how I make a problem go away. You don’t know Addison well enough to be sure she can do the same for you. You don’t know you can trust that she won’t betray you.”

Actually, yes, Dax did. He knew better than to think I would ever do something as—

“Time will tell, won’t it?” said Dax.

The comment was a slap. Okay, I got that he didn’t trust easily. I wasn’t expecting him to have total faith in me—especially after all Brooks had told me. But I would have thought that Dax would know I was far too loyal to fuck him over in such a way.

It stung, but I hurt for him as well. Life had taught him to expect betrayal and condemnation. And that was exactly what he did.

I crept past the kitchen, retrieved my phone from my car, and then returned to my office.

It must have been about half an hour later that Dax came striding into the room. Lounging in my armchair, I looked up from the book I was reading.

His hands in the pockets of his slacks, he arched a brow. “You ready to eat yet?”

“Whenever you are,” I replied, injecting a breezy note into my voice as I strived to hide the hurt I still felt. “I’ll go with meatloaf and the usual trimmings I like.”

His mismatched eyes drank in my face, narrowing slightly. “Are you all right?”

Ugh, there was rarely any fooling him. “Yup,” I lied. “Your dad left, I take it?”

Dax nodded. “Just now.” He paused. “I made it clear that he needs to stop acting so distant toward you. He assured me that he would. I believe he meant it.”

“Time will tell, won’t it?” Shit, I shouldn’t have said that. In doing so, I’d pretty much *announced* that I’d eavesdropped on his conversation.

He went motionless, his eyelids dropping even lower as realization dawned on him. “Addison—”

“I’m not mad,” I assured him. “Offended, maybe, because I’m a loyal person—no one whose loyal likes to be seen as anything else. I get that you don’t know me well enough to trust me. I get that it’ll take time for you to realize

that you can. But in the meantime, I ask that you try not to expect the worst from me.” Fuck my voice for cracking just a little.

He stared at me, his tongue poking into the inside of his mouth. “It isn’t really anything personal.”

I heaved a sigh. “I know.” But it stung nonetheless. I cleared my throat. “I’m going to finish this chapter while you order dinner. I should be done before it gets here.” *Hint, hint—leave.* There was nowhere for the conversation to go.

His chin dropped slightly for the briefest moment. “All right.” He walked toward the door but then stopped and looked over his shoulder. “I know you’re a loyal person, Addison. But you’re married to someone who has a different moral compass than you. Mine isn’t weak, but it follows another set of rules. Right now, you think you can live with that. And maybe you can. But maybe you can’t. It isn’t that I expect the worst from you. It’s that I don’t know if you can deal with the worst parts of me.” He then breezed out of the room.



Unhooking a tiny outfit from a metal bar a few days later, Sabrina cooed, “This has got to be the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.”

It was in fact super cute. I’d noticed it before we entered—it was featured in one of the window displays. If I didn’t already have three bags of stuff from other stores, I might have bought it.

Harri cast her a swift glance. “That’s about the twelfth time you’ve said that.”

Sabrina lifted her shoulders. “Everything here is just adorable.”

Very true. The popular boutique sold children’s clothes of all sizes. Some items hung on racks while others were

folded and piled on either shelves or tables. Little mannequins stood on risers sporting colorful outfits.

The store was bright, courtesy of the large glass-front windows and the florescent lighting. Elevators and stairways led to higher levels. Salespeople wearing headsets walked around, talking with customers and fixing displays.

The scents of new clothing, floor wax, and air freshener were strong in the air. Cheery music played low. The mishmash of voices echoed throughout the space. Babies babbled or cried in their strollers.

“There’s no point in buying newborn-sized stuff, Alicia,” Marleigh advised as my sister fingered a multipack of tiny sleepsuits. “Babies grow so fast they’ll hardly get any wear out of small outfits.”

“Just so you know,” began Alicia, flicking through the rack of sleepsuits, making the air ring with the scrape of metal on metal, “Ollie was a big baby.”

Marleigh tensed. “What?”

Nodding, I adjusted the position of the shopping bags hanging from my arm. “Ten pounds eight ounces.”

Marleigh did a slow blink, her hand flexing on the handle of her wheeled basket. “You’re lying.”

Stifling a smile, I shook my head. “Nope.”

“It’s true,” Harri confirmed. “Mom complains about it now and then.”

Her shoulders dropping, Marleigh let out a little whine. “Hopefully the baby takes after me.”

Sabrina snickered. “You weighed almost nine pounds, so ...”

Marleigh groaned. “I don’t want to get split in half.”

“You won’t.” Sabrina tossed an arm over her sister’s shoulders. “Now, tell me what in the store you’d like so I can mentally note down a possible lists of gifts for your baby shower.”

Marleigh looked at her askance. “It won’t matter how nice you are, I’m not going to let you name my child.”

Sabrina frowned. “Oh, come on.”

“No. And I mean, no. Now, onto better things ...” Marleigh scooped the merchandise from her basket and quickly flicked through them. “I’m definitely getting these, they’re too cute to put back.”

“I’ll stick with these booties,” said Alicia, holding them up. She glanced in the direction of the checkout counter. “The line is a little shorter now than when we first walked in, thankfully. Not by much, though.”

Looking at Marleigh, I gestured at her basket. “Give me that, I’ll put it back for you.”

With a grateful smile, she passed it over. “We hopefully won’t be long.”

“I’ll go pee while you two pay,” Harri declared.

The three women then swanned off.

Letting out a soft sigh, Sabrina flared out the skirt of a little flowery dress. “I swear, my ovaries melt whenever I look at baby clothes. My biological clock starts ticking even louder. Do you still want seven kids?”

Recalling my childhood plan, I chuckled as I began wheeling the empty basket along the faux wooden floor. “I haven’t wanted *that* many since I was at least eleven.” I stacked the basket on top of the pile near the propped-open door and then returned to my friend’s side. “I think three is a nice number, but I wouldn’t be opposed to having more.”

“Tamara wants two,” said Sabrina. “I don’t really care how many we have or—dear Lord.” She grimaced at her reflection in a wall-mounted mirror. “Could no one have told me that my bangs are all frizzy?” she demanded.

“It seemed more fun to let you find out the hard way.”

“You suck.”

Chuckling again, I fingered the soft cotton sleeve of a white tee that was positively adorable. I'd hopefully be returning to the boutique at some point in the not-so-distant future to shop for my own baby. The thought warmed my chest and made my lips curve.

I glanced to my left as movement caught my eye ... and I happened to clash gazes with Felicity through the store window, who stumbled to a halt on the sidewalk, her lips firming.

My smile faded. Ugh. I really wasn't in the mood to deal with her crap.

I mentally urged her to keep walking, but there was no such luck. She strode inside, her shoulders stiff, her chin up.

“Wonderful,” Sabrina uttered.

Wasn't it just.

Felicity stopped directly in front of me, and her gaze dropped to the tiny t-shirts I was looking at. Her eyes met mine again, hard and scornful. “That explains why my cousin married you—and with such speed. You're pregnant.” She sniffed. “I should have guessed.”

I thought about correcting her assumption, but I owed her no explanations. So, instead, I gave her a soft, mocking smile. “Now let's be civil, Felicity. We're practically family.”

The corners of her eyes tightened. “I'll bet you got pregnant on purpose to trap him.”

“Not all women have to manipulate men into committing to them.”

An amused snort popped out of Sabrina.

Felicity looked me up and down, her top lip curling slightly. “You would have had no other way of making him tie his life to yours. Dax is so far out of your league he's a mere dot on your horizon.”

“As you can surely tell, I'm terribly hurt you have such a low opinion of me,” I said, my voice bone dry. “It's gonna keep me up at night for certain.”

Sabrina gave my shoulder a pat. “At least you have Dax to fuck you back to sleep.”

“There is that,” I said.

Sabrina tilted her head at Felicity. “I would have thought you’d be relieved that Addie’s quite clearly moved on from Grayden. Oh no, wait ... the idea that she’s not pining after your man is something you actually detest, isn’t it? There’s no joy in ‘winning’ when you’re the only one taking part in the competition.”

Felicity gave her an *oh, please* look. “It’s obvious she only ensnared Dax to get Grayden’s attention.” Her gaze cut back to me. “You thought he’d leave me, rush to your side, and offer you everything if only you’d walk away from Dax. I’ll bet you got quite a shock when he didn’t try to stop the wedding from going ahead.”

I let out a bored sigh. “Such a thought-provoking parable. I suppose I also thought that Grayden would totally raise the baby you’re convinced I conceived to trap Dax.”

“I suspect you would have insisted on it, since you would have wanted to use the child to get money from Dax.”

“You know, you’d have made a kick-ass detective.”

Sabrina barked a laugh and turned away.

Her cheeks reddening, Felicity blasted me with a harsh glare. “You won’t convince me that you’ve quite simply *fallen* out of love with my husband.”

“Ex-husband,” Sabrina helpfully chipped in, but the bitch ignored her.

I exhaled heavily. “If the only way you can feel satisfied in your relationship is by believing that someone else wants your partner, fine, believe it. Believe I crave Grayden with every fiber of my being. It doesn’t bother me none. Because the truth is, Felicity, at the end of the day ... you’re irrelevant to me.”

“To the world,” Sabrina added under her breath.



Noticing that my sisters and Marleigh were making their way over, I smiled at Felicity. “Now, I hate to cut this short, but we have to bounce.” I did not want any kind of stressful scene to play out in front of my pregnant friend.

Alicia glanced from me to Felicity, her eyes narrowing. “All good here?”

“All is far more than good.” I gave Felicity a friendly nod. “See ya around. Stay classy.” With that, I walked out of the boutique.

Outside, Alicia sidled up to me. “What happened in there?”

Sabrina relayed the entire thing as we strode along the sidewalk, passing store after store, dodging pedestrian after pedestrian.

“She’s such a skank,” sniped Alicia.

Marleigh hummed her agreement. “The woman needs a good kick up the ass.”

“Preach,” said Sabrina, high-fiving her sister.

Harri nudged me with her elbow. “Are you going to tell Dax?”

I rubbed at my neck. “Yes. I’d rather not, since it will lead to inter-family conflict, but I promised I’d let him know if she ever came at me again. I’m surprised she did.”

“I’m not,” said Marleigh. “She probably figures that being his relation will save her.”

Maybe. “Then she’s in for one hell of a shock.”

## Chapter Fifteen

Pulling into my driveway later on, I cut the engine. Dax's car was nowhere to be seen. He'd informed me earlier that he "had business" with someone today but wouldn't be back late. I hadn't asked for specifics because there was no point—he very rarely gave me any.

Once I'd grabbed my shopping bags out of the trunk, I headed into the house. I went straight to the kitchen, where I found Gypsy lapping at the water in the bowl. "Hey, kitty cat."

She straightened, swiping her small tongue over her mouth.

I reached down and gave her a long head-to-tail stroke. She arched into it, granted me the honor of also giving her head a light scratch, and then she haughtily waltzed away. "All right, then."

I made a cup of tea and then went upstairs. There, I rested the cup on the dresser and plonked my purse and shopping bags on the bed. I unloaded said bags, taking out one item at a time—most were baby clothes, others were little things Marleigh would need.

Once I'd finished cooing over them, I began placing them back in the bags. I was almost done when I heard someone enter the house. There was also the sound of Dax's voice, but the words were muffled. Since no other voices spoke, I guessed he was talking on the phone.

I heard him moving around downstairs. The muted sound of his footfalls steadily became louder until, finally, he entered the room just as he ended his call.

I smiled. "Hey, sugar bun."

He blinked. "Sugar bun?"

"I figure I need to come up with a term of endearment for you, so I'm trying some out." *Someone* needed to save him from how super serious he was. "Not sure sugar bun is the way to go, though. It sounded better in my head."

Humor flickered across his face. “Right.” His gaze fell to the pile of tiny clothes, and his muscles minutely tensed.

“They’re for Marleigh and Ollie’s baby,” I told him. “You can relax, I’m not knocked up.” Despite what Felicity believed.

Which reminded me that I had a story to tell.

“Your shopping trip was productive, I see,” he said.

“It was a fun day. Aside from one teeny, weeny part. I was in a—”

His cell began to ring. Sighing, he fished his cell out of his pocket. His lips tightened. “I have to take this. Can you give me a second?”

I flicked my hand. “Yeah, there’s no rush.” As Dax left the room, I turned back to my purchases and then continued to reload the bags, intending to stash it all in my closet.

“Addison!”

I stilled, my brows dipping. There was no urgency in his voice. More like exasperation laced with incredulity. “What is it?” I called out as I made my way to the staircase.

“There’s something you need to see on the patio,” he replied.

I skipped down the stairs and walked straight outside. “What’s wrong?” I asked him.

He arched a brow and pointed a finger. “Want to tell me what that’s about?”

I looked down to see what he was pointing at and ... oh. Clearing my throat, I scratched my neck. “You surely know enough about cats to be aware that it’s a gift.”

“What I know is that cats generally leave rodents as gifts, yes. They don’t usually sadistically savage them.”

No, they didn’t, but Gypsy was ... different. Not about to admit that my pet was quite possibly as sadistic as he claimed, I raised my shoulders and said, “It would seem that

things got out of hand. Maybe the mouse tried to flee or something.”

“So Gypsy felt the need to brutalize it? Makes sense,” he deadpanned.

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll clean it up. Didn’t realize you’re so squeamish.”

“I’m not squeamish, I’m simply not keen on having mauled rodents and smears of blood left all over our patio.”

Yeah, it was quite a mess.

“It’s like she toyed with it before she killed it.”

“Cats have been known to play with—” I cut off at the knock on the front door. “You answer that. I’ll deal with the mouse.” Or what was left of it.

With a grunt, Dax walked away.

I headed straight to the kitchen and dug into a particular cupboard. Pulling out the dustpan and brush, I straightened.

And went still as a familiar voice reached me.

No, it couldn’t be him. He wouldn’t come here. He just wouldn’t.

But he had.

The words he spoke weren’t properly distinguishable, but I recognized his voice. What the hell was he thinking coming here?

I dropped the dustpan and brush on the floor and then began a swift walk down the hallway, following Dax’s voice coming from the living room ...

“Let’s skip the small talk, Grayden,” he said, impatience coating every syllable. “I was clear you’d need to make this quick.”

“I get that I’m the last person you’d want to see,” said our visitor, his voice carefully steady, low, and appeasing. “I can understand if you’re pissed. You have every right to be.

*I'd* be pissed in your position. But I'm not here to argue. I'm not here to make excuses. What happened earlier was *not* acceptable—I was very clear on that to Felicity.”

He was here about her scene, I realized. I could easily envision her returning to their home seething and ranting about me; could easily envision him panicking that she'd suffer for her actions.

“Believe me when I say I'm furious about it,” Grayden went on. “But I'm hoping we can avoid this turning into something ugly.”

I turned the corner that led into the living area just as Dax narrowed his eyes and asked, “What exactly is it you're furious about?”

Grayden frowned, his neck stiff, his muscles strained. “You don't know?”

As I stepped more fully into the room, the attention of both males transferred to me.

Suspicion and agitation warred for supremacy in Dax's eyes. There was also an unspoken accusation there.

“I was about to spill everything,” I assured him. “But then your phone rang.”

I glanced at Grayden to see that a wounded look had crept over his face that broadcasted so much emotion. Anguish. Longing. Regret. Need.

I was sure there might have been a time when I'd looked at Grayden in much the same way. But those days were over.

Dax turned to me and folded his arms. “Why don't you tell me what happened.” It was nothing short of a demand.

I swiped my tongue along the inside of my bottom lip. “In short ... Felicity saw I was in a children's clothing boutique, marched inside and—mistakenly assuming I'm up the duff and that's why you married me—accused me of getting pregnant to trap you, insisting my motivation was to

spur Grayden into leaving her and coming back to me.” I shrugged.

“Wait,” began Grayden, his brow creased, “so you’re not pregnant?”

“No.” *Yet.*

The wrinkle in his brow smoothed out as relief flashed in his eyes, but then confusion flickered across his features. “If that’s not why you two got married out of the blue ...” He didn’t add *Why did you?* but I heard it in his tone.

Uninterested in soothing his curiosity, I switched my attention back to Dax. He was staring at me, his eyes dark, his face hard.

“She thinks you’re pregnant?” asked Dax, his voice dangerously calm.

I swallowed. “Yes.”

A muscle slightly jumped in his cheek. “She thinks you’re pregnant ... and she felt it was acceptable to confront you?” The latter words came out slow but sharp.

“Dax,” began Grayden, raising his splayed hands in a gesture of peace, “Felicity knows she messed up. She’s very upset with herself right now. She regrets what she did.”

Dax’s brows inched up. “Is that so? Then where is she? Why are you here making her apologies for her?”

Excellent question. Not that I’d expected her to show up or anything.

Grayden rubbed the side of his face. “I asked her to stay home. I knew you’d be upset.”

“Upset? That’s what you think I am?” Dax took a deliberate step toward him, the move all the more menacing for how lazy it was. “Under no circumstances at all should your woman feel that she has any right to confront mine,” he stated, his voice still calm yet filled with thorns and barbs. “The fact that she would dare do that while under the impression that Addison’s pregnant makes the matter even worse. ‘Upset’ is a mild word for what I’m feeling.”

Grayden carved a jerky hand through his hair. “Like I said, she knows she messed up. She feels terrible about it.”

Dax raised a contemptuous brow. “I highly doubt that.”

Funny. So did I.

“Tell me, Grayden, why is it she believes she can cross my wife and, by extension, me? I warned her what the consequences would be. Is she under the impression that I was bluffing?”

“She wasn’t thinking.” Grayden nervously rubbed his finger along the edge of his collar. “She reacted on emotion.”

“What emotion? How could it possibly impact her that Addison might be pregnant?” Dax clipped, unfolding his arms. “What in the fuck does it have to do with Felicity? Explain that to me.”

Closing his eyes, Grayden pinched the bridge of his nose. “It has nothing to do with her,” he softly admitted. “Emotions aren’t always rational, though, are they?” His eyes snapped open as he lowered his hand to his side. “Me and Felicity are trying for another baby. We’ve been trying for months. So far, nothing has happened.”

“And, what, she’s been confronting every pregnant woman she sees as a result of how bitter and jealous their condition makes her feel?”

Grayden spluttered. “No.”

“Just Addison, then?” Dax cast him a scathing look. “You said you didn’t come here to make excuses. But that’s very much what you’re doing.”

Yup. It stung to a degree—I’d cared for this man a lot once upon a time. But I wouldn’t expect him not to side with his partner. I’d sure side with Dax.

Loosely balling up his hand, Grayden rubbed a knuckle against his brow. “I just want to keep the peace.”

“Then you should have done as I told you and insisted that she heed my warning,” said Dax with not an inch of mercy. I didn’t view it as cold, though. He simply wasn’t a

man who overlooked if anyone wronged him or those under his protection. *Everyone* knew that.

In that sense, Felicity had made her bed with full knowledge of the repercussions. If she believed she had a chance of escaping them, she only had herself to blame for that. Particularly since he'd given her a verbal warning already.

Cursing beneath his breath, Grayden turned to me. "I'm sorry for what Felicity did. *She's* sorry. It was petty and mean, but can we not let this go any further?"

Dax took another lurching step toward him. "Don't think to get around me that way. And don't for one minute think that Addison owes your woman anything, least of all a free pass for reproaching her whenever she feels like it. Felicity has done it too many times—it ends now."

Grayden scraped a hand over his face. "Wouldn't you try to fix this if you were in my position, Dax? She's the mother of my children. What else am I supposed to do? Stand back while you hurt her?"

"I have no intention of physically harming her, Grayden. I don't beat women—you know that. She won't be touched, but she'll pay for what she did. You can't prevent that."

"And you think I'd let it go? That I won't have you prosecuted—" He stopped speaking as a breathy chuckle came out of Dax.

"You could certainly try. But you'd have no case. There will be nothing to link me with what comes next. Your claims would be thrown out of court, if they even got that far." Dax dismissed him with a look. "Now get out of my house."

Grayden's posture stooped. He looked at me, the picture of defeat. "I really am sorry for what happened."

I believed him. Believed it genuinely pained him that she had targeted me this way. But I also believed he had no way of stopping her from doing it again, and so maybe it was best for everyone that Dax stepped in.



Grayden left, his shoulders slumped. I watched through the large floor-to-ceiling window as he strode down the driveway, got into his car, and then drove off.

“I’m pissed that he threatened you with legal action, but I also know it was a total bluff,” I said, turning to meet Dax’s entrancing mismatched eyes—a storm of dark emotion still brewed there. “He’s just feeling powerless, and that’s a feeling he’s not used to.”

“You pity him,” sensed Dax.

“A little. The guy’s in an impossible situation. He won’t like how she behaves, he won’t want it to continue, but he’ll naturally try to save her from herself and others.”

“And it doesn’t hurt you that he’d essentially take her side?”

“It doesn’t feel nice, but I wouldn’t expect anything else. She’s his partner.” I cocked my head. “Why would you think it might hurt me? I told you I’m not holding a candle for him.”

“You did. But people have a way of hiding their feelings from themselves when they don’t want to confront them.”

“In other words, you believe I simply tell myself I don’t care for him but it’s not actually true?” I asked with some surprise.

Dax pursed his lips. “I wouldn’t say I firmly believe that’s the case, but I think it’s certainly possible.”

I felt my eyes narrow. “Why? Do you have some leftover feelings for the women in your past other than Gracie?”

“No. But I can’t claim to have loved them.”

“Maybe you just weren’t in relationships with women who truly fit you.” It was possible he’d purposely—even if only on a subconscious level—sought out partners he couldn’t fully connect with. Like Brooks had pointed out, Dax kept his

circle small and his mental walls up. It made sense that he'd avoid people who might sneak past his guard.

As I looked at Dax right then, it was hard to keep the compassion from creeping onto my expression. I ached for this person who'd only ever been able to trust the people closest to him; who'd been let down by the outside world so many times over that he'd developed protective patterns and barriers that steadily became integrated into his personality.

“Well,” I began, crossing my arms over my chest, “you’re wrong in thinking I have any lingering feelings for Grayden—I can safely assure you he killed every one of them.”

Dax studied me long and hard, saying nothing.

“Back to the matter of Felicity ... what are you going to do?”

His shoulders rose and fell in a lazy, fluid movement. “Nothing she won’t deserve,” he prevaricated. “I warned her to stay away from you. She ignored me.”

“I think she believes that being related to you means she’s exempt from any consequences.”

“If so, she’ll soon be disabused of that theory.” His gaze flitted over my face. “Are you all right?”

“You mean am I upset after the little scene she caused? No. She’s just a dumbass with a big mouth. Nothing special or singular.”

“Maybe so. But never underestimate stupid people—common sense often eludes them, so they’ll do things they shouldn’t. Case in point.”

I allowed that with a slight incline of my head. “This will hopefully be the last stunt she pulls.”

“She behaves like a woman scorned,” he mused. “She didn’t act that way when Grayden was involved with others, from what I saw.”

“In her mind, she always had a hold on him when they were apart. She could yank on his strings any time, offer for

them to reconcile, and he'd eagerly toddle back to her. She made that offer when he was dating me, but he turned her down."

His eyes sharpened. "You cut the strings, in other words."

"That's the way she sees it. I felt it was more that he'd just gotten tired of her games."

"If that were the case, he wouldn't have gone back to her."

"She talked of moving away with their kids. I don't know if she ever intended to live up to what was a passive-aggressive threat, but he didn't want to take that chance. He must still care for her, though. Especially if they're trying for another baby."

Dax twisted his mouth. "I'm not sure I believe they are. I wouldn't put it past Grayden to lie for her in his attempt to defuse the situation. He shouldn't have bothered trying. She fucked up one time too many. I won't let it slide."

"Maybe it makes me a bitch, but I don't feel inclined to ask you to."

"It doesn't make you a bitch. It makes you someone who brooks no bullshit—nobody should have to." He took slow steps toward me, and my pulse predictably skittered. "In my opinion, her problem with you isn't merely that you cut those strings you mentioned before. Nor is it only that he still cares for you—which he does, I saw it clearly." Dax came to a halt in front of me, standing so close our bodies almost brushed. "It's that she doesn't feel on equal footing around you. You outshine her."

Which would have been quite a compliment, except ... "It's not difficult to outshine someone like Felicity. Anyway, enough about her. How was your day?"

"It went well," was all he said.

"Wow, don't overwhelm me with information."

His lips bowed up. "There's nothing interesting to tell."

Nothing he *wanted* to tell, more like. “How about ... you part with one thing you did today? Just one. I think you can handle that. Maybe.”

His eyes briefly dipped to my mouth. “I thought about you,” he said, his voice dropping an octave. “About what I was going to do to you later.”

Even as my hormones cheered, I waved a hand in dismissal. “That wasn’t something I hadn’t guessed. You’re a boy. Boys have sex on the brain. Tell me something else.”

“I ripped Thaddeus a new asshole after he caused a scene near his home when his father refused to give him his car keys.”

I felt my lips press into a thin line. “Drunk again?”

“Plastered. His parents are finally coming down hard on him, but they’ve left it a little too late. It’s going to take a lot of work on their part to rein him in.”

“When you say you ripped him a new one, I’m guessing it involved a threat or two.”

Dax only let out a low hum.

“You really must stop talking so much. It’s hard for me to get a word in edgewise.”

A smile lit his eyes. “I’ll bear that in mind.” He cast a look at his very expensive-looking wristwatch. “I have to make a quick call. Then we can eat. Scan the menu and then tell me what you want so I can order it.”

“Sure thing, pumpkin.”

He did a double-take. “Pumpkin?”

I shrugged. “Felt like giving it a whirl. I don’t like it. You?”

“I’d be happy if you never, ever called me that again.”

“Then we’ll scrap pumpkin.”

“Yes. Yes, we will.”

## Chapter Sixteen

As I walked into Caelan's tattoo parlor two weeks later, the scents of ink, leather, disinfectant, and wood polish greeted me. I'd never been there before, but I'd glimpsed the interior many times through the front window. Though there were no bright colors, the place didn't have a gritty vibe. More of a barbershop-meets-art gallery feel.

The color palette was a mix of red, cream, and shades of brown. Walls the color of brandy were lined with tattoo sketches, artwork, mirrors, pictures, licenses, and decal logos.

The reception counter looked much like a small bar, except there was office equipment rather than bowls of complimentary nuts.

I went straight to the counter and smiled at the brunette standing behind it. "Hi, I have an appointment with Caelan." When he'd heard I was thinking of getting a new tattoo, he'd offered to do it for me, making it extremely clear that he'd be offended if I went to anyone else. Since he was shit-hot at what he did, I wasn't about to turn down his offer.

The receptionist's lips curved. "You must be Dax's wife, then. It's cool to meet you. I'm Eva. If you'll just take a seat, he'll be right with you."

"Thanks." I crossed to the crimson sofa, flashed a quick smile at the woman seated at one corner of it, and then sank into the leather cushion.

The parlor felt surprisingly relaxing. It was busy, but not hectic. Music played low, not quite overriding the buzz of tattoo guns or idle chatter.

A merchandise area was off to the left of the reception area, featuring jewelry, metal art, aftercare products, and promotional items such as mugs, decals, and t-shirts.

The three tattoo stations were almost identical, all featuring a recliner, mirror, framed tattoos, and several shelves.

At his own station, Caelan was applying a bandage to the leg of a well-inked middle-aged guy. Jag and a female tattooist who I presumed was the girlfriend Alicia had mentioned were also busy with clients.

Along with a drawing area, there was a little spot at the rear of the parlor that had a sink, autoclave, and hand towels.

Deciding to pass the time by answering some work emails—the fact that it was a Saturday didn't stop any clients from contacting me with queries—I pulled my cell phone out of my purse. I'd responded to only a few emails when Caelan called out my name. I looked up, and he waved me over to his station.

I dropped my phone back into my purse, pushed off the sofa, and strode across the large space. As Jag glanced up and met my gaze, I gave him a friendly smile, which he returned with a nod. My eyes then clashed with those of the sole female tattooist. She gave me a look that was somewhat unfriendly. Huh. Whatever.

Caelan tapped the top of the deep-mahogany brow leather recliner. "Take a seat."

I did, and damn it was as comfortable as it looked. His station was pretty tidy. The mirror was clean, and the shelf beneath it was neatly lined with everything from inks and needles to ointments and bandages.

He sat on a stool beside the recliner and held out a few pieces of paper. "I sketched three drafts for you to look at. Any grab your attention?"

I took the sheets of paper and scanned the drawings carefully. I'd told him in advance that I wanted to have a dragonfly tattooed on my inner wrist—nothing incredibly fancy or highly detailed, more like someone had drawn the image with a calligraphy pen.

Each sketch was beautiful and exactly what I'd pictured, only better. One in particular stood out for me.

I pointed at the drawing on the top sheet. "This one. It's perfect." I gave him a winning smile. "You're my favorite

brother-in-law. I don't know if I've told you that."

His lips kicked up. "You have. But you've also said the same to Drey."

"I have not," I denied, going for indignant.

Caelan snorted. "Sure."

I waited in silence while he readied everything he'd need, washed his hands, pulled on disposable gloves, and then cleaned my inner wrist in preparation for the tattoo. Once he returned to his stool, he placed the transfer over my skin, checked I was happy with the placement etc., and then immediately got to work.

I went very still as the feel of the buzzing tattoo gun hit me. People seemed to experience the sensation in various ways. For me, it felt like I was being continuously scratched by hot cat claws.

It took me a few minutes to push past the discomfort and begin to relax. Only then did I ask Caelan, "What's the craziest tattoo you've ever been asked to do?"

"There've been loads of crazy ones," he replied without meeting my gaze. "A guy once came here asking if I could tattoo squid features onto his face. Said he thought he might have been a squid in a past life."

I blinked. "Oh. Well."

"Yeah, I had nothing either."

"Have you been up to anything interesting this week?"

"Other than work, not really. You?"

"Not much. But my week was instantly brightened when my brother gave me an ultrasound picture of his baby." I beamed just thinking about it.

"Everything look good with his fiancée and the baby?"

"According to the Ob, all seems good so far." We were all crossing our fingers and toes that nothing changed in that respect.

He carefully repositioned my arm slightly with a gloved hand. “Have you seen any more of Felicity or Grayden?”

“No. I don’t know what Dax did, but it seems to have worked. I don’t suppose *you* know, do you?”

“I asked. He answered in monosyllables.”

“At least you got monosyllables,” I muttered. “When I asked, he just stared at me.”

“My brother says very little about a lot of things. He plays his cards close to his chest.” Caelan paused. “Someone stole my car once. This was years ago. I mentioned it to Dax. Four hours later it was back in its parking spot—I still have no clue who took it, who brought it back, or how Dax handled it. He never said. He always handles shit for those under his protection, but he never makes a big deal out of it.”

“What you’re saying is I shouldn’t be offended that he hasn’t enlightened me, because this is just how he is—no one’s an exception.”

“Basically, yes.”

That didn’t make me feel much better. It wasn’t that I expected to be an exception to Dax’s rules, but I had hoped that we could get beyond superficial conversation and share important things. As yet, nothing had changed between us.

We still had a good dynamic. We made time for each other, communicated well, and had a healthy sex life. Though we had the occasional debate, we didn’t argue. But we also still couldn’t be described as friends.

Dax and I might talk about this or that, but never anything deep. More, it was really a chore on his part. He didn’t really *want* to speak with me about stuff.

Small and casual things that would be harmless to share—that he went to visit his parents, that he’d made plans with his friends, that he was considering buying a new car—I’d find out from others. Why? He simply wouldn’t think to tell me.



I got the sense that it didn't even *occur* to him to do so, just as it wouldn't occur to him to tell a work colleague. As such, I made a point to ask more questions about his day; wanting to get across that I was more interested than he seemed to assume; wanting it to become natural for him to share such basic things.

However, nothing had changed in that respect. He still gave me vague answers. He also still didn't accept my invitations to spend the sort of time together that would allow a friendship to develop. And I'd steadily reached the conclusion that he didn't truly want it from me; that he didn't want *me* to want anything from *him*.

"He's good at making a person feel shut out," said Caelan. "But he doesn't do it on purpose, Addison. He's a good guy. People talk like there's something missing in him. There isn't. Never was. He just doesn't let it all hang out."

I knew what Caelan was getting at. Being a self-contained person didn't mean Dax was an incomplete person, or that he was deliberately acting like an asshole. It was simply that parts of him were locked up tight.

"I know he's a decent man, Caelan. I wouldn't have married him if I thought differently." Curious as to why he'd feel the need to make such a point, I asked, "Are you worried I'll bolt or something?"

"Maybe not bolt, but ... too many women from his past gave up on him."

Dax and I weren't really "in" an actual relationship, though. At least not in the truest sense. That made it different. I tilted my head a little. "Why did they give up?"

"Different reasons. In some cases, they tried to change him. 'Fix' him. Thought if they loved him hard enough, he'd become someone different."

I frowned. "If you're not happy with a person as they are, if you feel the need to shape them into somebody else, you don't love them." I might want to change that Dax kept me at arm's length, but I didn't want to change *him*.

“Exactly. But they didn’t see it that way. It happened time and time again. And when loving him hard didn’t ‘melt’ him or some shit, they’d decide he couldn’t love; that he lacks what makes a person a person.”

Pausing, he dabbed at my partially done tattoo with a sterile cloth to soak up the blood there. “Don’t get me wrong, there were a few who didn’t want to change him. They truly cared for him. He just didn’t feel the same way, so they walked. I don’t blame them. But I do think they gave up on him too quickly. Only Gracie was different.”

“Unlike them, I’m not trying to win his love. I know I won’t get it, so you don’t have to worry that I’ll walk because of that. I can’t promise you the marriage will last—life surprises us in lots of ways. But I have no plans to give up on it or him.”

Staring me right in the eyes, Caelan tipped his chin. “I believe you. And it’s good to hear, because he wouldn’t let you go easily. He might not be head over heels for you, but he considers you his. You’d have a major fight on your hands if you tried to leave him, and I’d be surprised if you won that fight.”

I snorted. “If I wanted to leave, I’d leave—there’d be nothing he could do to stop me.”

Caelan’s lips curved. “It’s cute that you believe that.”

I felt my brows lift. “Cute?”

“Seriously cute.”

“I’m not scared of your brother.”

“You don’t need to be. He’d never harm you. Dax is no angel, but he’s no monster either. Still, he has a way of getting whatever he wants. He convinced you to marry him, didn’t he? That’s evidence of it right there.”

*Point well made.*



Entering the villa later on, I stopped in the doorway of the living area as I clocked Dax sitting on the sofa, a hardcover in hand, with Gypsy curled up against his thigh. Both man and animal looked up at me. Gypsy did no more than blink at me before again closing her eyes. Dax, however, focused on me in his usual intent way.

“Hey,” I said, flicking his book a brief glance. I’d learned he was well-read. He largely stuck to works of non-fiction, though he did enjoy horror novels. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be home.” Mostly because he’d left before I woke, and I hadn’t heard from him throughout the day.

“I’ve only been back an hour. I ...” He trailed off as his gaze fell to my bandaged wrist, and his face darkened. “The fuck?”

“I didn’t hurt myself,” I quickly assured him when he shot to his feet. “It’s just a tattoo.”

His brow denting, he placed his hardcover on the coffee table. “A tattoo?”

“Yeah. Caelan did it for me.” I crossed to Gypsy and scratched her head. “He wouldn’t accept payment,” I complained, “so I’m going to have to sneak money into his wallet the next time he’s here. He says hi, by the way.”

“You went to his shop hoping he could squeeze you in?”

“No. I had an appointment. I made it last week.”

There was a beat of silence. “You never said anything about it.” There was an accusatory note in that otherwise flat statement.

I double-blinked. “You’re never interested in what I’m doing.”

“What gave you that impression?”

Was he serious? Because he *looked* it. Which was weird, considering ... “You communicate it well.”

He arched a questioning brow. “How, exactly?”

“Whenever I told you in the past that I was going here or there, your only response was a hum. Half the time, you didn’t even look at me. I got the hint that you didn’t care to hear where I’d be going or what I’d be doing.” I gave him an easy smile. “It’s fine. I’m not upset about it.” Disappointed, maybe. Even a fake friend might ask if you had plans.

“What you do is of interest to me,” he stated firmly.

“I’m not saying you don’t wish to hear about it *at all*. You listen when I later tell you how my day went. I’m saying you don’t wish to hear in advance what my plans are. If you did, you’d ask. You never do. And like I said, it’s fine.”

Pausing, I tipped my head to the side. “Your brothers didn’t mention my appointment to you? Drey said you had lunch with them a few days ago. I suppose they just assumed you knew about it.”

“How did Drey know?” Dax asked, his eyes going flinty. *Someone* was feeling left out, apparently.

“I bumped into him when I went to see Harri at her doggy day care center—he was there with Sabre who, on another note, is in fact a complete nut. Anyway, Drey asked if I’d be working this weekend. When I said no, he asked how I planned to spend my time off.”

It was nothing short of sad that his brothers showed more interest in my life than Dax did. And maybe he was considering that, because his lips pursed in thought and his gaze turned inward. Right up until the doorbell rang.

I felt my brows meet. “Are you expecting anyone?”

He gave his head a small shake and strode out of the room. I slowly trailed behind him, wondering if maybe it was Rafael Cabello—the guy was a regular visitor. I heard the front door creak open a mere moment before I reached the living room doorway. From there, I watched as a figure practically launched themselves at Dax with a squealed, “Hi!”

I halted, taken aback as slim arms looped around his neck. Slim, *feminine* arms. An ugly lance of dark emotion stabbed my chest.

From this angle, I couldn't see the woman's face—it seemed to be pressed against his chest—but I already wanted to slap it.

I also wanted to slap *him*. He was letting her touch him ... why? Had he forgotten he was married? Did how I might feel about this not matter? She'd better be a freaking relative of his or I was gonna make that motherfucker bleed.

“God, it's been *ages*,” the stranger continued. “How are you?”

“Good,” Dax stiffly replied, disentangling himself from her.

She dumped an overstuffed duffel on the floor. “I tried calling you, but you never picked up or called me back. What gives?” She angled her head as she stared up at him, and the move gave me a good view of her face.

I sucked in a breath. A carbon copy of Gracie stood *right there*, smiling brightly at him.

Yeah, Gracie had an identical twin. I didn't know Mimi any better than I'd known her sister, but I knew enough to be aware that they were complete opposites. Whereas Gracie was sweet and laidback, Mimi was mouthy and rebellious.

Once upon a time, Mimi had also done her best to set herself apart from her sister in terms of her appearance. Not nowadays. There was no dark eyeshadow, no black lipstick, no facial piercings, no hair dye.

Maybe it was to honor her sister or in some strange effort to keep Gracie “alive,” but Mimi seemed to have adopted her “look.” She wore a minimal amount of makeup, most of which was focused around her slanted brown eyes—a thin coat of mascara, a subtle use of black eyeliner, and a gentle shade of gold eyeshadow. Her mocha-brown hair fell around her oval face in choppy layers. She'd put on a little weight in the right places, giving her some sensual curves.

The only thing that hadn't changed about Mimi was her edgy clothing style. She wore a ragged tee, ripped jeans, a thin leather jacket, and wickedly cool knee-high boots.

As if she sensed the weight of my attention, her eyes shifted to me. The light in her gaze dimmed, and her grin slipped. She looked back at Dax. “Who’s this?”

Uh, apparently, she had no idea he was now married.

I sidled up to Dax and flashed her a friendly smile. “I don’t think we’ve ever officially met. I’m Addison.”

Her eyes narrowing in recognition, she pointed at me. “You’re one of the Davenport sisters. The oldest.”

“That’s right.”

Dax slid me a dark look. “You *were* a Davenport. Now you’re a Mercier.”

Intrigue gleamed in Mimi’s gaze. “Oh, you married into the family? Who to? Caelan? You look his type.”

Dax cleared his throat. “Not my brother. Me. She married me.”

Mimi’s eyes snapped to his. “You ...” She trailed off, her brows slowly sliding together. “I’m sorry?” The picture of lost and confused, she bounced her gaze from me to him. Mimi then looked down, arrowing in on his ring finger. She blanched, her mouth going slack. “No,” she breathed, taking a step back.

Thrown by the horror and pain warring for supremacy in her eyes, I fought a frown. Dax didn’t look surprised by her reaction. He didn’t look *anything*—his face was utterly vacant.

Wildly shaking her head in denial, Mimi fixed him with a cold, direct glare. “You can’t be married. No way.”

He didn’t correct her. He merely stared at her, his gaze unreadable.

“It isn’t true.” She dug the heel of her hand into her breastbone. “You wouldn’t do that. Wouldn’t get married. You *wouldn’t*.”

Uh, why not? Was she under some impression that he’d never commit fully to another woman after having lost her

sister? She'd be right to an extent. I had no emotional commitment from him.

"This is"—she sharply swept out her arm—"I don't know ... Some kind of sick joke."

Why would it be sick, even if it was a joke? I was missing something here.

She clenched her fists. "*Tell me it isn't true.*"

"If I did that," Dax began, cool and composed, "I'd be lying."

An angry flush reddened her face. "You are fucking unreal," she hissed, her fists clenched, the definition of spitting mad.

He sighed. "Mimi—"

"I cannot *believe* you'd do this. What in the hell is going on with you?" she demanded, her voice becoming louder and shriller. "Why would you take a dump all over Gracie's memory this way?"

A slight frown briefly pulled at his brow. "I don't view it as disrespecting her memory in any sense of the word. I'm not certain why you do." He winged up a brow. "Wasn't it you who said she'd want me to get on with my life, not grow old alone?"

Mimi pressed her lips tight together and jabbed a trembling finger at him. "You said you didn't want to bind yourself to another woman!"

"No, I didn't," he argued, still calm. "*You* decided that I must feel that way when my relationships kept failing. You accused me of sabotaging them on purpose. I told you that you were wrong. You waved that away, so sure you were right. You weren't."

Her expression crumpling, she took another step back. The distress plastered all over her face would have made me feel bad for her if it wasn't for one thing: There wasn't simply shock and anger in her eyes. There was something I wouldn't have expected to see.

Jealousy.

A hot, bitter-edged jealousy.

*Well, shit.* She had a thing for the guy who her deceased twin had loved. And I would bet my life Dax was well-aware of it. What a mindfuck *that* must be for him. And for her, actually.

I stilled as a question slapped me: Had they slept together?

It didn't seem like something Dax would do, but people often sought comfort in the form of sex when grieving. He could have done it while his head was a mess.

Hell, they could even have slept together more than once. It would explain why Mimi had turned up here with an overnight bag, so sure of her welcome. It would also account for why she was in such a state—she'd had some hope that he'd commit to her one day.

The lines of upset in Mimi's face smoothed out as her expression morphed into something ugly and sour. "How long?" she bit out, glaring at him. "How long have you been married?" She spat the latter word like it was a curse.

"Five weeks," he replied.

She squeezed her eyes shut. "*Fuck.*" Her breathing growing fast and noisy, she inched up her chin and snapped her eyes open. "Well, now I know why you've been dodging my calls for the last week."

Wait, she'd been calling him? And he'd said nothing of it to me?

"You didn't want me to know," she accused. "You didn't want to admit to me what you'd done because you're ashamed."

Dax's brow pinched. "I feel not one bit of shame. I have no reason to. And I refuse to stand here and justify marrying Addison. If you don't like it, it isn't my problem."

She dragged in a pained breath. "God, you're a bastard." She slammed her blazing eyes on me. "I feel sorry



for you. I don't know what sweet little words he gave you, but he'll only ever love one woman," she taunted, her tone derisive. "My sister. You're second best. Always will be."

Wasn't she a sweetheart?

Much as I wasn't fond of her snark—or of her evident crush on my husband—I felt a pang of sympathy for her. You couldn't control who you loved. And I doubted someone would *choose* to fall for their dead sister's boyfriend. "How about you sit down and I'll—"

"How about you *fuck off!*" she blasted.

*Well.* My sympathy vanished in an instant.

"Enough," Dax cut in, the single word a cold demand.

She sneered at him. "This is bullshit. You betrayed Gracie, you—"

"Did what she would have wanted," he finished. "I moved forward."

A bark of humorless laughter came from her. "Moved forward?" she scoffed. "You'll never let Gracie go. You don't know how. And I don't think you even want to." Again, her gaze sliced to me. "Seriously, are you fucking stupid marrying someone who's hung up on a ghost?"

Dax smoothly inched forward in a fluid, menacing movement. "Careful how you speak to Addison." He hadn't raised his voice, he'd pitched it low. But it rang with enough authority to make her snap her mouth shut. "Think what you want. Disapprove all you want. But don't turn your anger on her—I won't like it."

Her cheeks flamed. "Kiss my ass, Dax." She snatched her duffel from the floor and scowled at me. "Good luck with this one," she sniped, tipping her chin in his direction. "You're going to need it." With that, she stormed out.

Exhaling heavily, he let the door swing shut.

Admittedly miffed that he'd kept me in the dark, I turned to him, a hardness forming in my gut. "You didn't tell me Gracie's sister was trying to contact you."

Dax gave a slight shrug. “It wasn’t relevant.”

*It wasn’t relevant?* I stared after him as he walked off—yes, walked. Off.

Every cell in my body bristling, I followed him into the kitchen, where he was pulling open the fridge. “So you wouldn’t want to know if Lake’s relatives were reaching out to me?” I challenged, keeping my voice level, not wanting this to turn into an unnecessary fight.

He went still, his jaw tightening.

“We promised each other honesty.”

Sighing, he retrieved a beer from the fridge. “We did,” he conceded, closing the door. “I apologize for not mentioning it. It didn’t occur to me that you’d want to know, but I shouldn’t have made that assumption.” Such a carefully worded statement.

And utter bullshit.

He’d known that I would want to be informed of such a matter. He’d chosen to instead hide it. “Do you keep a lot of things from me, Dax?”

A line briefly appeared between his brows. “If you’re asking if I hold back things that I feel you should be made aware of, no. This was a one-time occurrence.”

I folded my arms. “Answer me this question, then: Why would Mimi turn up here with a duffel expecting to be allowed to stay the night?”

“She’s a free-spirited sofa surfer,” he replied, grabbing a bottle opener from a drawer. “She does it to lots of people, skipping from house to house until she moves on to yet another city. She rarely sticks around for more than two weeks at a time.”

I squinted, studying his expression. “Have you slept with her?”

Even as he removed the bottle cap with a hiss of sound, his gaze flicked to mine. “No.”

I did not like just how much relief that brought me; didn't like that a black jealousy had been hovering close, ready to slice me if his answer was anything else. "But she made a pass at you, didn't she?"

His jaw clenching, he looked away.

"How many times did she do it?"

"A few." He dumped the cap in the trash can. "She was blitzed."

"I don't think she only came onto you because she was drunk. I don't think you believe that either." He was too perceptive to have missed what I'd sensed.

He set the bottle opener on the counter with a short sigh. "What does it matter? How she feels and what she wants makes no difference to me."

"Why did you dodge her calls, then? Wouldn't it have been easier for you to break the news over the phone? Or, knowing she'd be jealous as hell, were you trying to put-off hurting her for as long as you could?"

"I didn't tell her because it simply isn't her business," he stated, the ring of truth in his voice. "I'm not required to tell her anything, regardless of what she might wish to believe."

He resented that she thought differently, I realized. He hadn't been trying to protect her feelings by delaying the inevitable. He just refused to cater to them.

"How could she not have already heard that you got hitched?" I asked, unfolding my arms. "Wouldn't her parents have told her?"

"Her parents moved away years ago, so they likely don't know about it. She's not in contact with them anyway. They distanced themselves from her and anything else that kept Gracie's loss feeling too fresh, me included." Dax closed the drawer and then guzzled down a mouthful of beer. "Are you in contact with Lake's relatives?"

"I was at first. But the contact got less and less over time. It might have been different if they lived locally, but

they're in Colorado." Recognizing that he was attempting to shift the topic onto another, I backtracked. "There are enough gossips in Redwater who could have passed on the information to Mimi. Why would they not have?"

"Mimi has burned a whole lot of bridges. There aren't many people in Redwater who'd do her any favors—not even the few relatives here she has. They'd prefer for her to find out the hard way."

"Does that include you? Is that why you avoided taking or returning her calls?" If he resented how she felt, it wouldn't be surprising that he'd acted in such a way.

He shook his head. "I missed her initial call. She left me a voicemail. I didn't like what I heard; saw no sense in returning the call."

"What did you hear?"

He knocked back more beer. "She let me know she'd be coming to Redwater soon and said she hoped we could catch up."

"And that's bad because ...?"

"It's not bad. What made me disinclined to respond is that she was either having sex at the same time or faking it. All the appropriate noises could be heard," he added, slowly stalking out of the room.

"Jesus." I followed him along the hallway and up the stairs. "She did it to try to make you jealous."

"She failed. All it did was irritate me. I have no patience for such petty mind games."

"Has she done it before?"

"Yes. Twice. I didn't respond on those occasions, either. That evidently didn't deter her from doing it again." Tossing back more beer, he prowled into our bedroom.

Propping my hip against the doorjamb, I remained silent as he pottered around—setting down his bottle, removing his wristwatch, emptying the pockets of his slacks and placing the contents on the surface of his dresser.

The hardness in my gut from earlier was melting away, because I felt bad for him. If Lake had a twin that not only made it clear he cared for me but pulled silly stunts to get my attention, I'd be seriously conflicted. On the one hand, I wouldn't want to hurt the brother of the man I'd loved and so I'd prefer to dismiss his behavior—even if only because Lake wouldn't have wanted us to be at odds. But at the same time, I'd be so goddamn angry that they'd persisted in their advances.

Would I have been uncomfortable sharing that with Dax? No. But we were different kinds of people. Maybe too different to ever really be friends.

I pushed away from the doorjamb and walked into the room. “You have a choice to make here and now.”

His eyes flew to mine as he took another swig from his bottle.

“I don't like that you kept Mimi's calls from me. But I can't force you to be open with me—you have the right to keep stuff to yourself if it's really what you want. And if it is, I'll respect that. But it'll have to be a two-way street, Dax. That's the only fair way to do this. Either we're both honest even when we don't want to be, or neither of us are expected to be. Choose.”

Again, he set his bottle down on the dresser. “I already chose. I want honesty between us.” Rubbing at his jaw, he crossed to me. “I should have told you that Mimi tried to contact me.”

“Why didn't you?”

“You would have asked why she'd do that. Would have asked why I hadn't called her back. Would have guessed the situation I'm in with Mimi.” His jaw tightened. “I don't like to talk about it.”

“You don't like to admit out loud that she wants you,” I clarified.

His nostrils flared. “I don't like that she won't accept nothing's ever going to happen between us. I don't like that

she doesn't respect how I feel and, more, how I *don't* feel. I don't like that she makes a point of looking so much like Gracie in an effort to manipulate me."

Mimi might think the latter would instead make her more attractive to him, but in reality it would only serve to remind him of what he lost. "The whole thing is messed up. Selfish. Cruel, too."

"And pointless. I made that clear. Repeatedly. She always nodded, smiled, apologized, blamed the alcohol. But then she'd do it again."

I suspected he wouldn't have tolerated it from anyone else. He'd given her chance after chance because she was the sister of the woman he considered *the one*. For Gracie, he'd held back, hoping Mimi would stop.

"Now that you're married, she'll surely give up. I mean, she'll assume you care for me." I felt my brow pucker as something occurred to me. "Then again, she's also convinced you'll never let Gracie go, so she might not take your commitment to me seriously."

His shoulders lifted and fell. "There's no telling with Mimi. Personally, I think there's a good chance she now hates me enough to walk away and never come back."

Maybe. But considering she'd been so persistent all these years in trying to wangle her way into his affections, I wasn't certain she'd let marital bliss stop her. Cocking my head, I asked, "Was it really so hard to share all that with me?"

He hesitated. "It's not something I do."

"I get that you're not much of a sharer. But we said we'd be friends. As things stand, we're not. We don't need to be besties. I'm not asking you to devote lots of your time and attention to me. I'd simply rather we weren't bed-buddies occupying the same house, you know?"

His brow furrowing, he inched closer, eliminating the tiny bit of space between us so our bodies now touched and his scent blanketed me—inadvertently making my belly flutter

and my pulse get all excited. “I don’t think of you as a bed-buddy, Addison.”

“You don’t treat me as anything else, whether you realize it or not,” I gently pointed out. “It may not be your intention, but that’s how things currently are. Unless you want them to stay that way, we need to build some level of friendship.” Otherwise, all we had was sex.

A long, shallow sigh eased out of him. “I’ll work on it,” he eventually relented.

My snort was soft. “Don’t be *too* enthusiastic about it.”

“It isn’t in my nature to befriend people.”

“I’ve noticed. But you’re tough. You can handle it.” Flashing him a small smile, I added, “I might even get you a ‘friends forever’ necklace as a reward.”

His lips quirked. “A ‘friends forever’ necklace?”

“It’ll give you something to look forward to. A little added motivation. And if you’re really, *really* good at the friendship thing, I’ll also get you a matching bracelet.”

“Thoughtful,” he deadpanned, humor glinting in his gaze.

“That’s me. A total giver. You don’t know how lucky you are to have me standing here offering you a friendship branch, but you’ll soon get it. I have a feeling we’ll be good pals. We’ll be braiding each other’s hair in no time.”

His shoulders shook with a silent chuckle that chased away the last of the shadows in his eyes. But those shadows would likely be back—and soon. After all, the poor guy had had a hell of an evening.

Being face-to-face with the mirror image of Gracie would have been incredibly difficult. And hurting her sister—though said sister had thoroughly exhausted his patience at this point—wouldn’t have been easy, especially since witnessing Mimi’s pained expression would be like seeing *Gracie* in pain.

“Want some space tonight?” I offered.

“Why would I want that?” An idle question. His focus was on the fingers he began to run through my hair—the move slow, careful, entitled.

“Well ... you kind of got slapped by your past just now.” His mind had to be a mess. “And the scene that played out wasn’t fun.”

He only let out a distracted hum, preoccupied with rubbing the ends of my hair between the pads of his fingers.

“I won’t be offended if you’d rather be alone for a little while.”

His eyes slid back to mine. “Thought you wanted us to be friends.”

“Part of being friends with someone is knowing and respecting when they need some time on their own,” I pointed out.

“True.” His gaze lazily moved down to my lips, hovered there for a few seconds, and then skated back up to meet my eyes once more. “But I don’t need or want any space from you.”

I swallowed. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” He slowly dipped his head, pressed his nose to the hollow beneath my ear, and inhaled deeply. “Wouldn’t say it if I wasn’t.” The quiet words fanned over my sensitive skin, making a shiver ride my spine.

Feeling my mouth begin to dry up, I placed a hand on his chest for balance, worried I’d otherwise sway into him. “Okay.”

Dax lifted his head. “Glad we’re clear on that.” He slowly edged his face closer to mine. Stopped. Stared. Refused to let me look away. “Now,” he whispered, “get on your knees.”



## Chapter Seventeen

My entire body clenched. The words might have been spoken in a soft murmur, but the punch of authority there couldn't be missed. Nor could it fail to make every nerve-ending I possessed wake up in anticipation.

A static tension built. Stretched out. Turned thick and hot.

But we had a problem. "Dax, I don't know if this is the right time. I mean, after what just happened ..." His thoughts would surely be on another woman, a woman who—

He snapped his hand tight around my throat and hauled me closer, causing his hardening cock to aggressively dig into my belly. His eyes blazed with warning as he said, "Do not let your mind go there. No one else ever comes into this bedroom. Only you and me."

I nodded as much as his hold would allow. "Only us."

The menace slowly receded from his expression. As the hand collaring my throat slid up to gently burrow into my hair, he stroked the side of my nose with his own. "That's my good girl."

It was insane how he could so quickly bounce from sensually gentle to roughly forceful ... and back again. All that restrained violence would for certain come back. Any moment, he could switch once more. Knowing that, *waiting* for it, caused an intoxicating excitement to sing in my veins.

A crackling sexual energy danced in the air. It made my skin prickle, my nipples pebble, and my pulse go haywire.

His tongue traced the outline of my lips. "All day I've been thinking about having your mouth on me," he said, his pitch lowering, his words coming slower, his tone deepening. "I want to see you gagging on my cock, Addison. I want to bury it so deep I'm all the way down your throat. I want to watch you swallow every bit of come I give you. So"—he went nose to nose with me—"get on your fucking knees."

It wasn't voiced as a command, but the slivers of dominance embedded in his words slithered into my mind and pulled at me to obey, please, sign control over—sign *myself* over—to him.

My mindset shifted. Calmed. Settled. Became centered on him.

If he hadn't been my first, if this wasn't my initial introduction to sex, it probably would have felt strange to have feelings of both safety and arousal descend over me at the same time. But it felt natural and familiar to me. Put me at ease in a way I couldn't explain. Almost as if my body had become wired for this. Wired to expect it, even.

I knelt in front of him.

The light of satisfaction in his eyes, Dax rewardingly skated the pads of his fingers over my scalp. "Now put your hands on my thighs. Good." He lowered his zipper and fished his dick out of his boxers. Full, meaty, and long, it was a sight that made my thighs clench.

He tapped my cheek. "Open."

The moment I did, he lodged the thick head between my lips. He didn't sink inside, though. Instead, he palmed the sides of my face, his thumbs firm on my jaw.

"I'm going to use your mouth now," he said in a remarkably conversational tone. "You keep your hands where they are. You don't do anything other than suck."

So he was in one of *those* moods, I realized with an inner smile. There were times he'd want me to lavish the same kind of attention on his cock that he often did on my pussy. Other times, he wanted full control.

No warning, he shoved his dick into my mouth. His eyes going hooded, he let out a sigh of pure male contentment. As if he truly had been waiting for this all day.

Then, well, he went for it. Plundered like a goddamn savage. All the while, his eyes remained locked on the sight of his cock disappearing into my mouth again and again.

I kept my lips tight around him. Lips that soon began to heat and throb from the insane friction. Every thrust was just so fast, so forceful, so positively feral.

“This is what you get for having a mouth that’s made for fucking.” The merciless statement was so softly spoken it came out sounding almost sympathetic.

His thumbs dug into my jaw as his hips harshly snapped forward, cramming my throat with his dick.

As always when he did that, panic clawed at my lungs. I pricked his thighs hard with my nails, my instincts screaming at me to pull back.

Dax stilled. “Breathe, baby, you’re fine. Through your nose, that’s it.” He withdrew and then thrust back down my throat. “Just a little deeper, you can do it.” He reared back once more and then buried every inch of his dick so deep I instinctively swallowed around him. He bit out a harsh expletive and then went about fucking my throat.

My lungs burned. My eyes welled up. My throat felt seared. And soon enough, he broke, forcing me to swallow every blast of his release.

Breathing hard, he withdrew his cock. Looking down at me through sex-drunk eyes, he breezed his thumb over my swollen lips. “Perfect,” he rasped, his tone close to reverent. “Up.”

My own breathing ragged, I stood. “My knees are not a fan of this hardwood floor.”

“They’ll get used to it.”

I felt my brows hike up in affront. “They’ll—”

His mouth took mine, kissing me with raw carnality and open possession. It was drugging. Wicked. Heart-poundingly dominant.

I fell into it, a willing addict, wanting more. *So much need* beat at me. I was wet, aching, and felt a little drunk from both the dizzying anticipation and the rush of chemicals in my system.

He kept on devouring my mouth as we pulled off each other's clothes. He kissed me with so much intent and entitlement it felt like ... not a claim, but a *reminder* of his claim.

Dax drew back. "Lie down. Spread your legs." The words were low. Soft. Effortlessly assertive.

I did as asked, my toes curling when his eyes zeroed in on my pussy. The flame of possession in his gaze was a heady thing.

He knelt on the bed and grabbed my left ankle. "So fucking mine." Starting from my instep, he kissed and suckled his way up the entire length of my inner leg before moving up to nuzzle my pussy. "You always smell like cupcakes here. Makes me want to eat you even more."

I was about to explain that it was my vanilla-frosting-scented body wash, but then I gasped as warm, heavy hands pushed my thighs wider apart with an easy strength that tightened my nipples to painful proportions.

He skimmed his knuckles between my very slick folds. "Do you remember the first time I ate you out?" he asked, letting his lips graze my pussy.

"Uh, sort of. You kind of dazed me with your tongue sorcery that night."

His low chuckle fluttered over my damp flesh. "Do you remember what I told you right before you came?"

Closing my eyes, I searched my memories. "You said it'd be fun to go down on me while I wasn't allowed to move or make noise." Only we'd never gotten around to trying it, thank God, because I'd never manage—

My eyelids flipped open as realization penetrated my sex-fogged brain. "No, wait—"

"Be a good little toy, stay completely still, and do not make a sound." He gripped my ass and angled my hips toward his mouth, as if about to serve himself. "Your only job is to come as hard as you can." He clamped his mouth around my pussy.

Using his tongue, lips, and teeth, he began a slow but expertly sensual assault and, oh man, I didn't think this not-moving-or-speaking thing was gonna pan out.

I'd try, I really would. And I did. I remained as immobile as possible, biting back every moan and whimper, but I didn't have much faith that I'd last.

I liked to challenge myself, liked to please him, even liked being treated as a toy. But I wasn't certain I had the level of self-control required to not outwardly react to what he was doing to me.

Every lash, swipe, and stab of his velvet tongue was pure heaven. Each nip, nibble, and graze of his teeth was an extra spice. Warm breaths, low growls, and rumbly moans ghosted over my flesh, adding to the exquisite sensations.

He wasn't rushing. Didn't seem to be working toward the goal of making me come. No, he was pretty much *meandering* around my pussy. Like he had all the time in the world to play and explore. Like I really was just a thing and, as such, he had no need to care what I wanted or felt.

He licked up and down. From side to side. In circles—clockwise, anticlockwise.

Sometimes he used the tip of his tongue, other times the flat of it. Sometimes he kept the pressure soft, other times not. There was no regular pattern to follow. No way to predict what would come next.

Having no outlet for the building pleasure, being forced to bottle it all up, was not only absolutely maddening, it made me feel like I'd combust any second.

He abruptly went still, letting my clit rest on the tip of his tongue. He didn't move. Just stayed right there like that. Because he was a teasing bastard and *knew* I'd be aching to buck and squirm.

Squeezing my eyes tightly shut, I clenched my jaw hard as I strived to keep my muscles locked in place.

Intolerable seconds of *nothing* went by, and then ... "Such a perfect little toy." He swirled the tip of his tongue

around the tight throbbing bundle of nerves. “Now it’s time for your reward.”

He eased his lips around my clit and began to suckle like a master. *Thank God.* I felt each rhythmic pulse deep in my core, feeding the tension building there. He pressed a spot above my mound with two fingers, putting delicious pressure on my G-spot, and holy-fucking-shit it was now game over.

I came hard—fuck being quiet and still, I arched and cried out and clawed at the sheets beneath me.

“My turn.” Rock hard again, he curled over me, his eyes dark and glittering with unrestrained hunger. He hooked my legs over his shoulders, planted a hand either side of my head, and slammed his cock so deep I choked on my own breath.

“*Fuck,*” I burst out as the burn of being stuffed full streaked up my inner walls. Without conscious direction from me, my hands flew up to grip his taut shoulders. I dug my fingers into the hard muscle there. “You’re merciless with that thing.”

“You like a little pain. Let’s not pretend you don’t.” He very slowly reared back. “Keep your eyes on me, Addison. Don’t close them. I want you to watch me fuck you.”

All his leashed aggression abruptly poured out of him in a frenzy of brutal thrusts. *Jesus Christ.* Unable to move, I merely held on for the wild, exhilarating ride. Every forward snap of his hips drove his cock deep and made his balls slap my ass.

It was so hard to keep my eyes open—they kept trying to drift shut from the overload of pleasure. But I somehow kept my gaze locked on the man above me, whose own eyes would either fix on my face or stare down at where our bodies were joined.

Soon, my inner muscles began to heat and flutter from my approaching orgasm.

“Don’t,” he bit out. “Not yet.”

Fuck that, I needed to come. And I knew how to yank him under with me. I dragged my nails down his solid chest and squeezed my pussy tight around his cock.

He hissed out a curse and lost it—ramming hard, making the headboard pound against the wall. Mere moments later, my release swept up my body like a hot flush and burst over and through me, tearing a throaty scream out of me.

Dax broke, slamming his hips forward and locking his dick deep inside me. Shuddering, he ground his hips with every harsh blast of his come.

Feeling like I'd run a goddamn marathon, I sagged into the mattress beneath me—trembling, panting, utterly drained. Dax dropped my legs and collapsed over me, burying his face in my hair.

When I could finally speak, I weakly stroked his back as I said, "I should be honest with you. I know you don't like to talk about 'feelings,' but it's important you know my pussy is totally in love with your dick. It fought its feelings hard, it did, but it lost the battle."

His lips lazily curved against my hair as his body began to shake with a silent laugh.

"I must warn you that if your cock freaks out and bails, my pussy will *not* react well—it doesn't believe in divorce," I added. "Just saying."

His hand sweeping up my thigh and side, he spoke into my ear, "There'll be no divorce. You gave me you. I'm not giving you back."

"Even though my no-no parts has feelings for yours?"

"Even though."

"Oh. Okay. Glad that's settled."



I woke the next morning to the feel of something twitching against my hip. Fingers, I realized, when I forced my heavy eyelids open. Dax's fingers. Fast asleep, he'd positioned his arm at an angle. As it happened, I'd done the same—mine was crossed over his.

Like me, he didn't hog the bed or move around much during sleep. Nor was he in any way a snuggle bug. As such, I never woke to find that either of us had wriggled toward each other during the night. Occasionally, we might have flung out our arms in a way that caused them to incidentally overlap this way, but that was pretty much it.

Pulling my arm into my body, I rolled onto my other side and rubbed a hand down my face. I then grabbed my phone and checked the time. 7:05am. My body clock never let me sleep too long, even on Sundays.

Needing a pee, I slid out of bed, gave Dax's solid chest a quick ogle—well, it was *right there*—and retreated into the en suite bathroom. Once I'd done my business, I padded back into the bedroom, unsurprised to find Dax awake and scrolling through his phone. He was a light sleeper, so I unfortunately often woke him if I left the bed first.

His mismatched eyes flicked to me, slightly glazed from sleep. "Morning."

"Back atcha." I rubbed at the base of my spine. "I must have been sleeping in a weird position, because my back is aching."

"You were curled up like a fetus at one point—I only know because you woke me up muttering in your sleep."

I frowned. "Saying what?" I did occasionally talk in my sleep, but I allegedly usually made little sense.

He shrugged. "Something about crabs and lanterns—the words were muffled."

Crabs and lanterns? Hell if I knew what that was about. I couldn't remember any of my dreams from last night.

"You got plans for today?" he asked.



I blinked at the unexpected question. I doubted he particularly cared, but he was making an effort to show more interest. He was *trying*. “I told my parents I’d stop by and see them. Mostly so that I can assure them I’m still not seeping in misery and regret.”

He reached back and slipped his hand beneath his pillow, elevating his head slightly. “Is it that they don’t expect our marriage to last, or that they don’t want it to?”

“The first, I think. They just worry about me. It’s what parents do.” I let my lips curve. “You can come with me if you want to spend your afternoon having my dad grunt, scowl, and glare at you.”

His shoulders rose and fell. “I’ve got nothing better to do.”

Surprise made me pause when I went to peel the bandage off my tattoo. “You’re serious?” *I* hadn’t been.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, you’ve never accepted an invite from me before. And I personally wouldn’t want to deal with my dad if I were you.”

“I don’t blame him for the way he’s acting. My own father still has plenty of reservations. He doesn’t voice them anymore, but it’s obvious that they’re there.”

Yeah, I’d sensed that on the occasions he visited. He wasn’t rude to me, though. The same couldn’t be said for my dad when it came to Dax. “Well, you’re more than welcome to come if you’re really prepared to put yourself through it.”

Switching my attention to my wrist, I peeled off the bandage, unable to help smiling at the sight of the dragonfly. The skin around it was a little raw, but that was normal. “What do you think?” I asked Dax, angling my arm so he could get a good look at the tattoo.

He hummed. “Caelan does good work.”

“I told him he’s my favorite brother-in-law.”

“You said the same to Drey when he gave you free tickets to his upcoming game.”

I sniffed. “I don’t recall that.”

Dax only gave me a dubious look. “What time are we leaving to go see your parents?”

“About one pm. I’ll be in my office until then.” I had a book to read that had only recently been released.

“Office,” he said, all mockery. “Right.”

Okay, so it was more of a mini library slash reading den than anything else. “Not sure I like or understand your tone.”

“Oh, you understand it. If you don’t like it, that’s your issue.”

“Rude.”

“Fact.” He braced himself on his elbows, a heat beginning to gather in his eyes. “Now get over here. Neither of us are leaving this room until I’ve fucked you raw.”

I blinked, my belly fluttering. “Sounds good to me.”

It was my mom who answered the front door when we arrived at my parents’ home in the early afternoon. Saying big hellos, she pulled me into a hug. Her brows lifted when she realized I had company. “Hi, Dax,” she greeted, genuine welcome in her voice. “I didn’t expect to see you. Come in.”

We both strolled into the grand foyer and then, at her invite, followed her into the large sitting room. There, Dane was seated on one of the sofas, his cell phone in hand, idly stroking the white Persian cat on his lap like one of those evil movie villains.

The smile he offered me quickly dimmed at the sight of Dax.

Still, I gave him a bright grin. “Hey, Dad.”

He set down both his phone and Artemis—earning himself a put-out chirp from the fluffy beast—and then stood

as I crossed to him. He gave me a light squeeze before settling his gaze on the man who sidled up to me. “Dax,” he grunted.

My husband inclined his head. “Dane.”

I turned to my mom. “So much love in the room.”

Her mouth curled into a smirk that earned her a dirty look from my dad. She took orders for drinks and then headed to the kitchen.

I would have gone with her if I could have trusted that these two men wouldn’t end up arguing in my absence. Instead, I sat beside Dax on the sofa across from the identical one that Dane had claimed.

Dax draped an arm over the back of the couch, sitting close enough to me that our thighs *just about* touched. He and Dane indulged in a brief mini stare-out, which swiftly ended at the loud sigh I let out.

My dad’s mouth took on a sardonic twist as he stared at me. “How’s married life treating you?”

“Like I’m special.”

His jaw ever so slightly tightened. “You don’t usually bring him.”

“He missed you.”

Dane gave me one of his trademark droll looks.

“And I know how much you like surprises, so I thought I’d ask him to come along,” I added.

“Oh, you’ve been full of surprises these past couple of months,” my dad uttered.

I rolled my eyes. “Did we not talk about how marriages that aren’t built on the elusive thing called ‘love’ can actually work out in the long run?”

A sigh slipped out of him, and he sliced his gaze to Dax. “Who would you have married if she’d said no?”

That was a very good question, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer. “That’s his business.”

“Can’t he speak for himself?” It was a taunt.

“No, I’ve broken his mind and he now only talks if I allow it.”

Dane sighed. “Are you capable of being serious for five minutes?”

“Yes, it just holds no interest for me at the moment.”

Right then, Vienna reentered the room with a tray of cups. Drinks were quickly passed around, and she then took a seat beside Dane.

We spoke of mundane matters, my parents eyeing me and Dax like hawks the entire time; monitoring our body language—no doubt noting that, though we only engaged in incidental touching, we were completely at ease with each other.

Dax’s hands were far from neglectful in the bedroom, but he still rarely touched me outside of a sexual context. Maybe it would be different if we were an actual couple; maybe then there’d be hugs, kisses, and some social touching—I didn’t know. I’d never seen him with any of the women he’d dated, so I couldn’t even guess.

Breaking out of my thoughts, I returned my focus to the conversation. Though Dane ceased making rude remarks and tossing out nosy questions, he didn’t let up with the glaring and scowling.

In response, Dax did what he always did. He ignored it. That was the thing—he could use silence like a weapon. Could ignore you so spectacularly it would anger you more than any insult he might give.

Though the whole thing didn’t appear to be bothering Dax all that much, I nonetheless eventually burst out, “Dad, would you please stop being an ass to him?”

Dax looked at me. “It’s fine. If we have a daughter, I’m going to loathe whoever she marries.”

I felt my brows meet. “Why?”

“Because they won’t be good enough for her,” Dax replied. “No one will. They’ll be part of her life on my sufferance, and I’ll never let them forget it.”

Dane grunted. “That’s how it should be.”

“Agreed,” said Dax.

I looked from one male to the other, my lips parted. Well, at least they agreed on something.

A short while later, while Dax was driving us back to the villa, I looked at him. “You really don’t care that my dad’s being difficult, do you?”

Slanting the steering wheel to take a turnoff, he replied, “No. I told you, I’ll be the same with our daughter’s choice of partner, if we have one. What you’re not seeing is that Dane would act this way no matter what our reasons for marrying. That we’re honoring a pact just gives him more of an excuse to be remote and standoffish.”

Huh. He had a good point there.

“I suspect my dad will be the same with whoever’s Raven’s choice. God knows I won’t be any more pleasant to him. Neither will Caelan or Drey.”

“As a silent reminder for the guy to watch his step?”

“That, and we’ll feel she can do better than him—no matter who he is.”

I wondered if Dax would still feel that way if her choice turned out to be a close friend of his. I hadn’t been able to make her talk more about Rafael. She just kept reiterating that nothing had happened between them. *That* I believed. But her claim that nothing would ever happen? Not so much. There was something between her and Rafael. An unexplored potential.

I hadn’t mentioned my suspicions to Dax, though. Not merely because I couldn’t back them up, but because it would only cause friction between him and his friend. And I’d rather he wasn’t at odds with a full-on criminal.

“By the way”—I scratched the side of my cheek, feeling a little awkward—“thanks for coming with me today.”

He gave me a brief sideways glance. “It mattered to you the times I didn’t do it?”

I felt my nose wrinkle. “I wasn’t upset or anything. I didn’t even wish that you *would* come, since my dad isn’t exactly welcoming toward you. It’s just ... I want us to be a team. A unit. Support each other.”

“And you occasionally need support when you’re with your family?”

“It’s just that they usually quiz me about how our marriage is going—it’s annoying at times. They don’t need to do it when you’re there, because they can monitor us and form conclusions that way. It means I can escape the round of twenty questions and simply enjoy the visit.”

He let out a deep, thoughtful hum. Long moments of silence crept by. “I’ll go with you from now on whenever you’d like me to.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know. But I will.”

“Okay. Thanks. I appreciate it. I also won’t hold it against you if you change your mind at any point.”

He slowed the car to a stop as we reached a red light. “I won’t. Dane will get used to having me around. Until then ...”

“You’ll ignore him, and I’ll toy with his patience,” I supplied.

“Something like that.”

“See, we’re already making a good team. There’s hope for us yet.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Sitting in the balcony area of the football stadium's VIP suite a week later, I said, "Personally, I think Drey's team has this in the bag."

On my left, Alicia nodded. "They're on form today." Miss *I don't want any popcorn* plucked a handful out of my almost-empty box, the scavenger.

"Yup." Harri, sitting on my other side, bit into her hot dog. "The players on the other team don't seem to have their head in the game."

I was relieved it was half-time, since it meant I had a brief break from all the cheers, catcalls, shouts, boos, curses, and whistles. Add in the shots that were fired each time our home team scored and the noise-level could get insane during the game.

It was loud even now. Chatter and laughter came from the crowd. Music, voice-over ads, and game highlights blared over the loudspeaker. Those same highlights were replayed on the jumbotron while ad-banners scrolled at the bottom of the screen. Such noise wouldn't normally bother me, but my head was throbbing like a mother.

In the suite's indoor space behind us, Dax, Caelan, their parents, Jag, and Maverick were talking and knocking back beer while waiting for the game to resume. Dax owned the suite, and it was mega cool.

Feeling a smile curve my lips as an idea came to me, I said, "We need to snap lots of pictures of the suite to show Ollie. He'll sulk." Our brother had his own VIP suite, but it wasn't as luxurious as this one.

Alicia chuckled, adjusting the position of the jacket she'd slung over the seat back. "Definitely. He'll become pals with Dax just so he has access to it in the future."

"It would come as no shock." I dipped a finger beneath my sunglasses to ease the slight itch on the side of my nose.

We were in the shade here on the balcony area but still hotter than the devil. The humid air carried the scents of popcorn, beer, onions, hot dogs, warm metal, cinnamon, and nachos.

Like many of the fans who sat shoulder-to-shoulder in the tiered seating, we were also wearing Drey's team jersey. I hadn't planned to paint my face, but Alicia had talked both Harri and me into it.

Many of the excited fans sported ballcaps and foam fingers. Some held up signs and flags or were recording the goings-on with their cell phones.

I glanced down at the hectic field below. TV crews and cameras could be seen. Mascots waltzed up and down, and cheerleaders were performing clever routines while a marching band went to town.

"Damn, he's pretty," Alicia said with a dreamy sigh.

Tracking her gaze, I saw that she was watching the game highlights. "Who?" I asked before tossing popcorn into my mouth.

She shrugged. "All of them, really. I mean, *look* at them. So many, many muscles."

As Drey popped on the screen, I gently elbowed Harri. "How're things coming along with Drey's dog?"

"Good, I'd say." Harri sucked a little mustard from her thumb. "Sabre is very smart. Like *super* smart. But he wants to be top-dog. Leader of the pack. So he sort of fights Drey for the alpha position."

"He has a lot of energy, too," I remembered.

"That's one of the problems. Drey is very stern with him. But when you're dealing with an animal who has that much energy, it's hard to be consistent with them at all times because by the end of the day you're damn tired."

"I noticed you get along well with Drey."

"We have a lot in common," she said. Not with the excitement of a woman who'd clicked with a guy, but with the casual contentment of someone who'd found a new buddy.



I felt my lips part. “Oh my God, you friend-zoned him.” I had not seen that coming. “You did, didn’t you?”

Harri raised her shoulders. “Um ...”

Alicia gaped at her. “How could anyone possibly friend-zone someone who looks like him? Not that I’m complaining. He’s—”

“Too old for me,” Harri finished with an eye roll. “Right.”

“Alicia’s question is a good one.” I set my popcorn on the floor and then lifted my soda from the cupholder. “How *did* you actually manage to stick him into a friend box?”

“I guess he’s just not my type.”

“Fuck that, he’s everyone’s type.”

“What I mean is he reminds me of some of my exes. His career comes first—anything else is a distraction to him. Being with a guy who’s so singularly focused on his job isn’t an issue for a girl if, like Drey, she doesn’t do more than ‘casual.’ But I’m the opposite.” Harri’s tongue flicked out to collect the crumb sticking to the corner of her mouth. “Not that I don’t still think he’s sex on a stick, I just don’t feel at all inclined to act on it.”

“It’s for the best,” Alicia told her sagely, clearly pleased that our sister would remain single.

Harri narrowed her eyes at her. “Jag looks hot today, don’t you think?”

Alicia’s lips pressed together. She flipped Harri the finger and then switched her attention to me. “How are things going with you, Addie? I haven’t seen you in, like, a week. You seem ... I don’t know ... more positive.”

I slurped some of my soda through the straw. “Things are just better all-round. I’ve got potential clients coming out of my ears. Plus, Felicity and her crew have stayed out of my way.”

There had also been no further contact or trouble from Mimi either. Knowing Dax wouldn’t want his situation with

her to be shared with others, I hadn't told anyone about it—not even my sisters, though I knew they'd keep it to themselves.

I returned my soda to the cupholder. My fingers a little slippery from the condensation on my cup, I wiped them on my jeans. “Also, me and Dax are more settled now.” Aspects of our budding friendship still felt forced at times—as he'd pointed out, it wasn't instinctive for him to befriend people—but we were sticking with it.

“You do seem to have more of an ease with each other than you did before,” mused Alicia.

“We kind of ...” I trailed off as a tickle built in my nose. I slapped a hand over my face right before the sneeze burst out of me. “Damn.”

Harri eyed me as she held out a napkin. “That's, like, the third time you've sneezed in the past two hours. I think you might be coming down with something.”

I took the napkin and dabbed at my nose. “Nu-uh, I'm not sick.”

Alicia exhaled heavily. “You say it as if it would make you weak if you were. Everyone gets sick sometimes. Ew, don't drop the germ-ridden napkin into your popcorn.”

“I'm done eating it.”

“I wasn't.”

Demolishing the last of her hot dog, Harri looked at Alicia. “Why didn't you just buy your own?”

“I didn't feel like it.” Alicia retrieved her water bottle from the cupholder and unscrewed the cap. “I wasn't hungry anyway.”

Harri's brows inched up. “Is that why you ate half my mini doughnuts an hour ago?”

“I was being helpful. You could never have eaten all of them by yourself.”

“Helpful? Really?”

Alicia drank some water. “Really.”

“Did Jag tell you that?”

Alicia’s eyes flared. “Stop bringing him up every time I annoy you.” She placed the cap back on her bottle and then plonked it in the cupholder. “You know he and I have barely spoken.”

I shifted slightly on the plastic seat, grateful it was cushioned unlike those in the tiered rows—having a numb butt was no fun. “Speaking of Jag, I met his girlfriend. She glared at me like I’d tossed shit in her salad.”

Her forehead creasing, Harri swiped at her mouth with a napkin. “Yeah, she did that to me, too.”

I felt my brows snap together. “What? When?”

“When I bumped into her and Jag at a grocery store,” Harri replied.

“What a whore,” snarked Alicia, her protective instincts clearly all stirred up. “Did you slap her?”

“No, I mentioned it to Drey and asked what her issue was,” Harri explained. “He said not to take it personally; that Leonie doesn’t like people who she terms ‘trust fund babies.’”

“Ah,” I said. “Got it.” It wasn’t uncommon for people to brand us spoiled, superior, and out of touch with reality ... as if we grew up in a bubble where we weren’t exposed to the harshness of the world.

“Those people annoy me so much,” Alicia grumbled.

“Samesies.” Removing my sunglasses, I rubbed my aching temple. “But most do change their tune once they get to know us. Whether Leonie will bother getting to know us, I don’t know.”

I winced in sympathy as one of the people on the metal stairways stumbled, sending popcorn flying everywhere. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’d slipped due to a soda spill—there was plenty of them. The steps were also littered with bits of food, wrappers, and receipt stubs.

“Whoa,” began Alicia, “isn’t that Trace Lacroix?”

Following her gaze, I noticed that the famous actor was indeed stood in the neighboring VIP suite. He wasn't alone. His wife, Briar, and the other male in their triad, Kaleb, was with him.

Alicia stroked at her neck. "She is a lucky, lucky girl having two such fine specimens as husbands."

Absolutely, but ... "I don't know if I personally could deal with two, though. One is enough."

"Glad to hear it," said Dax.

I almost jumped at the sound of his voice. Tipping my head back to find him stood directly behind me, I cast him a frown. "Stop sneaking up on me."

"I didn't sneak," he calmly objected. "You just didn't hear me."

"Too busy ogling an actor," Caelan teased from beside him.

I shot the tattooist a *Don't stir the pot* look that only make him grin.

Walking onto the balcony with her husband, Kensey subtly peeked at Trace. "He is a treat to look at."

Blake gave her a hard stare. "I'm right here."

She widened her eyes in innocence. "It was a clinical observation."

Blake snorted. "Sure."

Just then, Trace glanced our way. His gaze zeroed in on Dax, and Trace then offered him a quick nod before going back to his conversation with his wife.

Again, I tilted my head to meet Dax's gaze. "You know him personally?"

"To an extent." His eyes zipped to my baby sister. "Do you have any experience at training cats, Harri?"

Twisting her head to look up at him, she blinked, seeming surprised by the question. "A little. Cats can be tricky

creatures, but they're not very difficult to train."

"Even if they're psychopathic?" he asked.

I shot him a glare. "Hey! Gypsy is not a psychopath. She needs some love and understanding."

"She needs a therapist," he countered.

"No, she—why are you nodding your head, Alicia?" I asked my sister.

She froze. "Uh, no reason."

I would have branded her a liar, but my nose chose that moment to tickle again. Another sneeze—this one much less delicate than the last—fairly erupted out of me. Again, I gratefully accepted a napkin from Harri.

Skirting around the row of seats to stand in front of me, Dax studied my face carefully. "Are you all right?"

"Perfectly fine," I replied, gently wiping my nose.

He squinted. "You're pale, your eyes are watery, and your nose is red."

"Don't flatter me so." I dumped the napkin in the popcorn box at my feet. "I'm not sick."

One of his brows slid up. "You're sure about that?"

"Positive."



Slumped in my office chair the following afternoon, I silently winced as I swallowed around my dry, aching throat. "I think I'm sick," I said, my voice a little raspy.

"I *know* you're sick," said Sabrina, standing in front of my desk, her arms folded, a stern expression on her face. "The coughing, sniffing, sneezing, and glassy eyes gave it away. Which is why I told you to go home the very moment you first got here. What on Earth possessed you to come in today?"

“I felt fine earlier.”

She gifted me an impatient look. “No, you didn’t. Pretending you’re well won’t *make* you well, you know. The power of positivity only goes so far.”

I pressed the heel of my palm against my forehead. “Stop shouting, my head hurts.”

“I’m not shouting.”

“And stop glaring at me.” I paused as a cough racked my throat. Ugh. “You’re supposed to be sympathetic.”

“Tough love is more my thing, you know that.” She gestured at the door. “Go home. Get some rest. And stay there until you’re better.”

I pouted. “It feels like admitting defeat.”

Sabrina rolled her eyes. “Just get your ass out of here. I’ll handle everything while you’re gone. You can’t exactly go meet clients and vendors looking all disgusting anyway.”

I felt my brows draw together. “I don’t look disgusting.” I *felt* it, though.

“No, you don’t,” she admitted. “But I’m feeling mean because I resent that you manage to look cute while ill. It isn’t fair. *I* look like the living dead when sickness strikes.”

“That’s not true.”

“You’re lying, and we both know it.”

I gave a weak shrug. “It seemed like the nice thing to do.” The last word came out on a croak as another upcoming cough scratched at the back of my throat. Oh, hell.

Ever the drama queen, she reared back when the cough finally burst out of me. “Get out of here. Go on, go.”

I pushed out of my seat. “If you insist.”

“Oh, I freaking insist.”

Seeing that enough time had passed for me to take my next round of painkillers, I chugged them down with water

before gathering my stuff together. Only then did I leave the building and head home.

Pulling into my driveway, I frowned at the sight of Dax's car in its usual spot. It would normally be another three hours or so before his workday ended. Maybe he'd just popped home to grab something.

My shoulders drooping, I pretty much shuffled into the villa, my footsteps dragging. I found Dax on the patio reading something on his cell phone, a bottle of water on the table in front of him. "You're home early," I noted as his gaze snapped to mine.

"So are you." He arched a superior brow. "Finally willing to admit that you're sick?"

I narrowed my eyes at the gorgeous bastard. He'd earlier recommended I take the day off, swearing I'd regret it if I didn't and predicting I'd return home earlier than usual. I'd insisted I was "fine." Over and over, actually. He'd eventually shaken his head and left for work.

"Do we really have to talk about such things?" I asked.

Humor flickered in his eyes. "I'll take that as a yes."

Not liking the gloating note in his voice, I gave him a haughty sniff ... which came out sounding a little bubbly, since my nose was partially blocked.

"Have you taken painkillers?"

"Yes. They're kicking in as we speak." My headache was now more of a dull throb—horrible, but more bearable. "What cut your day short?"

"I was supposed to go somewhere with Jag, but he had to cancel—he didn't fully explain why. It was something to do with Leonie."

As it occurred to me that he would have given me a less detailed response once upon a time, I inwardly smiled. We were definitely making progress with the friendship thing. He hadn't merely been paying me lip service when he assured me he'd work on it.

“On the subject of Jag and Leonie,” I began, “I don’t suppose you know if they’re serious, do you?”

Dax’s gaze sharpened. “Why?”

“Surely you’ve noticed the vibe between him and Alicia?”

He sighed. “He’s unlikely to act on it, single or not, so I wouldn’t bother playing matchmaker if I were you.”

I arched a brow. “He has something against ‘trust fund babies’ like Leonie does?”

Dax’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “She said that to you?” he asked, his tone pure silken menace.

“No, Drey told Harri about it when she asked him why Leonie gave her a dirty look.”

“And has she given *you* a dirty look?”

“It wasn’t a death glare or anything, so don’t go confronting her. Does Jag share her view?”

“No.” His brow creased when a cough crawled up my throat. “Are you sure you don’t want to see a doctor?”

I waved the idea away, just as I had earlier when he first suggested it. “There’d be nothing a doctor could do. It’s only a cold. I just need to rest, stay hydrated, and wait it out.”

Dax let out a displeased hum but didn’t argue. “Fine. Take a bath, change into sweats, and go relax and distract yourself with a book.”

I blinked. “It’s freaky how you have my exact plan in mind.”

Just then, his phone rang. Leaving him to take his call in private, I dumped my satchel in my office before going upstairs. In the en suite bathroom, I took a hot bath. The steam helped, making my throat hurt less and my nose clear a little.

Afterwards, clad in comfy sweats, I retreated to my office and settled in my plush, upholstered chair with a brand-new paperback that I’d recently ordered online. I’d originally



meant to get started on it later tonight. I loved the author—her books always drew me in.

Losing myself in the story proved to be a fabulous distraction from how bad I felt, though I wasn't impressed by how often a cough or sneeze dragged me out of a scene. At one point, Dax entered the room with a mug and a bottle of water—both of which he set down on the small table beside my chair.

I looked at the steaming cup. “What’s this?”

“Hot water with honey and lemon. It’ll help soothe your throat. My mother swears by it.”

I stared at him as warmth trickled into my chest. I hadn't expected him to do, well, *anything* other than maybe avoid me until I was better. It wasn't as if he was an attentive person, or as if he'd feel in any way obliged to baby me. He'd only come bearing fluids, sure, but it wasn't something he'd have done a few weeks ago.

I was about to thank him, but then his gaze dropped to my paperback and his lips quirked. I frowned. “What?”

He looked at me. “You read books by Nina Bowen?”

“Yes, she writes horror. She’s also *the shit*. You’ve heard of her? Oh, wait, your company publishes her books. I forgot about that.”

She'd once self-published her novels, but that had changed over the years for some ... My thoughts trailed off when I noticed his mouth twitch again. There was a weird glint in his eyes. Like he knew something I didn't. And he was clearly amused by that.

I felt my brow pucker again. “What? What’s funny?”

He gave a slow shake of the head. “Nothing at all.”

Not whatsoever convinced, nor in the least bit impressed that he appeared to be finding amusement at my expense, I decided to mess with him. Making an effort to look pitiful, I asked, “Will you read to me?”

His humor began to slip away. “No.”

“But it’s a husband-y thing to do.”

“I don’t care.”

“That’s not nice.”

“Neither am I.” He pointed at the mug he’d brought me. “Drink that. All of it.” He dipped a hand into the pocket of his slacks and dug out a box of the painkillers I’d been using. “And take more of those when you next need them,” he bossed.

I took the box with a sniffle. “Your bedside manner leaves something to be desired, but I won’t complain.”

“You just did.” With that, he turned and headed for the door.

“Dax?” I waited until he met my gaze before saying, “Thank you.”

He inclined his head.

“You can read to me another time.”

Sighing, he preceded to leave the room. “Let that dream die, Addison, because it won’t happen.”

Alone again, I snickered to myself and then delved back into my book.

## Chapter Nineteen

Thanks to my cough, I didn't have the best night's sleep. By the time the next morning rolled around, my body ached like hell, I was running a fever, and my nose was leaking like a tap.

Yeah, I wasn't going to work today.

Flat on my back in bed, I let my head loll to the side. Dax lay squarely in his "spot" on the large mattress, his eyes closed, his breathing even.

Given how much I'd coughed during the night, I was surprised he hadn't gone to sleep in one of the spare bedrooms at one point. I'd offered to do it so that he could have an interrupted sleep, but he'd glared at me like I'd suggested removing my rings.

"*You sleep in this bed. Our bed. No other,*" he'd then stated.

Though I'd told him it wouldn't be a big deal for me to spend one night in another room, he'd insisted I sleep beside him. Personally, I failed to see why he'd be so affected by my not being here. It wasn't as if my absence would be missed, given we slept on separate sides of the mattress and didn't cuddle. Though—*note to self*—I should really burrow into him one time just to freak him out for the fun factor.

A tickle scratched at my throat, and there was no holding back the cough. A wheezy cough that went on and on and on, making my chest and throat burn. I weakly sat upright, nabbed my glass from the nightstand, and took gentle swigs of my water, letting the cold liquid soothe the burn.

"I hope you're not going to insist on heading into work," said Dax, his voice thick.

"Not today," I rasped, the words barely audible.

He let out a gratified grunt. "I can't take the day off, but I'll come check on you between meetings."

Aw, that hit me in the feels. “You don’t have to do that, I’ll be fine.” But considering my voice was a pitiful croak and I had to look like a bag of shit, I wasn’t surprised that he raised a dubious brow my way. “Fingers crossed you don’t catch it.”

“I won’t catch it,” he said with total conviction, like no germ would *dare* try to infect him.

I rubbed at my throat. “Well, I hope you’re right.”

“I’m right.” Again, such conviction.

I merely shrugged. “If you say so.”

Before leaving for work, he set me up in bed with everything I needed—drinks, pills, tissues, healthy snacks, menthol lozenges, and even a soothing throat spray. He went about it in a very methodical and businesslike way as opposed to acting in any way nurturing, but my chest went warm all the same.

Throughout the day, wanting to get at least *some* work done, I handled emails while watching movies and documentaries on the TV mounted on the wall opposite me. For obvious reasons, taking and making calls was a no-no.

True to his word, Dax popped home here and there. Each time, I assured him that it wasn’t necessary. But he totally ignored me and did as he pleased.

*What’s new there?*

I wasn’t annoyed, though. I found it sweet. Touching. Especially when it was clearly so out of character for him.

Later on, when I went to his office in search of him, I saw that the room was empty. Noticing that the balcony doors were open, I made my way toward them ... which was right when I picked up an unfamiliar muted voice.

Stepping onto the balcony, I found no Dax. I realized then that the person speaking was actually outside the villa. As the balcony was positioned on the side of the building, I could see only a portion of the driveway from this angle. Right then, what I saw was Dax standing near his car with his back to me, facing a short, dorky-looking dude who appeared to be

somewhere in his twenties. A dude who was wearing a sly grin.

“I personally would have married the sister,” he told Dax. “Alicia’s her name, isn’t it? Yeah, pretty sure that’s it.” He hummed. “Damn, she’s got great skin. And those fucking legs go on forever. Am I right, or am I right?”

I gaped, honestly unsure what bothered me more: the sleazy way this prick spoke of my sister, or that Dax didn’t say a single word.

“Come on, you can’t tell me you haven’t had a few fantasies about that girl,” Sleazeball went on, still smirking.

Apparently, Dax indeed *couldn’t* tell him that. Because he didn’t.

“Seriously, why didn’t you put your ring on that one’s finger? I’m not saying the eldest isn’t hot. She’s a babe for sure.” The stranger’s nose wrinkled. “Just a little too curvy for my tastes. And she always struck me as a bit vain and uppity.”

I gritted my teeth, anger flaring in my belly. Not merely at the crap he was spouting, but at how Dax remained completely silent. *Thanks, hubby.*

“She has a great rack, though,” Sleazeball seemed to hesitantly grant. “And we all love a great rack, don’t we?”

Seriously, who was this motherfucker?

His smirk went up several notches. “The youngest one’s a beauty, too. As is her ass. Hmm, I’d like some of that.”

My back snapped straight. If my voice wasn’t a mere croak, I would have yelled down that I’d disembowel the little prick if he went anywhere *near* Harri or Alicia.

Dax cocked his head. “Haven’t I seen you with Wal Stroeder on occasion? He’s a chef at one of my restaurants. He’s also one of my tenants.”

I felt my brows snap together. Who gave a damn about Wal Stroeder, whoever the hell that was?

*Fuck this shit.* If Dax wasn't going to deal with Sleazeball, *I* would.

Furious—and yeah, kind of hurt—I hurried out of the office, stalked across the upstairs hallway, banded down the stairs ... and saw Dax returning inside.

I made a beeline for him as he closed the front door. “The fuck was that?” I demanded, which would have sounded much more assertive if the words weren't so hoarse and raspy.

His brow puckered in confusion.

“I was on your office balcony, I saw a preview of what happened out there,” I explained.

With a sigh of realization, he rubbed at the corner of his eyebrow.

I perched my hands on my hips. “How could you not have punched that sack of shit? I heard the crap he said about me and my sisters.”

Dax dropped his arm back to his side. “Addison—”

“Know what I didn't hear? *You* telling him to shut the fuck up. *You* defending my sisters. *You* defending me.” Anger tinged with humiliation sparked in my gut and caused my face to burn. “No, you were more interested in talking about Wal ... whoever.”

“There's a good reason for that,” Dax appeased, calm as ever. Yeah, *calm*.

I felt my brows fly up. “There's a ‘good’ reason for not saying anything in my defense, or in telling some creep to keep his distance from my sisters?” Try as I might, I couldn't see one. “And if I'm honest, it also wasn't real nice that you didn't deny having fantasies about Alicia or thinking maybe you should have married *her*. I mean, if that's how you feel, that's how you feel, but still.”

Set on ignoring the frog in my throat, I swallowed around it. Uh, ow.

Dax took slow, measured steps toward me, his eyes regarding me with incredulity. “Do you really think that's

actually the case?”

“What I think is that if the situation were reversed, I’d have shut that shit down. I wouldn’t have tolerated anyone talking smack about you.” The backs of my eyes burning as hot as my cheeks, I threw up my hands. “You know what? Forget it.” I spun on my heel and stalked off.

“Don’t walk away from me, Addison, we need to talk about this.”

I didn’t stop. Couldn’t. I needed space if I had any chance of finding some calm.

“I understand why you’re upset,” he went on, all reasonable, “but you have to let me explain.”

I didn’t *have* to do anything.

“Wouldn’t you like to know who he was?”

Nearing the staircase, I shook my head and said, “I’d rather not talk anymore about your mystery friend.”

“He’s no friend of mine. His name is August Blum. The guy’s a reporter.”

One foot on the bottom stair, I stilled in surprise, my brows sliding together. He was a, what?

Dax didn’t say anything more, or try to catch up with me. He simply waited.

Placing one hand on the banister, I slowly half-turned and met his unreadable gaze, knowing my expression would be a mask of sheer skepticism.

“He was interested in getting the scoop on our recent nuptials,” Dax elaborated. “I can guarantee you he was somehow recording that conversation. I wasn’t going to give him anything to print, no matter how much he tried goading me. And believe me, they always try goading me,” he added a little tiredly.

I licked my lips. “He’s a reporter?”

“Yes. He waltzed up the driveway just as I was grabbing something from my car. He was friendly at first. But

when I wasn't cooperative, he started tossing out verbal bait. It's easy enough for me to ignore the tactic—I've been dealing with it since I was a kid. That doesn't mean what he said didn't piss me off, though I doubt he meant a word of it—he just wanted me to jump to your defense; wanted a reaction.”

Flexing my fingers, I nibbled on my lower lip. Was his explanation believable? Yes. It even made sense. But I had so much anger and hurt powering through my blood that it wasn't easy to quite simply *accept* his story and back down.

Watching me carefully, he covered the space between us. His hand cupped my chin as he lowered his face slightly, snaring my gaze. “Do you really think I would tolerate anyone insulting you? That I would stay quiet unless I had a good reason?”

Well ... no. No, I didn't. It was far from his style. But if the dude was really a reporter, it begged the question: “Why didn't you just tell him to leave?”

“I did. He ignored me. At first.”

“What finally made him walk away?”

Dax minutely flicked his head to the side. “I indirectly threatened to have his boyfriend fired and evicted.”

“Wal Stroeder?”

“Wal Stroeder,” he confirmed, releasing my chin. “There would be no sense in me putting together such a lie when you could easily do an internet search on Blum—his picture will pop right up, along with articles he's written.”

True, I silently conceded as my anger and hurt began to steadily leach away. Rubbing at my face, I pulled in a long breath. And promptly coughed.

“The reason I didn't ram my fist in Blum's face is that the media ... they know how I am, how I operate. He will have had a cameraman close by, hoping to catch something on film. They usually do.”

“That's messed up,” I whispered.

He shrugged. “It's my normal.”



“That’s why it’s so messed up.”

He dragged his gaze over my face. “If I hadn’t been positive he was recording that conversation, I would have handled the matter differently. To be clear, I have never once had fantasies about either of your sisters or considered marrying them. You should have known better than to think otherwise,” he added, a pinch of admonishment in his tone. “I also do not at all consider you even remotely vain or stuck up. Or too curvy, for that matter.”

“I wouldn’t have cared if you had thought me too curvy—I’d have considered it your problem.” I was happy with my body as it was. “I just didn’t like that you didn’t tell him to shove it. Though I get now why you didn’t.” I bit into the inside of my cheek. “Have any other reporters sought you out recently?”

“No. But it’s never a surprise when they do. They have a habit of showing up. Usually whenever Michael Bale is suddenly a hot online top.” He gave an aloof shrug, but there was really nothing to be aloof about.

I had to admit, I was curious about how it must have been for Dax to grow up with Bale as a step-grandfather; curious about how it had affected his life and family—I only really knew the gist of it. But I’d never asked, because I didn’t want him to think I was interested in a, “*Ooh, tell me all the nitty, gritty details, I find it fascinating*” way. Like I didn’t appreciate how difficult it must have been for him.

I cast him a weak smile. “I’d hug you in sympathy, but you’d rear back from the affection in horror, so I’m going to settle for a shoulder pat.” I gently patted his left shoulder three times.

Mirth bled into his eyes. “Now that that’s over with, get back upstairs. You’re supposed to be resting. If you weren’t sick, I’d paddle your ass for thinking I might be in agreement with any of what Blum said out there.”

I straightened to my full height. “If you come near my butt with a paddle—”

“You’ll take what I give you,” he finished. “And you’ll enjoy it. That I can promise you.”

“It’s a promise you wouldn’t be able to deliver on.”

“Don’t be so sure.” He tipped his chin toward the stairs. “Go before I decide you’re well enough to handle it now.”

“I’m going. But I’m telling you, butt-paddling—or whatever it’s called—will never turn out to be my thing.”

“We’ll see.”

“No. No, we won’t,” I asserted. But he only smiled, the dick.

## Chapter Twenty

Opening the toilet stall's flimsy lock almost a fortnight later, I crossed to one of the sinks. Like the others, it was grimy and boasted weird-looking stains—much like the tiled floor. I felt my nose wrinkle.

The restroom at the gas station I frequented was not my favorite place, but my bladder had been screaming at me for release, so I'd taken a pit-stop on my way home. Too much coffee, I thought.

Not wanting to rest my purse on the wet counter, I kept it hooked over my shoulder as I washed my hands. The sound of water splattering against porcelain blended with the gurgling of a toilet and the weird noise coming from the exposed plumbing beneath the counter.

God, it *reeked* in here. Reeked of pee, vomit, bleach, and full-on shit. It didn't help matters that the soap was unscented.

Catching sight of my reflection in the rusted mirror, I wasn't pleased to find that I looked as tired as I felt. It had been a long-ass day that had involved more meetings than usual, and the latter one had lasted longer than expected.

At least I wasn't sick anymore. I had unfortunately passed it on to several others, including Alicia and Sabrina. Dax, however, didn't catch it. No, much as he'd insinuated, his immune system was made of pretty stern stuff.

Switching off the faucet, I shook my wet hands and then walked to the toilet paper dispenser. It was out of paper. Awesome. I tried the hand-drier, my lips thinning when it came to life with a weak whir of sound and did nothing more than cause air to *flutter* over my skin.

Eventually giving up on the drier, I left the restroom. The closer I headed to where I'd parked my car, the heavier the scents of gasoline, exhaust, motor oil, and sun-warmed pavement became. I had no complaints, since they chased the restroom-smells from my nose.

Much as I loved the summer, I couldn't say I lamented that we'd crept into September. For one thing, it wasn't quite as hot. For another, it would be October soon. I was a big fan of Halloween.

Rather than head straight to my vehicle, I grabbed two thin paper towels from the dispenser near the gas pumps and dried off my damp hands. Around me, engines idled, gas gurgled through hoses, and music filtered out of open car windows. But I still easily heard the bell above the station's door chime.

I looked up as a trio of laughing teenage boys piled out holding drinks and snacks. I momentarily went very still, a curse hovering on the tip of my tongue. Because one of the boys was Blaise.

Not wanting a scene, I prayed he wouldn't notice me. But apparently the universe was not on my side today. He did a double-take as his eyes caught mine, the amusement draining from his expression in a rush. His gaze chilled, his body stiffened, and his jaw set into a hard, unforgiving line.

Deciding to ignore him, I threw the balled-up paper towels into the trash can and then walked toward my car.

I didn't make it there.

Blaise slipped into my path and planted his feet. His friends followed his lead, though they seemed to have no clue why he'd done it. A cold smile took hold of his lips as he cocked his head.

*Don't do it, kid, don't do it,* I silently willed. *Just walk away.*

"Well, if it isn't my stepdad's old whore," he snarked.

I felt my lips part. That little son of a fucker.

His red-headed friend's brows shot up in surprise. "That so?" Eyeing me from head to toe, he gave me a sleazy grin. "I can see why Grayden went there." He elbowed the third boy. "Look at those tits, Glenn."

“Real nice,” commented Glenn, staring at my cleavage. “Even bigger than your girl’s titties.”

God save me from hormonal teenage idiots. I met Blaise’s glare with one of my own. “Walk away.”

He didn’t. He pointed his energy drink at me in a sharp, accusing move. “Because of you, my mom lost her job. A job she’d had for *years*. Dax was behind it—I know he was. He did it for *you*.”

Huh. It wasn’t a major surprise. I’d thought it possible that he’d choose such a method of retaliation. My dad had been known to use it on occasion.

Not about to say anything that would implicate Dax, I only replied, “If he is behind it—and I’m not saying he is—she brought that on herself. You’ll bring something similar on *yourself* if you don’t quit this now.”

Blaise let out an ugly snicker. “I ain’t afraid of Dax.”

“I doubt that.”

“If he touches me even *once*, my Uncle Lowe will take his ass down,” Blaise gloated.

How typical that he’d consider himself safe to act like a shithead because he had someone who’d bail him out of trouble. I shook my head. “Lowe won’t be able to save you from Dax.” Even the sheriff himself would know that.

Glenn exchanged a nervous look with the third boy and then leaned toward Blaise. “She talking about Mercier?” he asked, a shaky note to his voice.

“Yes,” I confirmed, figuring that Blaise’s friends deserved the chance to remove themselves from the situation since all they’d really done was make inappropriate sexual comments.

Their eyes widening, the two began to back away, passing the side of my car as they did so.

I resettled my gaze on Blaise. “You should be smart like your buddies there and *move*. This scene here won’t impress your mom. All you’re doing is focusing Dax’s

attention back on your family. She won't want that. Neither should you."

He sneered. "What she doesn't want is some bitch pining after what's hers. You want to steal Grayden from her again. Don't know why, because he's a piece of shit in my opinion."

I didn't bother pointing out that I hadn't "stolen" Grayden from her at all; that he and Felicity had been separated back when he and I got together—Blaise knew that already. "If I wanted him, I wouldn't have married Dax, would I?"

"How the hell did you even pull that off, anyway? Well, I'm betting he's regretting it. Now he's stuck with a shit-stirring skank who's turned him against his own family."

I almost crossed my eyes. He acted as if Dax and Felicity had been close all their lives until now. Not about to explain myself to some snotty-nosed kid, I flicked up a brow. "Are you done? Or would you like to make this even worse for yourself?"

I thought he'd probably choose the latter option, but a smirk pulled at his mouth as he held up one hand in a gesture of peace. "I guess I'm done."

Blaise backed away, taking the exact path that his friends had. As he approached my car, he dug something out of his pocket. There was a slight screeching sound as—*motherfucker*—he keyed my goddamn car. He stopped near my front passenger window as something caught his attention. Shit, I'd left it open a few inches. He pocketed his keys, opened his bottle, and then tipped a good portion of his drink through the gap.

Grinding my teeth, I glared at the little shit, wishing I was close enough that I could whack him over the head with my purse.

His smirk widening, he said, "Whoops. Sorry about that."

Oh, someone needed to tan his ass. And someone would. Because I wasn't going to protect him from consequences this time. "Bad idea, Blaise."

He only laughed and then jogged over to his friends. He wouldn't be laughing for long.

Striding over to my car with angry steps, I yanked open the front passenger door and glanced inside. My mouth went so tight my lips trembled. The nearest seat was covered in orange liquid, which was also dripping down the inside of the door and soaking the carpet. *Motherfucker.*

I took a step back, feeling my nostrils flare. No amount of thin-ass paper towels were going to be of any help, so it would be best to hurry home and deal with the mess there. I shut the door and then examined the groove in the paintwork left by his key. It was one hell of a deep scratch. My anger ramping up, I clenched my fists and cursed beneath my breath.

Since there was no way I could plonk my purse on the passenger seat as usual, I tucked it behind the driver's seat and then hopped in. Closing the door, I started the engine and lowered all my windows—the goddamn air in the car stank of the tangy orange drink.

As I drove, I fought for some measure of calm. I didn't find it. He'd gone too far this time.

Insulting and bitching at me was bad enough. But while neither were acceptable, they weren't anything I hadn't dealt with before. For Blaise to damage my property, however, was a whole other matter.

And completely unnecessary.

He'd said his piece. He'd vented plenty. That should have been enough for him. But no, he'd taken it that step further just to be a prick.

Dax would not be happy. Not at all. But I wasn't going to ask him for lenience here.

I'd given Blaise a chance once before, despite Sabrina's advice. But he hadn't stopped at graffitiing the parking sign outside my work building. No, he'd escalated.

Not merely by targeting my *personal* property as opposed to something assigned to me, but by doing it right in front of me rather than in the dead of night while alone.

It was cocky. Mean. Vindictive. An indication that there might possibly be no end to his destructive behavior unless someone stepped in and put a stop to it.

Both Felicity and Grayden had been given the opportunity to do that. Maybe they'd tried, maybe they hadn't. Either way, their influence over him clearly wasn't enough to keep him from crossing criminal lines. I wasn't going to give Blaise the opportunity to target me or my belongings again.

Pulling into my driveway, I saw that Dax wasn't home yet. He'd earlier notified me that he'd be home later than usual, so it was no shock.

Not wanting to waste any time tackling the orange stains, I swiftly changed clothes, grabbed the cleaning products from the kitchen, pulled on rubber gloves, and then quickly got to work.

The stain proved a bitch to remove from the seat, so my arm was aching when Dax finally whipped his car into the driveway a short time later. Blowing out a breath, I dropped the bristle brush on the seat and then straightened. My body should have become desensitized to his appeal by now, right? Well, it hadn't. Not even close.

Still, my hormones didn't have constant meltdowns around him these days. But there were moments when he'd do something that would make them sigh in appreciation. Like now, as he smoothly unfolded from the car with a powerfully masculine grace.

No shuffling or hopping or edging or pushing out of his seat. It was as if he *flowed* out of it, fluid as water. And then he stood there all tall and intense and suited-up, like he owned the freaking world or something.

He stalked toward me and rounded the hood of my car. As he took in the scene, his brow slightly puckered. "I take it you spilled something."



“No. Well, there *was* a spill,” I explained, removing my gloves. “But I’m not the one responsible. And it wasn’t an accident.”

His gaze narrowed, and his posture tensed. “Go on.”

With a weary sigh, I rested my gloves on the car roof. “Blaise chose to be a dick again.”

Something dark moved behind Dax’s eyes. “Elaborate.” The command was low, rumbly, menacing.

“I just saw him at the gas station. He was with two of his friends. He said some not-so-pleasant things to me.”

“Such as?”

I propped my hands on my hips. “He called me his ‘stepdad’s old whore.’ He blames me for how you cost Felicity her job and also claims I’m a ‘shit-stirring skank’ who made you turn against your own family.”

Dax’s jaw went so tight I would bet it hurt. He cast the partially removed stain on the passenger seat a hard look. “He did this?”

I nodded. “He poured some of his drink through my open window accidentally-on-purpose as he was walking away. Also”—I pointed at the scratch in the silver paint—“he thought it a groovy idea to key my car as well.”

Dax bent to take a thorough look at it. A stony, pitiless look descended over his face, making my scalp prickle.

“He’s not worried he’ll face any consequences, because he believes Lowe will protect him from you.”

“He’s mistaken,” said Dax, his voice a razor-sharp blade. Straightening, he pulled his cell out of his pocket, thumbed the screen a few times, and then put the phone to his ear. “Find Blaise Buchanan,” he ordered whoever answered the call. “A conversation needs to be had. You know where to take him.” He abruptly hung up.

Dax did that sometimes. Called someone. Dished out an order. Ended the call. And would tell me they were “employees of a sort.”

I jolted out of my thoughts as he began prowling back to his car. I followed after him. “What are you going to do?” No response. “Dax?”

“I’m going to ensure he never so much as considers repeating his actions.”

“How, exactly?”

He pulled open the driver’s door. “Don’t expect answers to questions like that, Addison.”

“Why not?”

His gaze latched onto mine, so serious and unyielding. “I deal with things my way. That will never change. Neither will the fact that I won’t speak of such matters to you. I don’t intend for that side of my life to touch you. Ever.”

I felt it was more of a case that he didn’t want to ever expose that side of *himself* to me. The violent side that was never able to rely on the justice system so personally settled any scores. A side that clearly awaited judgement from me—it was written all over his face.

I could assure Dax that I’d never condemn him, but I wasn’t sure he’d believe me. Not after comments he’d made to me in the past, and not after all that Brooks had explained to me. It would need to be something I *showed* Dax—possibly over a period of time.

Intending to start that right now, I said, “Okay. Just don’t get caught.”

His eyes raked over my face, absorbing every detail, most likely searching for some hint of uneasiness—or maybe even plain ole deceit. Finally, he shoved his car door open a little wider and said, “I’ll be home in a couple of hours. Eat without me.”

As if I’d do that when he was out there avenging a slight to me. “I’ll wait until you come back. We’ll eat together like we always do.”

Again, he gave me a long, searching look. With a curt nod, he then got into his vehicle and left.

Sure I'd be on pins until he returned, I knew it would be best to keep myself occupied. So I finished scrubbing away the stains from my car, took a shower to rid my skin of the astringent scent of the cleaning products, and then vented about the Blaise incident to my sisters and Sabrina via video call while I sat around in my sweats.

They were all as furious as they were certain that Dax would retaliate on my behalf, but I didn't confirm that he was doing exactly that as we spoke. Not even to the people closest to me would I ever say anything that would incriminate him.

When I saw through the living room window that Dax had returned, I ended the call and slipped off the sofa. I padded into the hallway just as he walked through the front door. I took stock of him. Unbelievable as it might seem, he was the picture of unruffled.

There was no anger in his eyes. No wrinkles or stains on his suit. No indication at all that he'd just had a violent encounter—not even marks on his knuckles. Whatever he'd used to beat Blaise, it hadn't been his fists ... unless he'd somehow covered them.

“He won't bother you again,” said Dax, his voice as cool and calm as the vibe he exuded. He slipped by me, strolled into the living room, and poured himself a whiskey at the vintage liquor cabinet there.

Much as I'd like to prod him for *some* details, I saw no point—he wouldn't tell me jack. “He might report you to Lowe.”

Dax knocked back some of his drink. “No, he won't.” A confident statement.

I felt my brow crease. “I know people generally don't speak up against you. But Blaise is different. He believes Lowe is his guardian angel.”

“Blaise considered himself untouchable before. Not now. Tonight was probably the first time in his life he's ever truly been held accountable for his actions. He wasn't expecting it. Didn't know how bad it could be. Now he does.

Now he knows he isn't ready to take me on." Dax took another swig of his whiskey. "He won't want me to come for him again. I warned him I would if he talked."

Hopefully Dax was right to be so certain. And hopefully he'd one day stop looking at me the way he was looking at me right now—like he was expecting both rejection and condemnation.

Did I *like* that he'd taken the law into his own hands and beat the piss out of someone? No. But nor did I blame him.

"Thank you for dealing with it," I said. "He would have kept this shit up if you hadn't, and it would have been worse next time."

Something flickered in Dax's eyes. Surprise, maybe.

"Felicity and Grayden will guess it was you," I added. "It won't matter if Blaise insists you weren't responsible, or if he doesn't tell them about the gas station incident—something which would definitely give you motive—because not a lot of people would ignore his connection to the sheriff."

Dax conceded that with an unconcerned tilt of his head. "I suspect I'll be contacted by Felicity at some point this evening. She might not be the most pleasant of individuals, but she loves her children; she'll want to have her say, though I doubt she'll come here."

Yeah, she wasn't quite that brave. "She has your cell number, right?"

"No."

"But you've called her in the past."

"I withheld my number each time. She and Grayden both have my business email address, however."

It didn't seem likely to me that she'd be satisfied with simply sending an email-rant to Dax, given her motherly protective instincts would be on fire. "It's a shame she wasn't able to get him under her control. Then it would never have

come to this. But maybe a life lesson will do Blaise's warped inner child some good."

Dax gave a loose shrug. "Maybe."

Watching him toss back another gulp of whiskey, I asked, "Are you ready to chow down some dinner?"

His eyes went slitted. "You waited for me?"

"I told you I would." He apparently hadn't been so certain I'd actually do it, though.

After several moments of silence, he pursed his lips. "I could eat."

"Then let's order it now."

Our meal was a relatively quiet affair. He spent a good portion of the time giving me long looks—some dubious, some probing, some cautious, and some totally inscrutable.

I'd responded several times with a questioning brow, narrowing of my eyes, or an impatiently barked, "What?" Each response from him had been a simple shake of the head.

We were piling the dishware back on the trolley on which they'd arrived, courtesy of one of the staff, when his cell phone rang.

He nabbed it from the kitchen table and answered, "What do you want?"

Ah, so it was one of his brothers. They had a habit of answering each other's calls with mock rudeness.

His brows slowly arched. "Are they now?" he asked, a lazy menace in his tone. "Put her on." He tapped his thumb on the phone screen, placing it on speakerphone.

"You did it," accused Felicity, a tremble to her voice—maybe of rage, maybe of nervousness, maybe of both.

"Did what?" Dax asked, nonchalant.

"You know what," she practically bit out.

"I don't play guessing games, Felicity. Be direct, or hand the phone back to Caelan."

Oh, she'd apparently gone to Caelan in the hope that she could contact Dax via him.

"My son is a *mess*," she spat. "Bruised, bloody, terrified. I can barely get a word out of him. He won't say who hurt him, but it could only have been you."

Dax leaned back against the kitchen counter. "Why is that? Surely you're not oblivious to how many people in Redwater he's wronged in some way, always banking on Lowe to get him out of trouble."

"It was you," she insisted, the shake in her voice more prominent now. "I don't know how you managed to cover him in bruises without breaking a single bone, but only someone who's no stranger to giving a beating would be able to do that."

"So it must automatically be me?"

"I spoke to his friends. They told me he had a run-in with Addison." She spoke my name like it offended her. "You punished Blaise. Traumatized him. How could you do that to him, Dax? He's your *blood*."

"I'm not certain why you'd say that as if it means something. It clearly means not one thing to him—he would have steered clear of my wife if it did."

A pause. "I don't know what's worse. That you could hurt him—a teenage boy, your own cousin—the way you did, or that it doesn't bother you in the slightest. People are right in what they say about you. You have no soul."

Anger rushed through my veins. *Bitch*.

His lips hitched up. "The thought of a teenage boy being harmed upsets you, does it? How easily you forget the times you came to me asking that I scare off someone who gave Blaise trouble. They were boys, too. They were someone's son. That didn't bother you."

She spluttered. "You stay away from Blaise."

"You keep him away from Addison." *Or he'll pay* went left unsaid but was heard in Dax's tone.

There was a slight shuffling sound, and then a male sigh drifted down the phone.

“They’re gone,” said Caelan. “I would have told them to fuck off when she came banging on my door asking for your number, but I didn’t want them showing up at your place. Grayden was trying to calm her down but it wasn’t working. I think he only came with her because he was worried she’d do something to land herself in shit. What exactly happened between Addison and Blaise?”

Dax relayed the incident, his voice remaining calm even when anger occasionally flared in his eyes. “Felicity is seemingly convinced that I’m responsible for whatever happened to Blaise,” he added.

From what I’d observed, he never said anything over the phone that could link him to any crime. Neither did his family, so I wasn’t surprised when Caelan responded, “Maybe whoever beat the crap out of him was banking on that. It was inevitable that someone would choose to teach him a lesson at some point—he’s made a lot of enemies.”

“That he has,” agreed Dax.

As he continued to speak with his brother, despite the dark emotions still roiling in my system, I found myself wanting to smile. Why? Because a few weeks ago, Dax wouldn’t have put the call on speakerphone. Hell, he might have even left the room to take the call; might have afterwards given me a bullet point version of it.

Tonight, he’d included me. Such a minor thing for others, but not for him. Not for this guarded, self-contained person who didn’t like—or feel the need—to involve people, even if his personal business in that case somehow related to them. He was just so solitary, such a go-it-alone individual.

Finally, Dax rounded up the conversation and hung up the phone. “I suppose I should have expected that Felicity would ask someone for my number.”

“I get that she’s upset—any mom would be if their son was beaten—and I don’t blame her for it. But I am pissed at

her for the crap she spouted just now. People do that to you far too often.”

“What?”

“Skip over *their* part in why you targeted them; say stuff like you have no soul.” The kind of thing they’d also said about Michael Bale, as if Dax’s actions in any way compared to those of a goddamn mass murderer. “The weight of what happened tonight doesn’t fall on you.”

Dax pushed away from the counter, his expression unreadable. “Not the full weight, but some of it does. After all, I could have handled the situation any number of ways.”

“But Blaise knew what path you’d likely take; he knew what he was risking. He did it anyway.”

Dax tipped his head to the side. “You don’t wonder if maybe those people are right?” he asked, his voice flat. “You don’t wonder if maybe there’s something missing in me? I feel no guilt over what I did tonight. I never do after I hurt someone.”

“But you’re only ever striking back at them. You don’t go round kicking the shit out of random people. And no, I don’t wonder if something’s missing in you. There’s nothing at all wrong with you. And fuck anyone who says differently.”

Something built in his eyes—an emotion I couldn’t quite identify. He pointed at the floor in front of him. “Come here,” he softly bid.

Swallowing, I covered the distance between us in just four steps.

He took a strand of my damp hair and twined it around his finger. “Maybe you’re right. Or maybe, like Little Red Riding Hood, you don’t see the big, bad wolf in front of you. Maybe you don’t really want to see him, so you tell yourself he’s not there.”

I swiped my tongue along the inside of my bottom lip. “I see him. As wolves go, he’s pretty intimidating. Dangerous for sure. But not soulless. And, well, I kind of like him.”



His eyes fairly crackling with that indefinable emotion, Dax lowered his mouth to mine. *Almost* to mine. With mere inches between our lips, he said, “Good. He kind of likes you, too.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

The hot spray of the shower raining down on me the next morning, I stared at Dax in utter confusion. He had a way of taking me off-guard. I wasn't even sure he always did it on purpose. He just wasn't a person whose actions or responses you could perfectly predict.

Take the current situation, for instance.

So far, he'd surprised me *three times* in the space of fifteen minutes. It had all started when he'd abruptly entered the shower stall. We never showered together. It wasn't, like, an iron-clad rule. We just didn't do it. But this morning, he'd joined me with the nonchalance of someone for whom this was a regular thing.

Not that he'd cozied up to me or anything. It wasn't necessary—the stall was spacious, and the shower head was large. But we'd stood close as we'd separately soaped our bodies down and washed our own hair.

I hadn't felt anything remotely close to casual. How could I? He might have kept his hands to himself, but the look in his eyes? It was feral. Indecent. Covetous. Like that of a starving predator on the hunt; one that was close to taking down its prey. The force and weight of his attention was so potent and palpable that I *felt* touched.

And yeah, I was damp. More, my hormones were in full-swing and my nerve-endings were all abuzz.

I'd thought maybe he was here for some shower sex—I could totally get behind that. But once he'd rinsed himself off, he'd backed away. That was surprise number two.

Disappointment had unfurled in the pit of my stomach. He hadn't left the stall as I'd thought he intended to, though. Nope. He'd casually taken a seat on the shower bench—his legs spread, his cock hard, his posture *all* alpha—and then settled in to watch me finish showering. And so we'd arrived at surprise number three.

My hands pausing in the act of smoothing conditioner into my hair, I flicked my head slightly to the side. “You’re seriously just going to sit there and watch?”

One muscular shoulder fluidly rose and fell. “Why not?”

“Well ... you don’t normally do that.” And it made me feel off-balance. Self-conscious. Even a little awkward—I was sure it was apparent in my body language.

A brow inched up. “You wear my rings, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You’re mine, aren’t you?”

Caught off-guard by the M word, I hesitated for a moment. “Yes.”

“Then why would you feel uncomfortable? You know you’re safe with me. So keep going. I want to watch.” That smooth, coaxing tone was a lure. A snare. An oath of plentiful, sexual rewards.

Who didn’t want sexual rewards?

I willingly let the compelling note that was buried in his voice pull me down the rabbit hole. That easily, I felt my hesitance and awkwardness drain away. I naturally fell into that mental space where safety and arousal merged.

His eyes went hooded, burning with approval. “That’s a good girl. Let everything else go.”

I carried on applying my conditioner, my skin hot from not only the water and steamy air but the way he lazily drifted his gaze over me, blatant avarice aflame there. Being the focus of it made me feel ... captured. Trapped. Bare. Robbed of my every defense.

My pulse lost its rhythm. My mouth went dry. My nipples started to throb.

More, anticipation crawled over and through me, filling every last crevice. The atmosphere in the stall went from thick and warm to oppressively electric.

As I rinsed the conditioner from my hair, my attention fell on his cock—so thick and hard. I wanted it. Wanted it filling me, taking me, possessing me. Wanted the friction, the fire, and the bliss that would follow.

God, the sexual tension was almost painful.

“Get over here,” he said, his voice dropping, thickening, taking on that mesmerizing quality my body never failed to respond to.

My pulse promptly did a hop, skip, and a jump. I padded along the shower mat as I moved to stand between his legs, the tang of excitement sitting on my tongue.

He brushed his knuckles over one puckered nipple. “You get to choose this morning. Do you want to ride me, or do you want to get fucked?”

Both, really. But I’d ridden him in bed last night. And right now, wound tight with need, what I most craved was the sexual roughness in him that often left him balanced on the edge of violence. “I want to get fucked.”

He curled his tongue around a taut bud and sucked hard, wrenching a gasp out of me. “It’ll be hard and fast,” he warned.

“Sounds good.” I loved quickies.

He slowly stood, staring down at me. In a bold and unrushed move, he curved his hand around my throat. There was nothing easy or tentative about his grip. It was firm. Dominant. Entitled.

And my entire being all but melted.

He licked and nibbled at one corner of my mouth as his free hand palmed my pussy. “Are you wet?”

I parted my lips to reply that—“*Fuck*,” I burst out as he jammed two fingers inside me.

“Hmm, you are. Good.” His mouth captured mine, and his tongue sank inside. As usual, that mouth of his swept me away. The kiss was a study in sensuality and tightly interwoven with greed and dominance and intent.

My body's response was instant. It heated, buzzed, charged up—just like the air itself.

I kissed him back, my heart pounding, a shudder of excitement tingling its way up my spine. He didn't move his fingers, he just kept them where they were even as my pussy squeezed and spasmed around them.

My stomach became a well of activity—fluttering and twisting and flipping. All kinds of inner bells and whistles and fireworks were going off. Feel-good chemicals were dumped in my blood and made my head swim.

He drew back from the kiss, releasing my throat and withdrawing his fingers from my pussy. The shimmer of need in his eyes brightened, intensified, glittered as I sensed his “soft and sensual” energy beginning to give way ...

And then it was gone.

He roughly turned us both and backed me into the cold tiled wall. Palms tightly grabbed my ass and lifted me like I weighed nothing.

Looping my legs around him, I gripped his nape with one hand and bunched his hair in the other. My heart beat with an impatient anticipation that made my breathing go to shit.

Dax nudged the broad head of his cock inside me, his lips skimming over my ear. “I'd heard that being a woman's first can make a man very possessive. Turns out it's true.” He slammed me down on his cock, the shock of his possession stealing the air from my lungs, making my overstretched walls burn and pulse.

*Dear Lord.*

“Never liked seeing you with anyone else. And now”—he began to withdraw his cock—“now no other man will ever have you.” He rode me hard, his pace fast and frenzied, his shaft grazing my clit with each thrust.

I tightened my hold on the tufts of his hair, letting out breathy little moans against the lips pressed to mine. The feel of his dick slicing through me over and over, shoving against

my tight inner muscles, forcing itself deep ... Nothing beat it. Nothing.

A wicked tension sat low in my belly, gathering in force, sharpening in intensity, building with every heavy, upward punch of his hips. Oh, and then my orgasm was looming over me. My moans coming quicker and louder, I scraped my nails over the back of his neck.

Fingertips digging into the flesh of my butt, he started fucking me harder. “Make us both come.”

I slipped a hand between us and zeroed in on my clit—tugging, rolling, flicking. His mouth took mine with a growl. No, ravaged it. The kiss was wild, bruising, fevered. And the roiling ball of tension inside me surged up and *ruptured*.

Choirs of angels sang as a dazzling white-hot pleasure powered through me, saturating every inch of my being. I screamed into his mouth, my pussy rippling and clenching the cock that started ferally jackhammering into me. His dick swelled and throbbed as he pitilessly shoved it deep one last time and exploded.

My eyes drifting shut, I did my best to calm my ragged breathing as my release gradually subsided. “We should really get your dick insured,” I slurred, tipping my head back against the tiled wall. “You know, just in case.”

“In case, what?” he asked, a smile in his voice.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Just in case.”

He nuzzled my throat, his lips curved. “Right.”

Once we were done in the shower, he stepped out and grabbed two towels. He handed one to me, wrapped another around his waist, and then disappeared. I patted my body dry, slipped on a robe, and then blow dried my hair.

Humming, I headed straight to the closet and eyed my selection of clothes, debating what to wear. I glanced to my left as Dax strolled inside. He was already dressed, his magnificent body clad in a navy-blue polo shirt and dark-gray trousers. Even in golfing attire, he looked hot as hades—

especially since his short-sleeved shirt flashed his muscular arms.

He planted his feet. “Do you have plans for next Saturday?”

I pursed my lips as I flicked through my mental calendar. “I’ll be working. There’s a birthday party scheduled for that day.”

“Is there any way your team could manage without you?”

“If necessary.” The event was nothing huge. The family had wanted their daughter’s sixteenth birthday party to be relatively low-key. I tipped my head to the side. “Why?”

“There’s a business dinner I need to attend. I’d like you to come with me.”

I blinked. “You would?”

“I’ve been invited to bring a guest. It’s not common for attendees to take a plus-one to a business dinner, but it’s not rare either. Naturally, people take their significant other on such occasions if they have one.”

“So, it wouldn’t be a date? That’s a shame,” I teased. “Watching you attempt to be romantic would likely be entertaining.”

His brows inched up in mild affront. “You don’t think I could be romantic?”

“If you truly *wanted* to be—like really, really wanted to be—sure.” The guy could probably do anything he set his mind to. “But let’s face it, that scenario will never occur, will it?”

“No,” he readily admitted. “You’re sure your team manage without you?”

“Yeah, it’s not a huge event.” They would be fine with it, having worked events without me before on multiple occasions. “Tell me more about the dinner.”

“It’s mostly a networking event, though on a much smaller scale. Ourselves included, the guestlist will only amount to sixteen people.”

It would likely be dull and boring, but it might also benefit Sapphire Glade for me to be introduced to more professionals in his “world,” so I’d get something out of it. “It’s kind of sad that a lot of the activities you indulge in are basically corporate. Like today, for example. You and your dad are going golfing with business associates to discuss potential deals.”

“And you, on the other hand, are still catching a movie with Alicia, yes?”

“Yes. Aside from our mom, who sadly can’t go with us, Alicia’s the only person who’ll watch horror flicks with me.”

“My brothers, Jag, and Maverick are coming later—there’s live boxing we want to watch, and it’s my turn to play host.” He eyed me strangely, as if waiting for me to complain about him spending quality time with “the boys.”

“Cool. Alicia and I may stop off at a bar and have a few drinks before coming home, but I won’t be back super late.” There was a minute shift in his expression—I couldn’t read the emotion there. “What?”

“I have another request.”

“What is it?”

He slowly closed the short distance between us with deliberate steps, making my belly go all fluttery. A gleam of *something* in his mismatched eyes, he locked them with mine, holding my attention captive. “I want you to let me choose what you wear today.”

Everything in me did a double-take. “What? Why?”

“I just do,” he replied, his expression giving nothing away.

I stared at him, sheer surprise leaving me at a loss for words. Some women might have inwardly balked at even the



thought of agreeing. But I found a weird kind of empowerment in overriding societal expectations. And, in my opinion, I was far too old to worry about what other people would think—especially with regards to something they'd never even learn about me.

What mostly stopped me from being inclined to respond with a *hell no* was that he generally asked very little of me outside of sex. It was as if *he didn't wish* to want anything from me—it was all part of his instinct to hold himself apart from me, I supposed. So to have him not only invested in what I wore but wanting to choose it felt good rather than weird.

There was something else as well. “I’m intrigued as to what you’d choose.”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

“You won’t otherwise tell me?”

“No.” One corner of his mouth did a slight upward tilt—he *knew* I didn’t like to have my curiosity go unsatisfied.

“Will it be something uncomfortable?”

“No.”

“Will it be something I already own?”

“Yes.”

“Will it be appropriate for the occasion and weather?”

Dax sighed. “You’re overthinking this. Don’t. It’s a simple request. You are free to say no. But if you agree to it,” he added, pitching his voice low, “it would please me.”

I pinched my bottom lip, struggling to understand his motivations. If it was in the context of BDSM, where Tops often liked to dress their subs, I’d get it. Or if it was a case of two people in a solid relationship who enjoyed exploring their identities together, I’d understand. But this ... yeah, I was just stumped.

I didn’t have a problem with allowing him to pick my outfit. He wasn’t asking for anything bizarre. And it wasn’t

like I was signing a contract in blood. I could always change my mind if I wasn't happy with his selection. I'd simply like some clarification on what had spurred him to make the request. But I could see from his expression that I wasn't going to get it.

Did I want to please him? Yes. I saw no need to deny it to myself; I didn't perceive it as a weakness. What was weak about wanting someone to feel good? And I'd gotten the impression that not a whole lot of people had ever been truly interested in making Dax feel "good," which was far too sad. He was used to others instead judging him, misreading him, condemning him, lying about him, or trying to change him.

Consenting to his request might not be considered normal by many, but there was nothing truly conventional about my marriage to Dax. We weren't going to ever have the connection and rapport that most couples did, so there was little sense in worrying about whether we behaved as they did.

I waved at my rail of clothing, stepped back, and crossed my arms over my chest. "Okay, have at it."

A hint of satisfaction blotted his eyes, and then he turned to my selection. Hangers clanged and fabric rustled as he casually scanned it. There was nothing indecisive about Dax—he made quick, efficient decisions in all aspects of his life. And that apparently included when it came to matters of my clothing, because he didn't hem, haw, or dawdle.

He picked out my lemon belted shirt dress that featured a slight thigh split—a solid choice, in my opinion. He didn't stop there. Nope. He selected my lacy, lemon lingerie and also my white high heels that had a strip of yellow.

As he spread the items on my bed—with the exception of my shoes, which he placed on the floor—I hummed. "Who knew a fashionista lived within you?"

The touch of exasperation in his gaze only made me smile.

"And you're not going to tell me why it 'pleases' you that I'd agree to this?" Because it was killing me that I

couldn't figure it out.

He must have sensed it, because his lips twitched into a taunting smile. "No."

*Asshole.*

"What do you want for breakfast this morning?" he asked. "I'll order it now while you dress."

"Hmm, biscuits and gravy will go down nicely."

With a crisp nod, he disappeared.

I shed my robe, slipped on my outfit, gathered my hair into a high ponytail, and then dabbed on some makeup. Done, I left the room, smiling as the doorbell rang. The food had arrived. Awesome timing.

I descended the stairs, more than ready to—

"Sheriff," Dax greeted, stood near the open front door, his broad build blocking my view.

My step faltered. *Sheriff?*

"Dax," rumbled another voice. *Lowe*. "I was hoping I could have a few minutes of your time."

It was a declaration of intent, not a request. But there was an almost imperceptible note of discomfort there. Well, who'd be at ease with making demands of Dax?

I strolled down the hallway as Dax ever so slowly stepped aside, allowing the other male to enter. Podgy with a jowly face and closed-off eyes, Lowe strode inside at a nonchalant, unhurried pace. But the tense set of his compact shoulders betrayed his nervousness.

He wasn't alone, but the cop with him—a cute dark-skinned guy who gave Dax a curt nod—didn't cross the threshold. To me, it seemed like a *This has nothing to do with me* gesture. Which meant Lowe wasn't here "on business."

His flat stare landed on me. Hardened. Soured. Well, it would seem that he regarded me with the same distaste as his niece and great-nephew. And I couldn't say I cared.

He quickly blanked his expression and turned to Dax. “Nice place you got here.” An idle, empty remark.

“I have plans, so you’ll need to make this quick,” Dax told him, his voice calm but firm. “Leave out the small talk and tell me why you’re here.”

“All right.” Lowe notched up his chin. “Where were you yesterday between the hours of five and seven?”

“Here,” Dax lied, no hint of deception in his tone, expression, or posture. “Why?”

Lowe squinted. “Is there anybody who can verify that?”

“Me.” I sidled up to Dax. “I’m Addison Mercier, his wife.” Did I feel bad about lying to a cop? Not in this case, no. I would have done it for Dax either way.

“Why the interest in my whereabouts, Lowe?”

“Blaise Buchanan.” The sheriff tossed out the name, a challenge in his eyes.

Dax responded with a slight shrug. “What about him?”

“He received a solid beating yesterday.” Lowe rested his hands on his gun belt. “His mother believes you had something to do with it.”

“Did Blaise accuse him?” I asked.

“No,” the sheriff reluctantly told me before resettling his gaze on Dax. “In fact, he was adamant that you had nothing to do with it. But he refuses to name who’s responsible.”

I folded my arms. “So, basically, you came here to appease your niece as opposed to actually question a viable suspect?”

Lowe’s eyes narrowed once more. “Where such violent incidences occur, Dax is always a viable suspect. And I’d say he has motive, since there was an incident between you and Blaise yesterday.”

“I don’t know if I’d call it an ‘incident.’ He made some smart remarks to show off in front of his friends,” I said, deliberately playing it down. “You know how teenagers can get. You also know how your niece can get. And since I know there can be nothing at all to link Dax to what happened because, as I said, he was here with me, all you’re doing is allowing her to waste your time.”

A slight flush stained his cheeks, but he didn’t deny it. Couldn’t. He was here to placate his niece—we all knew it.

“Any other questions?” Dax asked, drawing the sheriff’s attention back to him. “Or are we done here?”

Lowe pressed his lips tight together. “I may have more questions at a later date. For now, we’re done. But whoever put their hands on Blaise should reconsider doing it again.” He stiffly walked out, shrugging past his fellow cop. The guy gave Dax a brief raise of his eyebrows and then trailed after Lowe.

“I figured there was a slight chance he’d question you,” I said to Dax as he closed the door. “It seemed a no-brainer that Felicity would tell him little tales. I mean, she’s ... What? Why are you looking at me weird?”

“You lied to him,” Dax commented. “You didn’t twist the truth. Didn’t simply omit details. You flat-out lied.”

Offended that he seemed so damn surprised, I frowned. “Of course I did. You think I wouldn’t give you an alibi?”

His silence said it all.

Feeling my mouth tighten, I propped my hands on my hips. “Look, we might not have gotten married for conventional reasons, but you’re still my husband. You have my loyalty. *All* the way. I will always stand by you, no matter what. Get used to it.”

His direct stare flickered with so many emotions—all were there and gone in milliseconds, leaving me with no idea what he was thinking or feeling.

He delved a hand into my hair and fisted—not too tight, but tight enough to get my attention. “It’s dangerous to

make that kind of promise to a man like me.” The words were soft. Quiet. Grave.

I swallowed, my hands slipping down to my sides. “I don’t know what that means.”

“It means I’ll hold you to it,” he warned. “Even when I’ve done something I know you won’t condone—and there’ll be plenty of things I’ll do that most people won’t condone—I’ll still hold you to it.”

“And so you should. I gave you my word.” I held up my hand and wiggled my ring finger slightly. “Haven’t I always stuck to it before?”

“Yes, you have. But lying to a cop for me is one thing. You don’t like or respect Lowe. Could you lie to your sisters, friends, parents? Lie to the people you love for me?”

“Yes.” I could say that with all certainty. “I already have. I mean, they were lies of omission to be exact. Like yesterday, when I was telling Sabrina and my sisters about what Blaise did. They guessed that you would personally deal with him—I didn’t confirm it. But had they outright asked if you would handle him, I’d have said no.”

They would have known I was lying, of course. But they would also have understood. They knew me; knew I would protect him.

Dax’s grip on my hair tightened to the point that my scalp prickled—and yeah, ow. He drew in a breath through his nose. “Hearing you pledge such loyalty to me, I have to wonder if you have any idea who you married. You say you see the wolf, but I’m not sure you really know what I’m actually capable of. I suppose it’s moot, though. You made your choice. It’s too late for you to go back on it now. I wouldn’t let you if you tried. You’re mine. I made you mine. You wear proof of it on your finger.” He paused, his eyes blazing. “And you always fucking will.”



It was past ten that evening when I returned home. The muffled sounds of rumbly voices and deep male laughter greeted me as I entered. I tracked the sounds to the living room. The lighting was dim, and most of said light came from the glare of the widescreen TV. That didn't obstruct my view, though. I swept my gaze across the large space and ... *damn*.

Look, I had no actual interest in any guy other than Dax, but that didn't mean I couldn't appreciate coming home to the sight of five smolderingly gorgeous males lounging around my living room, did it?

Dax, Caelan, and Maverick were sprawled on the sofa while both Drey and Jag were chilling in an armchair. It was a whole lot of alpha and testosterone in one room. What a bounty of blessings.

And Dax had thought I might complain about returning home to find this little scene here?

*Pfft.*

As five sets of eyes flew to me, I smiled. "Evening, boys." In response, I received hellos, nods, the raising of a beer bottle, and even a salute.

"How was the movie?" Dax asked me.

"I'm delighted to say it was jumpy as hell." Alicia had become so freaked out she'd performed the sign of the cross at one point—she wasn't even all that religious.

Jag frowned. "Why delighted?"

I lifted my shoulders. "What's the point in watching a horror flick if it ain't gonna give you the chills?"

"Nice dress," Maverick remarked. "Dax, you really let her go out looking like that? It's as if you *want* guys to hit on her."

I would have addressed the whole "let her" part, since no one *let* me do anything. But I'd quickly come to learn that Maverick liked to bait people and then sit back and observe the show. "Stop trying to start shit."

He grinned. “But I’m good at it.”

“I’ve noticed.” I glanced at the TV and felt my brow pinch. A superhot guy was being interviewed in a room with glass walls that overlooked a boxing ring. “I know his face from somewhere.”

“He lives in Redwater,” Caelan told me. “That’s Cole Delaney, the retired boxer who married—”

“Izzy McKenzie,” I finished with a mental snap of my fingers, thinking of a famous photographer who also happened to be the daughter of a celebrity couple. “I remember now.” I’d seen them together a few times.

Drey parted his lips to speak, but then a sound blared on the TV that made his attention zoom back to the screen. “Fight’s about to start.” That easily, all eyes left me.

Intending to grab a bottle of water, I headed for the kitchen. I only took three steps into the large room before I halted with a wince. “Oh, girl.”

The sound of footfalls behind me preceded Dax’s voice. “What is it?” Sidling up to me, he sighed. “Another crime scene, I see.”

“Don’t be dramatic.” I flapped a hand toward the sadly dead mouse. “This is a natural thing.”

“Natural?” he echoed, his brow creasing. “You call that natural?”

“Cats kill rodents. Probably have done since almost the beginning of time. It’s no biggie.”

“The mouse has no head.”

I nodded, swallowing. “I see that.”

He flicked up a brow. “It doesn’t bother you that your cat apparently chose to—”

“There’s no proof that Gypsy beheaded it, okay. Let’s not make assumptions. She could have found it this way.”

Sighing again, Dax grabbed the dustpan and brush from a cupboard. “Face it, Addison, there’s something very



wrong with your pet.” He scooped up the tiny corpse and took it outside.

I wiped down the floor and then retrieved a bottle of water from the fridge just as he reentered the kitchen. “I’ll be in my office if you need me for anything.”

“Or you could join us in the living room,” he suggested. “You’ve done it before when we watched football and soccer.”

Because I’d wanted to make an effort to get to know the people closest to him. Also, listening to the boys rag on each other could be fun. But ... “I don’t want to constantly horn in on your time with the guys.”

“It’s not ‘horning in’ when you’re being invited, is it?” He returned the dustpan and brush to the cupboard. “Well?”

“All right.” I placed the water back into the fridge, nabbed a beer instead, and then followed Dax into the living room. At his urging, I squeezed into the spot between him and the corner of the sofa.

Maverick frowned at me when I took a few nachos from the bowl on the coffee table. His gaze cut to Dax. “So what’s happening here is you have a wife who’s all class and beauty but will crack open a beer, not bitch about the shitload of junk food, and will watch live sports with you and your buds?”

“Yes,” Dax replied.

Maverick shook his head. “You’re a lucky fucker.”

Dax’s mouth curved into a self-satisfied grin that said, *I know.*

Well, so long as he knew.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

As Dax and I stood in the short line at the hostess station, I carefully adjusted the position of my rose gold bracelet. It was no shock that his business dinner was being held at this particular restaurant. Many were. In fact, I'd met with clients here on a number of occasions.

With its white and gold color palette, the place was elegant with a regal vibe. Beautiful paintings adorned the walls. The occasional sculpture and pretty plant could be seen. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, ensuring the space was well lit but not too bright.

Tables covered in alabaster-white tablecloths were dotted about the space. Waiters and waitresses weaved between them, smoothly navigating the labyrinth. Delicious scents wafted from steaming plates that either sat on tables or were being carried on trays.

It wasn't loud or rowdy. No boisterous laughter, no shrieking kids, no babies crying. The air gently pulsed with soft murmurs, low classical music, and the clinking of silverware.

My only complaint was that the air conditioning was a little too cool. Goosebumps swept up my skin, making me wish that the collar of my black jumpsuit didn't diagonally slash across my chest, leaving one shoulder and arm bare.

Hearing a soft feminine giggle, I looked at the couple directly in front of us. They were so cute. They kept leaning into each other, whispering and chuckling. His fingers were splayed possessively on her back, and he repeatedly brushed kisses over her temple.

I slid a quick look at the man beside me. The beginnings of a wan smile touched my lips. Here we were standing close enough that our arms touched. *Thrilling*, I thought dryly.

I wondered what he'd do if I leaned into him and kissed his cheek or something. Probably jerk away with a *what*

*the hell?* glare. The image was funny enough to tempt me to go through with it.

When we eventually reached the front of the line, Dax told the hostess we were meeting others here. She informed us that some were already seated at the table and gestured for us to follow her. Dax swept out a hand, indicating for me to go first. I trailed behind the hostess, my high heels clicking on the floor.

We paused at one point as a large group rose from a nearby table and made moves to leave. One by one, they carefully filed past us. A particular male stopped as he caught sight of me.

His mouth curved in a kind of surprised delight. “Addison, how are you?”

I smiled. “I’m fine, thanks, Beckett. How’s everything with you?” We’d dated once upon a time. He was a nice guy, but he’d been put off by my trust fund.

“Great,” he replied. “Couldn’t be better.”

A heavy hand rested on the base of my spine and slowly slid upwards until it curved around my nape, making my pulse do a tap dance. I felt Dax’s body heat radiate against my back as he shifted closer, blanketing me in his cologne.

“Beckett,” he smoothly cut in, “it’s been a while.”

My ex’s smile widened. “Dax, good to see you.” He held out his hand, and Dax used his free hand to shake it. Beckett then looked from him to me. “I heard you two were married. Congratulations.”

Dax thanked him and then went on to ask him about his family. He was all charm and ease and amiableness as he spoke. The entire time, his hand remained a warm weight on the back of my neck.

I might have contributed to the conversation if I wasn’t feeling a little rocked by Dax’s hold. With the exception of our wedding day, he hadn’t touched me much in public. And *definitely* not like this. Not with pure male possession. It was making my heart pound and my hormones melt.

Finally, he rounded up the conversation.

“It was real good seeing you both again,” Beckett told us. “Take care.” With that, he shrugged past us.

Dax’s hand glided from my nape down to the spot between my shoulder blades, and then he gently urged me forward. I followed the hostess to a table not too far away, and the people there graciously stood with polite smiles.

After greetings and introductions were exchanged, Dax and I took our seats. Several people made a point of congratulating us on our marriage.

A graying male with rugged features pointed at me. “You must be related to Ollie and Dane Davenport. You remind me of them.”

I nodded. “Ollie is my brother; Dane is my father.”

“I’ve had the pleasure of doing business with both in the past,” he told me. “They’re ruthless men.”

I smiled. “Excellent compliment.”

Some soft chuckles drifted around the table.

“When and where did you two meet?” one of the wives asked, her pretty blue gaze dancing from me to Dax.

He replied, “We’ve known each other for many years. Our families are well-acquainted. I’ve done business with Dane myself on a number of occasions.”

How wonderfully he completely dodged her question. She didn’t even seem to have noticed.

Other questions floated our way ...

*How’s married life?*

*Where did you go on your honeymoon?*

*Did Dane bless the wedding or does he hate Dax for making the cardinal sin of touching one of his daughters?*

On and on it went.

Dax answered for us, working around the questions he didn’t want to fully answer; outright lying at other times.

When the attention finally eased off us, I leaned into him and whispered, “You’re good at that. Bullshitting, I mean. I actually envy just how skilled you are at it.” I noticed one side of his lips quirk.

His thigh bumped mine beneath the table as he placed his mouth near my ear. “Were you ever involved with Beckett?” The words tickled my ear, stirring the little hairs there. It wasn’t really a question, it was a guess.

“Only briefly a few years ago,” I replied. “Why?”

Dax’s only response was a flat hum.

It was right at that moment that the rest of the guests arrived. Soon after, the server took orders and then melted away. The small talk around the table changed to business matters once the food and wine appeared.

A few of the wives seemed to work with their husbands, so they were sure to make their input known on the aforementioned matters. The other women at the table—myself included—didn’t contribute much. I mostly just watched and listened.

One flirted a little with Dax—not taking it so far that it couldn’t be considered playful, but enough that I wanted to throw my fork at her. Instead, I kept a placid smile on my face, refusing to make any kind of scene. It wasn’t as if he was giving her any encouragement. In fact, he made a point of not making much eye-contact with her, which increasingly irritated her as the evening went on. Ha.

Well, at least I’d got to talk a little about Sapphire Glade. People had only asked out of politeness what I did for a living, but several had requested a business card.

The food was absolutely amazing, if not a little pretentious. But I couldn’t deny that I was relieved when the dinner was over.

Outside, we slid into his car. Clicking on my seatbelt, I gave him a false grin. “Wow, that was so much fun.”

“Yes, you looked riveted by the conversation.” His tone was as dry as mine.

“You seemed a little bored yourself at times.”

Driving out of the lot, he said, “There’s often too much circling around ideas and proposals. It’s sometimes like a dance. I’m too direct and eager to move forward for me to have much patience for that.”

I’d be the same in his shoes. Dithering frustrated me. I’d rather make a decision and act on it than spend too much time deliberating.

“How serious were you and Beckett?”

The unexpected question made my forehead crease. “Not very. We weren’t together long.”

“Why not?”

I shrugged. “Quite simply, he hadn’t liked that I had more money than he did. He’d wanted me to give up my trust fund—either to charity, or to my siblings.”

Dax let out a scornful grunt. “He wanted you to suffer for his own insecurities, essentially?”

“That was pretty much the case, yes. I refused his request. He understood why but couldn’t accept the situation, so we parted ways. It was an amicable split.” I cocked my head. “Why do you want to know?” He never asked me about my exes. Not even Lake.

He opened his mouth to respond, but then his cell phone rang. As it was linked to the car’s Bluetooth, I could see Raven’s name on the vehicle’s small monitor.

Dax answered the call via Bluetooth, “Yes?”

“I’m sorry to bother you with this, especially on a Saturday night,” she began, sheepish, “but I have a bit of a problem.”

A fine line dented his brow. “What sort of problem?”

She sighed. “Mimi showed up at my place. She wants to stay over. Since I don’t like her habit of throwing crazy parties and all that stuff, I would have turned her away like

always. But she's beyond plastered; I let her in, hoping to sober her up."

"She's resisting, though," Dax guessed, giving me the sense that he'd done this dance with Mimi himself.

"Yes. *And* she's breaking my stuff for shits and giggles. There's no way I'm letting her stay here, but I don't want to toss her ass out while she's in such a state. I'd never forgive myself if she ended up dead in an alley somewhere. I'd drag her into my car and drive her to a friend's house, but I had a few cocktails earlier."

Dax put pressure on the pedal, upping his speed. "I'll be there in about twenty minutes." He hung up and spared me a brief look.

I narrowed my eyes. "Don't even think about taking me home before you go deal with this. I stand with and behind you, remember?"

His lips thinning, he jabbed a finger on the car monitor and scrolled down until he found Caelan's name in his list of contacts. He then pressed "Call."

The phone rang a few times before his brother answered, "This better be important."

"Mimi showed up on Raven's doorstep blitzed," Dax told him, his hands flexing on the steering wheel. "She's being ... difficult."

"Shit," muttered Caelan.

"Raven wants to drop her off somewhere else, but she's been drinking too so can't drive. I'm on my way to her place now to pick up Mimi, but you're closer. Can you head there so Raven's not alone with her?"

"I'll leave now," Caelan replied, his voice curt.

When the call ended, I frowned at Dax. "Why wouldn't you want Raven to be alone with her?"

He exhaled heavily. "Generally, Mimi is a happy drunk who wants only to sing, dance, and laugh. But sometimes, she

can be mean and get handsy. That she's breaking things isn't a good sign."

I scraped my teeth over my lower lip. "Do you think she'd actually hurt Raven?"

"Maybe not. But I'm not taking any chances. She took a swing at my mom once, but my father jumped between them. Another time, Mimi punched her own cousin. And all because they told her she'd had enough to drink."

I whistled. "That's nuts. Your mom would have kicked her ass." I'd sensed that Kensey was no pushover. And, having been brought up in the rougher areas of Redwater, she was no stranger to physical fights.

His mouth slightly hitched up. "She would have. I think she was disappointed that she wasn't given the chance."

Soon, we pulled up outside his sister's apartment building. It actually belonged to Dax. It was one of several that he owned. As such—knowing not only the entry code but the concierge—he entered the complex with no issue.

As we stepped into the elevator, I spoke, "Is it unusual for Mimi to turn to Raven for somewhere to stay?"

"No." He jabbed a button on the keypad, and the metal doors soon after closed. "They were friends for a time."

"I'm guessing Mimi's homeless."

"She is, but by choice." He slipped his hands into his pockets. "She's not struggling for money. Far from it. The inheritance she received from her grandparents is pretty hefty. She could hop from five star hotel to five star hotel if she wanted. But she prefers to stay with friends. Which, on the surface, seems sweet. Except she takes advantage while there. Throws parties. Lives like a slob. Brings home random guys to fuck. Even sometimes does drugs."

*Whoa.* "How many times has she stayed with you?"

"Once. That was years ago. Once was enough."

"What happened?"



“I told her she could stay for a few days. She made a pass at me. I turned her down. When I came home from work the next day, a bunch of people I’d never met were partying in my apartment. Music was blasting. The place reeked of weed, beer, and sex. She was lying on the living room floor letting guys snort lines of cocaine off her bare ass.”

I felt my jaw go slack. “Wow.” Rubbing at my nape, I added, “It sounds like extreme attention-seeking behavior to me.”

He gave a fluid shrug. “Whatever the case, she has sabotaged a lot of her friendships and alienated family members by acting this way.”

Ah, yes, I remembered he’d spoken of how she’d burned many bridges in Redwater.

The elevator came to a halt, and the doors glided open. I followed Dax down a hallway and round a corner. Finally, he stopped outside a door and wrapped his knuckles on it.

Moments later, it swung open to reveal Raven. She blew out a relieved breath and meekly greeted, “Hey.” As we shrugged past her, she took in our attire. Horror contorted her expression. “Please tell me you weren’t on a date and I cut it short.”

“It was just a business dinner,” I assured her. “We were on our way home when you called.”

A feminine laugh rang out from somewhere in the apartment. On its heels came muffled words grumbled in a male voice laced with agitation.

Raven winced. “Caelan’s not happy. She’s deliberately pushing his buttons. I didn’t tell her you’re coming,” she told Dax. “Maybe the shock of seeing you will sober her up some.” She began strolling down a narrow hallway, urging us to follow. The place was bright, airy, and fun with its eclectic vibe.

“Don’t be so anti ... anti ... *antisocial*, Caelan,” I heard Mimi slur. “You know, we could have our own private party if you’d stop being such a grouch.”

Cringing, Raven glanced over her shoulder at me and Dax. “She threw herself at poor Caelan when he first entered the room. Even tried performing a strip dance for him.”

I gaped. “You’re kidding.”

“Not to seduce him, to annoy him,” Raven clarified. “And it worked.”

The three of us filed into a room on our left. A kitchen, I quickly realized as I took everything in.

Standing near the large stainless steel fridge, Caelan plucked a bottle of wine out of Mimi’s hands. “No,” he bit out. “You’ve had more than enough booze. You need to sober up.”

She pouted. “Don’t wanna.”

Raven sighed as she approached the pair. “Come on, Mimi, just—”

She swayed. “No, being sober is *boring*, I—” She did a double-take as Dax sidled up to his sister. Her expression turned sullen and petulant. “What’re *you* doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” said Dax, his own expression vacant.

Her upper lip peeled back. “I don’t wanna talk to you.” Catching sight of me standing a few feet away, she sneered. “I *definitely* don’t wanna talk to you.”

“Funnily enough, the feeling’s mutual.” Unrequited love was a true bitch, so a part of me felt sorry for her. But only a small part. It was hard to be understanding when it was Dax she loved; when she acted so selfishly where he was concerned and persisted in making things difficult for him.

“Get your things,” he told her, his tone sharp. “You’re leaving.”

Her head whipped back to face him. “No. I’m staying here with Raven. Unlike *some* people, she’s nice to me.” She staggered backward and bumped into the kitchen island hard.

*Ow.* That had to hurt. But the alcohol apparently dimmed the pain, because she only chuckled.

Dax looked at his sister. “What did she bring with her?”

“Just the duffel she dumped in the living room,” Raven replied.

“I’ll go get it,” volunteered Caelan, who then stalked out of the kitchen, nodding at me as he went by.

Mimi joined her hands, her eyes lighting up. “You know what we need? *Music*. Where’s my phone?” She began patting the pockets of her jeans.

“You can’t stay,” said Dax, his voice hardening.

She flapped a hand. “Unclench, will ya. Come on, we’ll have a drink. A toast to Gracie. We’ll let bygones be bygones and whatever.”

Raven flicked the ceiling a quick look. “Mimi—”

“Gracie would have wanted that, wouldn’t she?” She stared at Dax, her lips trembling. “She wouldn’t like that we’re fighting.”

Her choice of words made me frown. She spoke like they were a couple who were at odds with each other. Not that I thought she believed they *were* a couple, just that she seemed to feel they had a more intimate connection than they did. From what Dax told me, they didn’t have a connection that went beyond their mutual link with Gracie. I suspected he’d otherwise shove Mimi out of his life—he wasn’t a man who suffered any fools.

She swayed a little again. “We didn’t used to fight when Gracie was alive, did we? We got along fine back then. Why can’t we do that now?”

Oh, maybe because she kept coming on to him.

Gulping, she anxiously rubbed at her wrist. “Do you think she’s mad at me? For wanting you? Do you think she hates me like you do?”

I cringed on her behalf. Damn, she was gonna hate herself in the morning if she remembered asking him that.

Raven held up her hands. “Nobody hates you, Mimi. Gracie would certainly never hate you.”

“*He* does,” Mimi said sulkily. “Did you know he got married? Or did he hide it from you as well?” Her gaze flew back to him. “Why did you do it? I’ll never buy that you love her, so don’t give me that crap.”

He let out a bored sigh. “This is not—”

“*Why* did you marry her?” It was more or less a whine.

I wanted to give her a mouthful of shit—point out that it was none of her business; that she needed to stop pining after him; that acting out this way wasn’t going to achieve anything—but it would only escalate the situation. That would bowl over the attempts of Dax and the others to defuse it.

Caelan reentered the kitchen, a duffel in hand.

Mimi’s glassy eyes dipped to it, and her brow furrowed. “You know, that looks just like my bag. We have the same taste.”

Unreal.

“Time to leave,” said Dax, tipping his head toward the door.

She backed up fast, crashing into the island again. “*No*. I like it here. And I’m not going anywhere with *you*.”

“You don’t have a choice in that,” he told her, a chill to his voice. “You’ve been your usual, destructive self and so overstayed your welcome here. But you’re too wasted to be left alone, so one of us needs to take you somewhere safe.”

She scoffed. “Like you give a shit if I’m safe. *You* don’t care about *me*.” She swallowed, her eyes glistening. “Why won’t you care about me? Why can’t you want what I want?” She stumbled toward him.

He lifted a hand to ward her off. “Don’t,” he ordered, his voice sharp. “We’re not doing this again. I’ve told you many times that you’re pushing for something you’re never going to have. I’ve also told you why, but you’re choosing not to listen. If you’d prefer to ignore me, do that. But I’m not

going to cover old ground yet again. And if the fact that I married someone else doesn't clearly spell out for you that I don't—and never will—want a future with you, I doubt anything will.”

Harsh words, harsh tone, but I couldn't blame him for feeling so exasperated.

The distress fled from her expression in a rush, rapidly replaced by anger. “You can be so cruel sometimes. It's because your exes are right—you're cold inside. I see that now. What warmth you had died with Gracie. And now you can't love anyone.”

Bristling, I spoke up, “You don't believe that. You *want* to believe he's dead inside because then it will hurt less that he doesn't feel for you what you feel for him. But you know it's pure bull.”

Her cheeks flaming with rage, she pointed at me again while cutting her gaze back to Dax. “Get her out of here,” she imperiously ordered ... liked this was her home and he lived to serve her. “I don't want her near me.”

More like she didn't want to hear what I had to say, because she knew it to be true and didn't want to face it.

“The only person who's leaving is you, Mimi,” Caelan cut in. “Even if I have to carry you out of here, you're leaving.” He looked at Dax. “I've got this. You and Addison head home.”

“Home,” Mimi spat. “How cozy.” She flashed a sly smirk my way. “Did Dax tell you about us? About the times we slept together?”

I shot her a *Bitch, please* look. “That never happened, and we both know it.”

“But the press doesn't.” Her smirk widening, she turned back to him. “Imagine what the world would think if they thought you'd slept with your dead girlfriend's identical twin. Imagine the pretty lies I could tell them.”

I went motionless. Oh, that motherfucking skank. I would have marched over there and gotten right in her face if

Caelan hadn't grabbed my arm.

"Imagine how much they'd lap that shit up," Mimi went on. "There are other things I could tell them. Things about Gracie. *Goody-two shoes, Gracie*. She wasn't really so perfect, you know." With a gasp, Mimi slapped her hand over her mouth, her eyes going wide.

I tensed. Now what in the hell was *that* supposed to mean?

Dax slowly stalked into her personal space. "If you want to join the list of women who talked to the tabloids, you do that," he welcomed, his words coming low and unrushed. "I don't care what the world thinks of me. The question is ... will you care that you'll have burned every last bridge you have? Let's face it, there aren't many."

Her eyes flickering, she flexed her fingers. "I wish I could say I hate you. I really do." The admission was quiet. Sad. Self-pitying.

Unmoved by that, Dax said, "Caelan's going to take you to one of your friend's houses now. Don't be any more difficult than you already have been—for Raven's sake, if nothing else. She's always been a good friend to you. You've disrespected her enough for one night, don't you think?"

Releasing my arm, Caelan crooked his fingers at Mimi. "Let's go."

Straightening to her full height, she swept her hands down her sides. "Fine. For *Raven*, I'll go quietly." She pretty much weaved her way to him.

I stilled, bracing myself for her to do something dumb like launch herself at me. Not that it would work—her balance was shit, Caelan was *right there*, and the others would step in if he didn't—but it seemed that she wasn't the most rational of people when drunk. She didn't pounce, however. She instead painted a haughty expression on her face and didn't even glance my way, as if I wasn't worth her attention.

*Right back at you, heifer.*

Honestly, I got the feeling that the real reason she'd so easily left without incident was that she *wanted* out of here so she could escape being questioned over what she'd said about Gracie. She'd startled herself by blurting that out. Panic had rippled across her face.

Also guilt.

But was she playing Dax? If Gracie had done something that would hurt him, wouldn't Mimi have told him about it in an effort to make him let her sister go?

He hadn't reacted to her comment. Hadn't so much as batted an eyelid. He'd been more bothered by her threat to talk to the press. Which said he either trusted Gracie so implicitly that he wouldn't believe she'd done anything to wrong him, *or* he simply thought Mimi was attempting to dick with him.

Once I heard the apartment front door close, I puffed out a breath. "That was rough. Are you okay, Raven?"

"Yeah." Her shoulders drooped. "It's just sad that things are the way they are, you know? It isn't the first time she's showed up here moaning about how much she wishes she could stop feeling anything for Dax. But it was different this time. She's bitter. Resentful. I expected it, because it was inevitable that she'd be pissed that he's married. But I didn't expect her to say she was considering selling her own story to the tabloids."

Anger once more sparking in my gut at the mere thought of it, I looked at Dax, whose jaw was hard. "Do you think she'd really do it? Or do you think she's just blowing off steam?"

"It's hard to say." He paused, twisting his lips. "She's not a cruel person, but neither were my previous girlfriends who sold their stories. You don't need to be a shitty person to do something shitty; you just need to feel motivated to do it."

"And just maybe you being married is giving Mimi that motivation," I mused, following his train of thought.

He inclined his head. "Maybe."

One thing was for certain: If the woman *dared* pull that stunt, I would make her life even more miserable than it already was.

I turned to Raven. “Come on, let’s get whatever mess she created cleaned up.”

After we’d all trashed the broken glasses, righted the upturned coffee table, and cleaned the wine-spill from the living room hardwood floor—which now had a noticeable dent, courtesy of Mimi “playfully” stabbing it with the fireplace poker—Dax and I said our goodbyes to his sister and left the complex. In silence, we returned to his car and fastened our seatbelts.

It wasn’t until we were halfway home that I broke the silence and said, “I felt a little bad for Mimi right up until she made noises about talking to the press.”

He spared me a quick glance. “Felt bad for her?”

“A little,” I repeated, emphatic. “I obviously am pissed that she won’t respect your wishes but, well, we don’t choose who we fall for. It just happens. She doesn’t *want* to love you—that’s more than obvious. She’d change it if she could.”

“She doesn’t love me, Addison,” he upheld, his tone the verbal equivalent of a hand flick. “Not really.”

I felt my brows dip. “Why do you think that?”

“I don’t think it. I’m certain of it.”

“What makes you so sure, then?”

“You can’t love someone you don’t know. You can think you do, because you have all that room to imagine they have traits they don’t have; that they’ll make the perfect partner. But you only really love the impression of them that exists in your mind.”

I cocked my head. “And you feel that Mimi doesn’t really know you?”

“For years she’s been holding out hope that she could eventually make me succumb to her advances. She’s Gracie’s sister—I’d never go there. Not even in my mind. If Mimi truly



knew me, she'd be well-aware of that; she wouldn't have wasted her time or energy."

I dipped my chin. "Yeah, that is a good point. But sometimes, we can fool ourselves into believing what brings us most comfort. She needs to believe she has a chance with you, even as she hates herself for wanting that chance. Or *needed* to believe. It should be past tense now. You marrying me forced her to face the reality of the situation."

"Is she really facing reality, though? It didn't seem that way. She may not like that we're married, but she's not taking my commitment to you seriously."

"True," I realized, thinking on it. "In her mind, you can't possibly love me, so I'm someone to be pitied and ridiculed. But while she doesn't buy that you're committed to me, she can't shrug it off or ignore it. Because the fact remains that you married *someone*, whatever your reason, and that 'someone' wasn't Mimi—*that* in and of itself says you don't want her."

He sighed. "Things would be easier if she'd long ago accepted that. But she's always been someone who wants what she can't or shouldn't have. And if she *does* eventually get such things, she then stops wanting them."

I opened my mouth to ask about the little comment Mimi made about Gracie ... but then I thought better of it. If he'd thought there was any substance to it, he'd have surely questioned her about it. If I brought it up, there was a chance he might simply get insulted on Gracie's behalf, feeling I was doubting the deceased woman's integrity.

"What?" Dax prodded, having noticed I was about to speak.

Thinking fast on my feet, I lied, "I was just wondering if Mimi showed this same interest in you before Gracie died."

"No, she didn't," he replied, switching gears. "I never got the sense that that was where her head was at in those days. So either she hid it well, or this was a later development."

The weary look on his face made me ache for him. Much as I had more questions, I figured it would be best to let them lie. They weren't important. Mimi wasn't important. What mattered right then was somehow lifting his mood.

“Want me to vomit in her purse for you?” I asked, smiling when a surprised chuckle—weak though it was—bubbled out of him. “Don't get me wrong, I'd relish slapping the piss out of her. But a stinging face can be soothed pretty fast and with little effort. The stench of puke clinging to the fibers of your purse, however? Yeah, that doesn't go away so easily. And I'm all about leaving a lasting impression.”

His lips curving, he gave me a quick glance. “I appreciate the offer, but I'd rather you weren't vomiting.”

“I wouldn't mind.”

“I would. I want you healthy, not sickly—no matter the reason.”

Aw, how cute. “You sure?”

“Positive.”

“All right. But if you change your mind, let me know. I mean it, the offer will continue to stand.”

His lips twitched into a wider and more genuine smile. “I'll bear that in mind.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

I'd just finished typing up tomorrow's to-do list when Sabrina poked her head into my office. "I'm leaving now," she told me. "I just wanted to first let you know that Mr. Rickman is still giving me excuses about his outstanding payments."

A sigh of annoyance slipped out of me. "You finally managed to get him on the phone? Kudos." We'd invoiced him three weeks ago, but he was still dicking around. "What reason did he give for having not coughed up the cash, even though it's now *mid-October*?"

"The gist of the conversation was ... it's all a big mix-up—and no, he didn't elaborate on what exactly that meant, despite that it didn't actually explain anything—but it would be great if we could just go ahead with the event anyway and he'd pay us at a later date."

On occasion, clients would try convincing us to allow them to pay off the full amount *after* the event. If there were extenuating circumstances, we agreed. But not always, because there were times said clients would keep on delaying it in the hope that we dropped it. Then we had to take legal action, and that was both costly and messy. "What did you say?"

"I told him that would only happen if he could get you to agree to it, so he'd need to call you directly because I wouldn't be passing on that message for him. He made a few mutterings and then eventually promised he'd settle the payments by the end of tomorrow." Her mouth curved. "You scare him."

I let out a delicate snort. "I don't know why. I'm a delight."

"You are. You're also a take-no-shit person, which means you scare people like him who like to *toss out* shit. They know they can't manipulate you. Plus, you're Dax Mercier's wife now. That bumps up the fear factor."

“Hmm, well, if he pays tomorrow, great. If not, we’ll be pulling out of the event.” Yawning, I rubbed at the back of my neck. “Any other issues?”

“Nope.”

“Good. I need to unplug.” I’d *had* way too much screen time today, and I was feeling the sting of it. Literally. My eyes were dry and stinging like a bitch. “I could really do with a nap.” And some eye drops.

Sabrina’s brow pinched. “Do you have time to take one before you meet Dax’s family at the restaurant?”

“No, but I’ll be fine.” To celebrate the birthday of his godmother, Sarah, Kensey had organized a celebratory meal. As Dax’s wife, I was invited.

“Well, enjoy your dinner,” said Sabrina. “And wear the little black dress you bought when we went shopping last weekend.”

“That’s my plan.” Unless Dax requested that I allow him to choose my outfit for the evening, though I doubted he would.

He’d done it twice more since the morning Lowe had appeared at our villa. And I’d noticed a pattern. It only happened on non-work days, and only if we would be spending pretty much the entire day apart. Which didn’t clue me in as to Dax’s motivation. And neither did he, knowing his evasiveness frustrated me.

Sabrina flashed me a farewell smile. “See you tomorrow, bright and early.”

I waved. “Tomorrow.” Turning back to my laptop, I quickly skimmed through my emails, ensured there was nothing time-sensitive, and then made a mental note to respond to them tomorrow before switching off the device.

As I gathered all my stuff together, I reminded myself to wrap Sarah’s gifts when I got home. I’d meant to do it last night but had forgotten.

A month ago, I would have predicted there'd be a weird vibe at the restaurant table, given Blake had reservations about my marriage to Dax. But for the past few weeks, Blake had behaved differently toward me. He spoke to me with genuine warmth.

I wasn't sure why, or if it was caused by anything in particular. But his politeness wasn't forced, and his queries about my life weren't mere attempts at civility. Maybe he'd decided to simply make his peace with the situation. Or maybe it was somehow connected to my having given Dax a false alibi—I had no clue; wasn't sure Blake even knew about that.

I couldn't say that my own father had let his reservations drop. However, he'd been less frosty toward Dax on the past few occasions they'd been in the same room. Dane was still a little standoffish, but nowhere near as rude. I was glad of it, because my protectiveness toward Dax had grown.

There had been a subtle *shift* in our dynamics. A lessening of self-protective tension on his part. As if he—or his subconscious, maybe—no longer viewed me as a threat so wasn't braced for rejection or betrayal. There was an ease between us now that hadn't been there before.

Oh, Dax was still as guarded as ever. That would never change—the trait was woven into the fabric of his personality. But I didn't feel that there was an abyss between us nowadays. More like a moat.

A moat was fine. I might never cross it, might never be someone he cared for, might never bypass his mental barriers, but I didn't need him to expose so much of himself to me. I just wanted us to be friends. That was exactly what we were.

We still didn't venture out together unless it was a group event, like to one of Drey's games or a family meal. But our conversations didn't feel in any way forced. Our interest in each other's routine and goings-on was real.

We talked. Teased. Shared. The air of remoteness that had originally existed between us had slowly but surely fizzled out. So, yeah, everything was going well.

This was made better by how we'd had three weeks of pure peace. No more bullshit from Felicity, Grayden, or Blaise. And aside from the apologetic text she'd sent to Dax the morning after her last stunt—a text within which she'd also assured him that she'd never sell any stories about him to the media—there'd been no more peeps out of Mimi.

Ready to leave, I locked my office, said my goodbyes to the members of my team who hadn't yet left their desks, and then took the elevator down to the first floor.

As I was crossing the lobby, my phone began to chime. Halting, I dug a hand into my purse and whipped out my cell. *Mom*. Feeling my lips soften into a smile, I greeted, “Hey Mom, what's up?”

A shaky breath traveled down the line. “Addie, don't panic; hear me out all the way.”

I went motionless, my gut clenching. “What's happened?”

She hesitated. “Wyatt's in hospital. We think he had a heart attack.” Her voice broke on the latter words.

I all but flew out of the building as dread gripped me in its jaws. “What hospital?”

“St. Erin's.”

“I'll meet you there,” I told her as I ran for the parking lot, my pace restricted by my goddamn high heels.

“You don't need to come all the way up here; I can keep you updated.”

*Fuck that*. “I'm on my way. Text me where exactly you're at.” The hospital was *huge*. “I'll see you soon.” I hung up and dialed Dax's number, tearing across the parking lot like my ass was on fire.

“Yes?” he answered.

“I'm sorry but you'll need to head to Sarah's birthday meal without me,” I said, my words a little breathy and choppy.

A brief pause. “What’s wrong?” His voice was hard and cautious.

“Wyatt had a heart attack. Or that’s what my mom suspects—she doesn’t know for sure yet.” Finally reaching my car, I unlocked it with the key fob. “I’m heading to St. Erin’s now.”

A low curse sounded. “I know it’s easier said than done, but try not to think the worst. People can have chest pains for other reasons.”

“I know, but it’s hard not to panic.” Having tossed my purse and satchel on the passenger seat, I hopped into the car and switched on the engine. “I’ll text you when I know more. I have to go.”

“Don’t drive too fast, Addison. Be safe.”

I blinked, surprised by the vehemency in his voice. “I will.” I ended the call, dumped my cell in the cupholder, and reversed out of my spot.

I took deep, controlled breaths as I drove, adrenaline pulsing around my system. Wyatt had had a few health issues over the years, but nothing too serious. I’d never worried much. To me, he’d always been larger than life; too strong for anything to take him down. Hearing he could have potentially had a heart attack wiped away that comforting delusion.

I knew my siblings would find this just as rough. He wasn’t a grandfather who’d clicked more with one grandchild than the others. He had the same tight, close relationship with all of us. It was horrible to think that we could lose him.

I finally reached the hospital, but it took several minutes of scouring the attached lot before I found a space to park. Exiting the vehicle, I made a swift beeline for the building, panic fluttering in my belly like a thousand butterflies. Using the directions my mother had texted me, I made my way to a particular private waiting room, passing shops and cafés and various units and wards as I navigated the maze of hallways.

Shoving open the door to the glassed-in room, I found my mom, Alicia, Harri, and Melinda all sat around looking varying degrees of anxious. They stood when I crossed to them, and I quickly hugged all four women.

“How is he?” I asked no one in particular.

“We’re not sure yet.” Melinda dabbed her red nose with a scrunched-up tissue and slumped back into her seat. “No doctors have come out to give us any news yet.”

I glanced around. “Where’s Dad?”

“New York,” Vienna replied as she returned to her seat beside Melinda, who immediately clasped her hand tight.

“Business trip?” I guessed.

My mom nodded. “Ollie’s with him. I let them know what happened. They’re going to fly home today.”

Alicia sank into the chair on the other side of our grandmother. “Ollie gave us strict instructions not to mention it to Marleigh until we have answers. He’s right that it’s for the best.”

Harri nodded, retaking her seat. “She’ll only worry. She adores Wyatt as much as we do.”

“So, what happened with him exactly?” I sat beside my baby sister. “Was he doing anything strenuous?”

Melinda gave her head a slow shake. “He was arguing with our neighbor again. It got real heated. Next thing I know —” She broke off, and her eyes welled up. “I need to hear he’s okay. He *has* to be okay.”

“He will be,” Harri declared. “Wyatt is strong as an ox. No, stronger.”

Vienna gave a clipped nod. “He’ll be fine.” She spoke with utter conviction, but I heard the tremble of fear there.

“He better be,” muttered Alicia, her legs crossed, the foot on the floor bouncing like crazy and making both her thighs jump. “If he isn’t, I’ll ... well, I don’t know what I’ll do, but it’ll be something he doesn’t like.”



A reluctant, tremulous smile plucked at Melinda's mouth.

Spotting both a water fountain and a coffee machine in the far corner of the large space, I asked, "Does anyone want coffee or water?"

Both Vienna and Melinda requested the first while Alicia ordered the latter.

"I'll help you with the drinks," offered Harri, rubbing her hands on her thighs.

I offered her a grateful smile. "Thanks." As we walked away, I cast her a probing look. "Are you okay?"

She idly traced her eyebrow. "To be honest, I haven't properly processed what's happening yet."

I gave her arm a gentle, comforting squeeze. "Does Simon know about it?"

She shook her head. "Mom's going to call him after she hears from the doctor and knows what's what."

That was probably best. "Did anyone call Heather?" I asked, referring to Melinda and Wyatt's daughter. A woman I'd never called "Aunt," because she was nothing close to it—hadn't ever tried to be.

"Melinda did." Harri's nose wrinkled. "Mom overheard the call. Apparently, Heather didn't seem too concerned but promised she'd 'make an appearance.' Her words."

I shook my head. "I don't buy for a moment that Heather's not all that bothered." She loved Wyatt, but their relationship was strained due to her stubborn belief that he favored Vienna over her.

Heather was also convinced that Melinda cared more for Vienna as well. No amount of reassurances from her parents had made a difference—Heather firmly upheld that they played favorites, and she made them pay for it in small ways.

“Neither do I,” said Harri as she plucked a disposable cup from the top of the water fountain. “But you know how she is. I called Junior to let him know what was happening,” she added, referring to Heather’s son—he’d moved to England eight years ago. “He’s going to catch a flight over here as soon as he can. I promised I’d keep him in the loop until then.”

“Wyatt will be thrilled to see him.” We all would. Our oldest cousin was nothing like his mother.

Harri filled the cup at the water fountain while I prepped the coffees at the nearby dispenser. We then returned to the others and distributed the drinks.

I was just about to sit down when the door to the waiting room swung open behind me. I turned, hoping to see a doctor, desperate for news on Wyatt. It wasn’t a doctor, but disappointment didn’t spike through my blood. Because it was Dax.

Surprised, I could only stare as he made a beeline for me—his every step smooth, purposeful, swift. He didn’t stop until the fronts of our bodies touched. He palmed the side of my face, his striking eyes carefully drinking in my expression. And then that same hand crept around to palm the back of my head as he tucked it beneath his chin. His other arm slid up my back at a diagonal angle, sweeping me into a secure hug.

A hug.

He was hugging me.

His hold was protective. Comforting. Steadying. And my tension bled out of me even as I felt an expanding sensation in my chest.

“You’re here,” I whispered around a thick throat.

He dipped his head and placed his lips near my ear. “Of course I’m here.”

I fisted the sides of his shirt. Maybe I should have expected him to come—friends were there for friends—but I hadn’t. Nor had I expected him to curve his body around me this way.

I wasn't sure why, but hot tears stung my eyes. I closed them, pulling in a long breath through my nose. He was as solid and unwavering as an old oak tree—exactly what I needed right now.

“Any word on Wyatt?” he asked.

“Not yet.” I pulled back enough to meet his gaze as a thought struck me. “How did you know where to find us?”

“I have my ways.” Letting his arms slip away from me—I refused to acknowledge how disappointed that made me—he fished his phone out of his pocket. “Give me a minute.” He then strode to the corner and put his cell to his ear.

Alicia looked up at me, her brow wrinkled. “Who’s he calling?”

I shrugged. “He didn’t say. Possibly his mom or dad.” Taking the seat opposite her, I put my hand to my stomach—the damn thing kept seizing and rolling. It didn’t help that I was surrounded by the not-so-nice scents of antiseptic, iodine, stale air, and bad coffee. “We were supposed to attend a celebratory dinner for his godmother’s birthday.”

Melinda’s lips parted. “You didn’t have to cancel. We could have contacted you with news once we had it.”

“I *want* to be here,” I stressed. “Plus, there’s no way I could sit and enjoy a meal right now. And my mind would have been on Wyatt anyway.”

Melinda’s gaze settled on Dax, who was still talking on his phone. “He didn’t attend the meal without you,” she noted.

“No, he didn’t,” I agreed with no small amount of wonder.

“I can see you’re surprised he showed up here,” she said, the smile she gifted me a little strained around the edges.

“I’m not at all surprised,” my mom claimed, fingering the butterfly pendant dangling from her gold necklace. “By nature, Dax is a man who’s there for those who need him.”

She was right, of course. I’d likely done him a disservice by being so taken off-guard by his presence. In my

defense, he hadn't given me any hint that he'd meet me here when I'd spoken to him over the phone. Maybe he'd just assumed I'd know he'd come.

My gaze jumped to the door as it opened once more. I felt my lips flatten. Again, it wasn't a doctor. It also wasn't someone who I enjoyed being around.

Heather stormed over to us and set her hands on her narrow hips. "So, where is he?" she asked ... like she expected him to be sitting right here.

Melinda stood and pulled her daughter into an awkward hug. "With the doctors. We're still waiting on news." She retook her seat, exhaling a shaky breath.

Heather scanned each of our faces. "I don't know why you're all looking so worried. Two of my exes who swore they were having heart attacks actually had a bad case of indigestion. That's probably all this is." She settled her gaze on her mother. "Dad doesn't have a weak heart."

"I keep reminding myself of that." Melinda twirled her wedding band. "I keep telling myself it could be nothing."

Heather swiped Vienna's drink from her hand and took a sip. She balked, her face scrunching up, and spit the coffee back into the cup. "Ew. That's disgusting."

I felt my jaw clench. The coffee could have tasted like fucking ambrosia and Heather would have done the same damn thing. Why? To fuck with my mom.

I didn't know the *full* history of what had gone on between them when they were kids, but I was aware that Heather—not impressed by having a foster sister—had somewhat physically abused her back then. As adults, neither woman had any tolerance or time for the other.

My mom made an effort to be civil with her for Melinda and Wyatt's sake, and Heather refrained from causing scenes out of fear of what my dad would do—he'd interfered in her life once or twice in the past for upsetting Vienna. But that weak level of civility was as good as it got between them.

And if Heather felt she could get away with passive-aggressively poking at my mom, she would.

The bitch actually tried giving the coffee back to Vienna, not fighting a smirk.

My mom steadily stared at her, her face blank—the woman was a pro at hiding her emotions. “Nah, you keep it.”

I turned my head as my peripheral vision caught movement. Dax was making his way back to me, pocketing his phone.

“The doctors gave Wyatt a physical exam,” Dax announced to us, “and now he’s currently undergoing some tests—they’ve made no definitive diagnosis yet.”

I blinked, my head tilting. “How do you know?”

He gave an easy shrug. “I make regular donations to the hospital.”

“Well, hello there,” Heather practically purred. “I didn’t notice you. What a terrible oversight on my part.”

I flicked the ceiling a quick glance. She was the biggest and most cringe-worthy flirt to have ever existed. “Dax, this is Heather, my mom’s foster sister.”

“Melinda and Wyatt’s *biological* daughter,” Heather felt the need to add, saying it as though it meant she was the only daughter that counted.

I didn’t miss the eye roll my mom exchanged with Harri.

“And you’re Dax Mercier. Addison’s husband, right? Such a shame I wasn’t invited to the wedding,” said Heather with a pout, a tang of bitterness to her words.

I hadn’t invited her because she was a fucking idiot. No one had argued that I should, not even her parents. They loved her, but they weren’t blind to her nature.

Dax didn’t greet Heather. Or hold out his hand. Or nod her way. Or anything.

She pointed one slender, long-nailed finger at him. “You know, I met your dad a time or two.”

She’d probably tried her hand at seducing Blake as well. Heather only ever showed interest in men who were married. She’d been married herself twice, but both her exes were committed to someone else when she first met them.

“You look a lot like him, but you have your mom’s eyes,” Heather told him, a dark curve to her lips. “Buchanan eyes.”

I tensed at the verbal stab—it was a cruel reminder of his connection to a man who’d taken advantage of his grandmother and disowned his mom. “Don’t,” I told her, my voice hard. “Don’t go there.”

She lifted her hands, humor lighting her face. “My apologies. I didn’t know he’d be so sensitive.”

Melinda’s eyes fell shut. “Heather, please sit down and just ...”

“Not talk?” Heather supplied.

*Works for me.*

“Not make comments that might hurt or provoke others,” Melinda corrected. “Have you spoken to Junior at all?”

Heather looked as though she’d fight the change of subject, but then she sighed and said, “Yes, I called him a little while ago.” She gracefully sank into a seat. “He said Harri had already given him the news about Dad. He’s planning to fly over and see him.”

Dax claimed the chair beside mine and checked his watch.

I leaned into him. “You don’t have to stay,” I said, keeping my voice too quiet to carry to the others. “I mean, I’m glad you’re here. But I know you won’t want to miss Sarah’s birthday meal.”

His brow puckered for the briefest moment. “I’m staying.” He splayed his hand on my thigh—a statement, a

reassurance. “She’ll understand. She wouldn’t expect me to be anywhere else but here.”

I stared down at his hand. Now that we were officially friends, his casual touches weren’t quite as rare. Still, there was never any *feeling* behind them.

Light strokes, brief pats, gentle squeezes, warm hugs ... those things anchored you. Reassured you. Soothed you. They were a way of—for lack of a better term—touching base, I supposed. A way of nonverbally checking in.

Not for Dax.

He just didn’t do that stuff—not with friends, not with family, not with anyone. I was used to it. What I *wasn’t* used to was it in any way bothering me.

I wasn’t sure how, why, or when it happened. I wasn’t sure if it was something that had come on gradually or if it simply sprang up on me over the past week. Whatever the case, I had lately begun to really feel the *absence* of such casual touch between us. I’d somehow reached a point where it had started to bug me a little.

And so, as I gazed down at the hand he’d rested on my thigh, I liked it more than I should.

Maybe it was simply that, unlike him, I *was* a tactile person. Maybe it wasn’t really about Dax at all. Maybe I just lamented that we didn’t have that kind of friendship. Either way, I was not a fan of how much it affected me.

“Well, Vienna,” began Heather, pulling me out of my ruminations, “you must be *thrilled* that your eldest went and found herself a rich-ass husband just like her momma.”

Her back ramrod straight, Vienna skewed her with a vacant stare. I could sense it was taking everything she had to not tell the bitch to shut right up. If it wasn’t for Melinda’s presence, she’d have already done so.

Heather examined her nails. “I personally don’t think I’d be so proud, in your shoes. Did you know Dax owns a strip club?”

Surprise flickered across Vienna's face.

Grinning, Heather sliced her gaze to me. "Did *you* know?"

"I know he used to own one, yes." He'd sold it years ago—Brooks briefly mentioned it to me back then. "Though I don't see how it's relevant."

Her grin shrunk slightly. "You sure the club changed owners? Because that's not what I heard."

Dax ever so slowly leaned forward, pinning her with a lethal glare that made her tense. "I don't know what gave you the impression that I'll tolerate you attempting to play mind games with my wife," he said, his words soft and slow and exuding danger, "but it stops now. Right fucking now."

Heather pressed her lips together, her eyes narrowing.

Apparently satisfied, Dax sank back into his seat and draped his arm over the back of my chair. The move was as protective as his tone of voice had been, and it made my chest go all gooey.

I leaned into him again and whispered, "This is why I didn't invite her to our wedding."

He let out a quiet grunt.

Silence fell as we continued to wait for a doctor to arrive. To pass the time, I alternated from reading the posters tacked on the otherwise plain walls to reading the subtitles on the muted wall-mounted TV. I also watched through the windows as people walked along the corridors beyond the waiting room—some dressed in scrubs or uniforms, some in standard clothing, others shuffling along in hospital gowns while holding IVs.

Aside from the ever-composed Dax, we were all on pins—tapping our feet, swirling our ankles, biting our lips, furtively eyeing the door. Even Heather, though she took pains to instead look bored by scrolling through her phone, was quite clearly restless.



Harri reached back to restlessly tug at her ponytail. “I need to use the bathroom. I’ll be right back.” She stood, hooking her purse strap over her shoulder. It was right then that the door opened.

As a middle-aged guy in a white jacket breezed inside, we all stood. He confirmed our worst fear: Wyatt had, in fact, had a heart attack. Fortunately, surgery wasn’t required—the clot-dissolving medication they administered had worked. However, he’d need to stay overnight for observation.

Inhaling deeply, I let the relief that Wyatt was stable sink in—absorbed it, processed it, fucking relished it.

Melinda’s false “I’m okay” front crumpled with what seemed to be the same relief I felt. “Can I see him?” she pled.

“He can have visitors, but only two at a time,” the doctor replied.

“Me and Mom should go first,” Heather announced. “It’s us he’ll most want to see.”

Vienna gave a subtle eye roll. “Good idea. You two go on.”

When the doctors and two women left, I sighed at Dax. “Never a dull moment with Heather.”

“Every family has one,” said Alicia.

By the time it was my turn to go see Wyatt, he’d fallen asleep. My chest tightened at the sight of him pale and linked to beeping machines. Never had I seen him look fragile. Not until right then. It scared the shit out of me.

When I eventually returned to the waiting room, Melinda looked from me to Alicia to Harri as she said, “You all head on home. I’ll text you with any updates.”

Alicia frowned, her shoulders stiffening. “But—”

“I’m leaving, too,” Vienna told my sister, as if to ease any guilt she might feel. “I need to pick up some things for Melinda and Wyatt.”

Which was something *Heather* could have done so that my mom could have stayed, but it seemed the woman had already left.

I gave Melinda a hug. “Call me if you need anything.”

She smoothed a hand down her blouse, her eyes sad. “Thanks, honey. I will.”

Dax cupped my elbow. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

We all walked out together, only dispersing when we reached the parking lot. When he began guiding me to his vehicle, I dug in my heels and pointed at the opposite end of the lot as I spoke, “My car is over—”

“I’ll have Caelan come get it and drive it back to our villa,” Dax told me. “You can ride with me.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“I disagree. I don’t want you driving right now.” He gave my wrist a light squeeze. “Let me take you home.”

I swallowed. “Okay.” I allowed him to continue leading me to his car. “Thank you for coming. And for staying.”

His face firmed. “You don’t need to thank me. You said you’d be at my side when shit went down, right? What makes you think I wouldn’t do the same for you?”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Leaning back on the patio chair, I nibbled on my bottom lip as I stared at the man sitting across from me, who was chewing the last of his breakfast bagel while scrolling through his phone. “So,” I began, “I have a question.”

Dax’s gaze lifted to mine. “Go on.”

“Halloween is coming up in, like, three days. How would you feel about me hanging up some decorations?”

A fine line dented his brow. “You already have. There’s an autumn wreath hanging on the front door, and there are pumpkins on the ground either side of it. We’ve got throw cushions with leaves and gnomes and acorns on the covers. And you’ve put dandelion garlands here, there, and everywhere.” None of which he seemed impressed by.

I lifted my finger. “Those are *fall* decorations.” He’d okayed me shaking up the décor, but he’d done it rather begrudgingly. “That’s different.”

“Why do we need both kinds?”

“Because it would fill me with child-like joy.” I pouted. “Don’t you want me to be happy?”

He looked close to rolling his eyes. “Fine.”

I smiled, nodding. “Thank you.” I tipped my head to the side. “So you don’t usually decorate for the holidays?”

“No,” he replied, lifting his mug.

“But surely you make an exception at Christmas, right?”

“No.” He chugged back some coffee.

“Any particular reason why, or is it just because you’re something of a minimalist?”

“The latter.”

Huh. I couldn’t imagine not wanting to spice up the décor at such times. I *loved* that stuff. It got me in the mood

for the holidays and filled me with feelings of nostalgia. But I understood that it wasn't everyone's idea of fun.

"It won't make you uncomfortable if I spruce things up for Halloween, though?" I checked. "Because I'll skip it if it's something that will bother you."

The line between his brows smoothed away. "It won't bother me. What would bother me is if you sulk over the lack of festive décor."

"I wouldn't sulk." I'd just be a little cranky. "If you're sure you're fine with it, I'll dig out my decorations later. Speaking of later ... I'll be stopping off at my grandparents' house on my way home from work so I can check in on Wyatt."

He was doing fine, having taken the doctor's advice and done as instructed. Though he was beginning to chafe at having people popping in to see him every day like he was, in his words, "*a small child trying to stick a clothing hanger in an electric socket.*" We weren't *that* bad. Just still a little freaked out over his health scare.

Breaking out of my thoughts, I told Dax, "You can have dinner without me if you want."

"I'll wait for you to get home." He set down his cup and gave me a pointed look. "You always wait for me."

Grateful, I gave him a soft smile. "Thank you, hubby."

He rolled his eyes. "On the subject of holidays, my mother called me while you were in the shower earlier; she's invited us to spend Thanksgiving at her table. Raven and my brothers will also be there."

I grimaced. "My mom threw out the same invite for us and all my siblings. She mentioned it last night over the phone but I forgot to tell you." I worried my lower lip. "Maybe we could split our time. Have dinner at one house and then eat dessert at the other. Or something. It's not ideal, but Ollie and Marleigh do the same thing every year so neither has to give up time with their family at Thanksgiving."

Dax pursed his lips, pensive. "That would work."

“Then the question is ... which house do we visit first?”

He hummed. “I have no real preference.”

I did. “We’ll have dinner with your family and eat dessert with mine.”

“Why?”

“Because I would rather you didn’t have to eat a full meal while you have my father being ... well, my father. He’s less rude nowadays, but still.” And surely no one could properly enjoy their food while being glared at. It sure wouldn’t be good for a person’s digestion.

A dismissive frown settled over Dax’s face. “You know I don’t care that he acts that way.”

“Well, *I* care. I’m determined to put an end to this ‘I can’t be nice to my daughter’s husband on principle’ idiocy once and for all.”

He gave his head a slight shake. “You’re wasting your time trying to make him welcome me into the family.”

I let out a stubborn sniff. “I don’t see why. It’s not as if you two have no shot at getting along. He actually likes you, and he doesn’t like many people outside our family.”

“Doesn’t matter. I had the downright nerve to marry his baby girl. That changes things. I’ve explained this already.”

“Yes, but it’s positively ridiculous. I’m going to be hopeful that things will improve.”

He gave a fluid shrug. “You’re only setting yourself up for disappointment.” He glanced at his wristwatch. “I have to leave now. I have an early meeting to attend.”

As he rose from his seat, I shot him a bright smile. “Have a good day, sweetums.”

He stilled, the image of unimpressed. “No. Just no.”

“Yeah, sounds cringy when I say it out loud,” I conceded. “But don’t think I don’t know that you want to

smile right now.”

Amusement briefly flickered in his gaze. “Later.” His lips *ever* so slightly quirked, he rounded the table and walked away.



Tensing in his armchair, Wyatt sighed up at his wife. “Woman, *stop hovering.*”

Melinda gave him an arch look. “I’ll hover as much as I like. Now eat.”

Wyatt cast a sad glance at the salad on his lap tray. “Can’t a man have a cheeseburger in his own home?”

“Not when he recently had a heart attack,” she retorted.

He scowled. “Even the birds wouldn’t eat this.”

“Of course they wouldn’t. It isn’t a plate of seeds. *Eat.*”

Wyatt looked at me. “Do you see how she treats me?”

Stifling a smile, I shifted a little on the sofa to better face him. “You gave us all a scare, *especially* Melinda. She’s trying to ensure you don’t end up back in hospital. You should be putting in the same effort.”

She gave me a serene smile. “Thank you, Addie.”

He grunted and lifted his cutlery. “At least *some* good has come of all this. The damn neighbors have stopped being a problem.”

Yes, I’d heard that the young couple had gotten such a fright from him having a heart attack right in front of them that they hadn’t thrown one of their usual overloud parties since then. I suspected they wouldn’t ever again, since I knew my dad had had a little chat with the couple—he would ensure they kept a lower profile from now on. And if that didn’t turn out to be enough, Dax would likely step in.

“So, how’s everything with work?” Melinda asked me.

“Fine. Busy.” I’d only been away from the office two hours and I had another shit-ton of emails and a fair few voicemails waiting for a response.

The three of us chatted and laughed as Wyatt ate. Well, *tried* to eat. He kept grimacing and shuddering and cursing beneath his breath like she’d fed him goddamn gruel, the drama king.

About an hour or so later, when it was time to leave, I gave them both hugs and assured them I’d be back for another visit soon. Pulling my key fob out of my purse, I walked down the path and over to my car.

Hearing a boyish giggle, I glanced to my left to see a small kid pointing at the front window of a nearby Chevy while grinning up at the woman holding his hand. I suspected his source of amusement was the *huge* splatter of bird shit on the glass.

I hopped into my car, brought the engine roaring to life, and then began making my way home. I was looking forward to getting there, excited to pull out and hang up my Halloween decorations.

In many ways, I was like my dad. But there were some instances where I took after my mom—like her, I regressed during Halloween. Poor Dax was about to find that out the hard way.

I wondered how he’d feel when I blurted out the news that, yes, we’d be welcoming trick or treaters to our door. Knowing Dax, he’d retreat upstairs to get some peace and quiet.

Not used to celebrating Halloween alone, I would have invited my sisters to the villa so I’d have some company, but Alicia had a date and Harri was attending a fancy dress gig. Likewise, Sabrina and Tamara had plans—they were heading to a spooky festival. I would have invited Ollie and Marleigh but he, much like our father, wasn’t a fan of the holiday.

As I eased my foot off the pedal to lower my speed, I glanced in my rearview mirror ... and felt my brow furrow. A Chevy wasn't too far behind me. A Chevy that had a big blob of bird shit on its front window. Huh.

Reaching a roundabout, I took the second turn-off. So did the Chevy. Shortly after, I reached a T junction and went right. So did the Chevy.

My scalp prickled. Either I was being paranoid or—

No, I was being paranoid. Totally.

But when I took the next left turn, the Chevy once again mimicked my move.

I shifted in my seat, uneasy. As I drove, I kept an eye on its movements. When I slowed, it slowed. When I sped up, it sped up. When I turned, it turned—whether I went left or right.

Okay, so I wasn't being paranoid.

My stomach rolling, I used the car's Bluetooth to call Dax.

His phone rang a few times before he answered, "Yes?"

"Something weird is going on." I licked my lips. "I think I'm being followed. No, I *know* I am."

"Followed?" he echoed, his voice dropping.

"Yes."

"How sure are you?"

"Positive," I stated, firm. "When I was leaving my grandparents' house, I noticed a bronze Chevy parked nearby. That same Chevy caught up with me and has been on my ass ever since. And I mean *on my ass*."

A soft curse floated down the line. "Can you see the driver?" he asked, the sound of a door closing in the background—possibly our front door.



“Not very well. He’s male. Has a slim face and dark, scruffy hair. He’s kept enough of a distance between us that I can’t get a good look at him, but he doesn’t seem familiar.”

“Where are you?” Dax asked above the *bleep* of a car unlocking.

I gave him my location.

“You’re not far from CCC. Go there. Park in the lot. Stay in the car. Keep the doors locked.” A car engine began to purr. “I’ll be there soon.”

“Okay.”

He hung up without another word.

I exhaled heavily, flexing my hands around the steering wheel. And it occurred to me how instinctive it had been for me to reach out to Dax. Not my dad or Ollie or the cops. No, I’d sought Dax’s help without thought, wholly trusting that he’d know what to do; that he’d come to me no matter how busy he might be; that I could rely on him to keep me safe.

It was one thing to trust someone. It was another thing to feel that you could rely on them. It said a lot about how far he and I had come that I would so easily turn to him.

I flicked my rearview mirror another look. The Chevy was still close.

Who the hell would tail me? *Why* tail me? My movements wouldn’t be of interest to anyone. I highly doubted I had a stalker or anything like that.

Could someone be doing it to screw with me? I supposed so, but I didn’t see why they’d do it. There were some people who weren’t fans of mine, but none looked like the driver.

It was possible that this person was dicking with me in an effort to piss off Dax. But ... I’d told Dax there was a bronze Chevy following me. That hadn’t seemed to clue him in, so maybe this wasn’t anyone that he knew. At least not *well*.

It was mere minutes before I arrived at my destination. In the lot, I picked a spot that was surrounded by enough cars that my little follower wouldn't be able to park close to me. Just as I was about to turn off the ignition, my phone rang.

*Dax.*

I accepted the call. "Hey."

"Are you at CCC yet?" he asked, his voice all business.

"I just got here."

"Maverick is on his way; he lives closest. Are your doors locked?"

I pressed a button to secure them all shut. "Yes."

"Keep it that way."

I scratched at my head. "Do you have any idea who this person could be?"

"No. But I'll find out who they are."

Catching movement in my peripheral vision, I turned my head to find someone standing right there. *The driver.* "Uh ... he's at my window. He's gesturing for me to lower it." All while wearing a big "I'm harmless" smile.

"Don't," Dax commanded.

Like I'd had any such intention.

"I just want five minutes of your time," said the stranger loud enough for his words to reach me through the glass.

Sadly for him, he wasn't getting those minutes. "I don't recognize him," I told Dax. "He's in his early to mid-fifties. Double-chin. Mustache. Acne scars. He's definitely had a broken nose at some point."

Dax muttered a quiet curse.

I tensed. "You know who he is."

He sighed. "Yes. He's a local reporter. His name is Lennie Fowler."

My jaw clenched. *Another* goddamn reporter?

“Five minutes,” repeated Lennie, a plea in his tone. “I’ll pay you for your time.”

“Why would he want to talk to me?” I asked.

“He’ll be hoping you can give him something interesting to print about me or my family,” replied Dax, his voice flat. “He likes to do that.”

I narrowed my eyes. “So he’s done articles about you in the past?”

“Yes,” replied Dax with a grunt. “Mostly when I was a youth.”

Ignoring the knuckles wrapping on my window, I asked, “What stuff did he write?”

Dax hesitated. “Let’s just say the articles weren’t in my favor.”

Feeling my lips press into a thin line, I glared up at Lennie. He was likely one of the assholes who’d repeatedly snapped pictures of Dax back then and written shitty stories about him that painted him as a killer in the making.

Exasperation flashed in Lennie’s eyes. “I mean you no harm. I just wanna talk.”

I was tempted to tell him to fuck right off, but I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of having something to print. Your words could be used against you, but your silence couldn’t be misquoted.

“We can talk in public.” Lennie pointed at Chrome Canvas Bar. “I’ll go inside and wait for you there. Okay?” Adjusting his collar, he strode off.

“He’s heading into the bar on the off-chance that I’ll follow,” I informed Dax. “I’d love to go in there and rip him a new one.”

“It’s best not to give him anything worth publishing.”

“Yeah, I get that. I’m still tempted.” Spotting a familiar person walking toward the car, I felt my insides relax.

“Maverick’s here.” I wound down my window and smiled at the newcomer. “It turns out he’s a reporter by the name of Lennie Fowler. He’s in the bar.”

His expression hard, Maverick studied my face. “You all right?”

“No, because I can’t punch him in the dick. And I really, really want to.”

Maverick’s lips twitched. “Stay here.” He then walked away and went into the bar.

I closed my window and let my head tip back.

“I’m almost there,” said Dax. “You can go home now. I’ll deal with this.”

I snorted. “Go home while you handle a situation I pulled you into? Oh, you’re funny.”

“*Addison.*”

“Hey, I’d understand if something was about to happen that you wouldn’t want me to see. I get that you don’t want ... certain things ... to touch me. But all you’re going to do is talk to him.” Dax couldn’t exactly physically let loose on someone in public. “And anyway, it’s not like ...” I trailed off as something caught my attention. “Ugh, he’s tearing across the lot. Lennie, I mean. I’m guessing he’s running from Maverick.”

Dax let out a sound that was something between a grunt and a snort. “He won’t get far.”

I watched as Maverick followed the reporter at a slower pace, smirking when Lennie cursed at the sight of the Chevy. “Let me guess. Maverick slashed one or more of his tires as a precaution.” Dax must have told him I was being tailed by a bronze Chevy—there was only one of those parked here, so Maverick would have known which vehicle to target.

My gaze darted away from the spectacle as another vehicle entered the lot. One I knew well. My pulse spiked. “I see you.”

“I’m hanging up now. Wait in the car.” He rang off.

I angled myself a little to get a better view as Dax parked near the Chevy. He unfolded from the car in that fluid way he had and crossed to Lennie, who instantly took a step back, the anger slipping from his expression to be replaced by dread. Ha.

Dax began to speak, but I couldn't make out the words. I lowered my window enough that his voice could filter into my car.

"I'm a reporter, interviewing people is what I do," the asshole defended. "It ain't personal."

"Addison is my wife, Fowler, so I consider this very personal," said Dax, his voice hard as stone.

"You shouldn't. It's just business. You're both high profile people for different reasons. The public will want a glance at the inside of your marriage, and the press are going to want to provide it. Don't think you can tell me what I can or can't write." Brave words, but there was a shake to his voice that betrayed his nerves.

Dax gave him a superior look. "I don't care what you print, Fowler. That's the thing—nobody does anymore. Not after it was proven that you have a tendency to fake and embellish stories."

Lennie's face set into a mask of resentment. "It was you who exposed that, wasn't it? You cost me my job."

"Your actions cost you your job. Now, as I said before, I don't care what you choose to print. But I do care that you're tailing my wife."

"It's not like I'm stalking her. I just wanted an opportunity to talk to her."

"She doesn't want to speak to you. I think you received that message when she didn't leave her vehicle, but you pushed anyway."

Lennie sighed. "Like it or not, you make good clickbait, and the women in your life have a habit of talking to the media. I won't be the only reporter to approach your wife hoping she'll do the same."

“Maybe not. But, like you, they’ll achieve nothing.” Dax pinned him with a menacing glare. “In future, keep your distance from Addison.”

Lennie swallowed hard. “Or what?”

One corner of Dax’s mouth curled. “It isn’t only the women in *my* past who like to talk, Fowler. You have interesting sexual tastes. Perhaps the people of Redwater would like to hear all about it. Your loved ones? Not so much.”

A crimson flush stained the reporter’s cheeks. “You’re a real son of a bitch.”

“That’s not something you didn’t already know.” Dax flicked a glance at Lennie’s car. “Now, I suggest you change your tire. Maverick can help, if you’d like.”

The reporter stiffened. “I got it.”

Dax turned away from Lennie and crossed to my car with fast, determined strides. He poked his head through the open window. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. Just pissed.” It was bad enough that people like Lennie had targeted Dax when he was just a boy. This particular asshole clearly didn’t feel bad about it if he had no qualms with doing it again now that Dax was an adult. “Can I not kick him or something?”

Dax’s lips slightly hitched up. “No. Let’s get home.” He pulled back and straightened. “I’ll stay close behind you.”

As we drove to the villa, I silently seethed on his behalf. *Seethed*. My protective instincts were dancing around my system, making me want to punch someone.

Or, more specifically, Lennie Fowler.

And other reporters like him, actually. Reporters who’d made it impossible for a young boy to live a normal life. Reporters who’d contributed to how guarded and self-restrained that boy grew up to be.

How different might Dax be if he hadn’t dealt with such harassment; if he hadn’t had to see his name and picture

in shitty article after shitty article?

Not that I *wanted* him to be different. I just resented that he'd been shoved into a situation that had resulted in him developing so many self-protective mechanisms.

When we arrived at the villa, we both went straight to the living room. There, I set my hands on my hips and exhaled a heavy breath. It did nothing to calm me down.

Dax looked up from the drinks he was pouring at the liquor cabinet. "Still pissed?"

I rolled back my shoulders. "Livid."

"Fowler spooked you?"

"What? No. I'm not livid that he tailed me; I'm livid that the press won't let you live your life in peace."

Something I couldn't name flared in Dax's eyes. Something that softened the light creases on his forehead.

"How could he have thought I'd *actually* talk to him?" I asked, incredulous.

"The women in my past saw no harm in it. Though, initially, most refused to talk. That later changed." A glass in each hand, Dax began to make his way toward me. "Some accepted the opportunity to be a paid anonymous source, mistakenly thinking I wouldn't find out. Others were more bold and didn't mind having their identities exposed."

Because, as Caelan had mentioned, they were bitter that Dax didn't grow to care for them. It made me wonder if this was part of why Dax chose a wife who had no emotional attachment to him—there'd be no chance of such bitterness coming into play.

I stared deep into his eyes. "You know I wouldn't do something like that, right? Even if you somehow hurt me, I wouldn't go down that cruel road."

He studied my face for a long moment and then pushed a glass into my hand. "I wasn't so certain at first but, no, no I don't think it's something you would do."

A knot untangled in my stomach. He might not fully trust me yet—he'd been betrayed too many times to allow himself to be so sure of someone outside of those closest to him—but he at least trusted that I wouldn't do this one thing.

“Good,” I said. “Back to the subject of Fowler ... What about his sexual tastes? What did you mean by that?”

Dax drained his tumbler. “He often takes random women home from bars or clubs and pays them to pace in front of him in only their underwear and high heels while he jerks off. He doesn't fuck them, doesn't even touch them. I suspect this is because, in his mind, it then isn't classed as cheating on his girlfriend.”

Unreal. “So he's just an ass in general?”

“Yes.” Dax tapped my glass. “Drink.”

I knocked back the whiskey, relishing the burn as it slid down my throat. “You should have let me kick him.”

“I don't think you'll have to worry that he'll bother you again. But he's right that other reporters might approach you.” Dax took my empty tumbler from me and set both on the coffee table. “I'm aware you could handle such a situation on your own, but don't. They need to see that there'd be consequences or they'd keep coming back. So if one does try to speak to you—”

“I'll keep my mouth zipped, walk away, and then call you,” I promised. “I respect that this is something you'd want to personally deal with.”

He gave a curt nod.

I exhaled a long breath. “I was so looking forward to coming home and setting up the Halloween decorations. That sack of shit ruined my mood, and now I have to postpone my plans until tomorrow because I'm too annoyed to go through with them right now.”

Dax hummed long and low. “Two things might help. You can either retreat to your not-really-an-office and lose yourself in a book to help your brain power down.”



I tilted my head. “Or?”

“Or I’ll do it for you,” he said, his pitch dropping. The sudden glisten of heat in his gaze told me *exactly* what he meant by that.

My pulse hopped and then swiftly began to quicken. At the same time, each and every muscle in my body tightened. “You’re like some kind of sexual sorcerer.”

His brows dipped. “A what?”

“I’m seriously pissed right now. There should be no way that my mind or body would so easily respond to the prospect of getting down and dirty, but both are totally game. You call, they answer. Just like that.” See, sorcery.

“Because every part of you—inside and out—knows you’re mine.” His eyes took a leisurely dip to my mouth and lingered there, tracing its shape. His gaze finally coasted back up to snare mine, delving deep; seeing too much; demanding my complete attention. “Strip. Lie on the rug. Say not one word.”

The dominant shards in his voice buried themselves deep in my thoughts, my skin, my willpower. The option to object was right there in his tone. I just didn’t want to object. I didn’t want to resist. I wanted to mentally sink into that place where I felt safe; where at the end of the following-his-lead rainbow lay spinetingling, mind-numbing, off-the-charts bliss.

I began to unbutton my shirt. Satisfaction shimmered in his eyes. And a familiar sense of calm flooded me as my world narrowed to him.

I peeled off layer after layer. The entire time, tension gathered in the air—sexual, muggy, oppressive. It thickened with every minute, became more electric with each piece of clothing I shed.

His eyes never once left me. They tracked my every movement, lethally focused as those of any wild predator. A glow of approval rose in those orbs when, naked, I padded over to the fluffy rug and lay on my back.

He moved to stand at my feet. “Spread your legs wide open.” The words *flowed* over my skin—his voice so soft, so deep, so lulling. He nodded once when I did as he bid. “Good. Now clasp your hands and stretch your arms high above your head.”

Again, I obliged him. I gripped at the tufts of fur on the rug, excitement beating in my blood and bringing a warm flush to my cheeks.

He looked his fill, taking his time. I might have fidgeted with nerves, but I felt immobilized by the expression on his face. It transmitted so much. Hunger. Need. Possession. A carnal intent that twisted my stomach.

“This would be a sight to come home to,” he said, his tone conversational. “I have to warn you, though ... you’d have to make sure you were wet and ready for me. Because there’d be no foreplay.” Male greed pooled in his eyes as they locked on my pussy. “I’d sink my dick inside you and fuck you raw. I wouldn’t even bother getting undressed.”

His fingers went to his shirt buttons. *Awesome*. I licked my dry lips and watched as he began shedding his clothes. Anticipation rose up and nipped at my skin, bringing my nerve-endings buzzing to life.

Finally naked, he planted his feet. Damn, his body was a work of art. Period. And the dick jutting upward, thick and ready to roll, would easily win a cock pageant if such a thing existed.

He dropped down to kneel between my thighs, curled his upper body over me, and braced his weight on the palms he planted either side of my head. His eyes swept over every detail of my face—not simply my features, but each line, freckle, curve, and dip ... as if appraising an antique or something.

Looping my arms around his neck, I angled my head to offer my mouth. He didn’t take it. He trailed the tip of his nose down my temple, along my cheek, across my jaw, all the way up the other side of my face, and then over my forehead until it touched my temple again ... forming a complete circle.

Way too needy to patiently wait for him to move things along, I lifted my hips enough to grind against his hard shaft.

“You want my cock”—his tongue flicked out and lashed my lower lip—“you’re going to earn it,” he whispered, a purr of assertiveness there.

I blinked. “Earn it?”

“By pleasing me,” he explained. “I’m going to play with you now. You can move as much as you want. You can make as much noise as you want. But there’s one thing I wouldn’t recommend that you do.”

“What?”

“Come,” he replied. “You’re free to do so, of course. But if you do, that will be your orgasm for the evening. I’ll finish myself off in your mouth, or maybe come all over your pretty breasts. If, however, you hold out ... I’ll shove my dick inside you and fuck you so hard you can’t take it—but you *will* take it.”

His mouth swooped down and closed over mine. His tongue snaked inside, glided against my own, and began that age-old dance he’d perfected. The kiss reeked of sex. Of need. Of *him*.

I’d never known anyone with more sensual finesse than this guy. He kissed like he was relishing a dessert. Like my mouth was an indulgence he was determined to taste, savor, and greedily devour.

Angling his head, he revved up the kiss, plunging his tongue deeper, stealing the breath from my lungs and setting off a chain reaction of chemicals.

Air. I really needed air. Absolutely did not give a crap.

I wrapped my lips around his tongue and suckled. A low, drawn-out growl crawled up his throat and poured down mine.

He broke the kiss ... and what followed could only be described as honest-to-God’s sensual torture.

He began at my neck, making sure to seek out every “happy spot.” There was licking. There was suckling. There was biting. There was shaping. There was squeezing.

He soon drifted down to my shoulders and arms. The pads of his fingers skated over me, possessiveness in their every press, stroke, clasp, and glide. Like they were stamping my skin with proof of his ownership—not one I could see, but one that would settle into my bones; one that I’d never be free of.

He squeezed my breast hard, shocking a delighted gasp out of me. And then his grip gentled, loosened, *frustrated*.

One moment, his touches could be all carnal tenderness. The next moment, they could be wickedly rough. Again and again, he switched. But always, every move was laced with a leashed aggressiveness that threatened to surface any second.

Moist heat soon gathered between my legs. An intoxicating cocktail of chemicals danced through my bloodstream and drugged my mind.

He honed in on my breasts next, teasing until my nipples tightened to twin, painful, tingling points. Every suck and bite on the taut buds sent sparks of pleasure to my core. God, I felt so empty it *hurt*.

Swallowing a frustrated whimper, I sank my hand into his hair and pulled. “Dax—”

Teeth dug into the side of my breast in a not-quite-bite. With a hiss of complaint, I loosened my grip. His tongue eased over the smarting spot to soothe the prickle.

He slid further down my body, teasing my stomach relentlessly. His tongue would lick. His breath would blow over the wet skin. His teeth would then nip or graze.

At this point, my nerve-endings were on total overload to the point that even the crisp hairs on his thighs and chest seemed to scrape at my skin.

I raised my head to glare down at him. “Are you trying to make me crazy?” The hoarse words sounded tortured out of

me.

Lifting his head to meet my gaze, he rested his hand on my stomach, his fingers splayed, taking up as much skin as he could. “What’s wrong?”

I blinked. “*What’s wrong?*”

Humor sparkled in his mismatched eyes. “You look a little flushed.” He slid his hand down to cup my pussy, digging the heel of his palm into my clit.

My toes curled so hard I thought they might cramp. “I want to kill you right now.”

Moving lower, he hummed as he nuzzled my slick folds. “I don’t doubt it.” His tongue did an idle little foray over where my “landing strip” used to be. “Do you know one of the things I love most about this pussy?” he asked, his lips skimming my damp flesh as he spoke, his breath *literally* fanning the flames. “That it was mine first.”

My eyes drifted shut as he licked at my slit. He ate me out with his usual pussy-eating mastery. He didn’t half-ass it, no, *he went to town*.

His tongue stole the show—a freaking sexual weapon that drove me higher and higher as it licked, swirled, and sank deep.

I wanted to ride that tongue. Wanted more of it. Wanted it deeper inside me.

And yet, I didn’t.

Because I didn’t want to come yet. That meant fighting my instinct to chase the orgasm that was hovering so close; meant resisting the urges to buck, squirm, and arch into his mouth and fingers. It was *such* a mindfuck.

Again and again, I neared the peak of an orgasm. Again and again, I beat the pleasure back. He hummed his approval each time, rewardingly stroking my inner thigh or pressing a lingering kiss to my navel. But then he’d go all gung ho on my pussy once more.

Positively *done* with this shit, I grabbed his head. “I really need to come,” I rasped.

He rolled his tongue around my pulsing clit. “So come,” he invited. “No one’s stopping you.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, biting back a whimper.

“You’re doing so good.”

No, I wasn’t. My head was so fucked I thought I might cry. My body was in no better state—my skin felt oversensitized, my muscles keep trembling, my pussy was on fire, and my breasts ached like holy hell.

In short, he’d goddamn wrecked me.

As yet another orgasm began to build, I felt myself start to drift ... as if my mind just couldn’t process the sensations anymore. I fought the floaty feeling, panicking that I might explode if my guard was lowered—all this fighting would then have been for nothing.

The sexual tension coiled tighter and tighter in my belly. So tight it was painful. My thighs trembled, and I fisted the rug so hard my nails bit into my palms. I wrestled back the hovering orgasm; battled it with every bit of willpower I had. Until, finally, it eased off.

Dax slid back up my body and pressed a kiss to my jaw. “All done. You did good, baby. Very, very good.” He got to his knees again and flipped me onto my stomach, startling an *oof* out of me. “Head down. Ass up.”

My pulse leapt, and my breathing—already uneven and choppy—kicked up even more. Resting the side of my face on the rug, I pushed up onto my knees.

“That’s it.” Each of his thumbs brushed over a spot on the globes of my ass. “Love these dimples here.” He curved a hand around my hip and inched the broad tip of his cock into my pussy.

My breath snagging in my throat, I grabbed at the rug once more. He’d better not be in the mood for soft and slow, because I didn’t—

His cock slammed deep, filling and stretching and burning my inner walls and *fuck* it was too much. I blew apart. Fractured into a billion tiny pieces. I didn't know if I screamed or bucked—I was too mentally adrift on euphoria to register anything *but* the euphoria.

When the crazy release subsided, I melted into the rug—a mass of trembling, sweaty muscles.

“Hmm, now, isn't that better?” He put a hand between my shoulder blades to pin me in place. “Stay down.” He sluggishly reared back, making me gasp as his dick rasped along my hypersensitive inner muscles, and then he was pounding into me.

The ride was fiercely savage. As if he'd snapped the leash on all that sexual aggression he carried. He pitched his hips forward again and again, stuffing me full over and over.

It was raw. Earthy. Feral. It would only be thanks to the hair that had tumbled around my face that I wouldn't have rugburn on my cheek.

I would have thrown back my hips to meet each thrust if I could have moved. His hand held me down—a warm but firm and heavy weight that kept the control in his grip.

There was no slow build-up. My next release built fast, gathering in my core. My thigh muscles clenched. My pussy tightened. A shiver skated down my spine.

And then the orgasm hit.

It seemed to crackle through my bloodstream, an electric outburst of pure bliss that sent me soaring with a choked scream. I felt my pussy clamp down on his cock; felt my inner muscles tremble and spasm. Dax slammed into me one last time as jets of come splashed my inner walls.

Gasping for breath, I sagged, depleted of all energy. I had literally nothing in me.

The hand between my shoulder blades slid up to burrow in my hair as Dax curled over me and pressed a kiss to my neck. He stayed there like that, panting and shuddering. “Feel less pissed now?”

“You know, actually, my mood has remarkably improved,” I replied, my breathing a little choppy. “But then, what with your being a grade A student of Duan Juan, that was kind of inevitable.”

His body shook above mine in silent laughter. “You say the most unusual shit when you’re sex-drunk.”

“I’m just giving credit where it’s due. I was only thinking earlier that your dick would easily win a cock beauty pageant.”

A full-on chuckle rumbled out of him.

“I give the best compliments, don’t I?”

“Yes, Addison, yes, you do.”



## Chapter Twenty-Five

“Are you going to be like this every year?”

I glanced up from the trolley of food that Dax had just wheeled into the kitchen. “Like what?” I asked him, tilting my head slightly.

Looking somewhat peeved, he replied, “Like a kid who’s on an IV of pure sugar.”

Uh, the truth? Yes. Yes, absolutely. Me plus Halloween equaled big-time regression.

Hence why I’d spent most of my day watching movies, carving pumpkins, making spooky-themed cookies, virtually touring a haunted house on my laptop, and even painting a ceramic skull like I routinely did with my sisters when younger.

I wasn’t used to celebrating Halloween alone. Dax was home, but he wasn’t keeping me company. He’d spent most of the day upstairs, leaving me to my own devices. Still, I’d enjoyed myself.

My level of excitement had kicked up a notch when the trick-or-treaters had finally started arriving—I loved seeing little ones in their costumes, all hyped up and smiley. More had showed than I’d initially expected, but fewer and fewer had appeared until eventually the numbers fizzled out even though the hour wasn’t late. But that was understandable since, being a Sunday, it was a school night.

“I did tell you I loved Halloween,” I reminded him.

“You failed to mention that you’d turn into someone I don’t know for the entire day.”

A snicker popped out of me. “What can I say? This holiday does funny things to me. And to my mom, actually. That’s just how it goes. Buckle up. This is your life now.”

He grumbled something beneath his breath, but I didn’t miss the spark of amusement in his eyes.

“Just think, Halloween will be over in a few hours.” I twisted my mouth as I contemplated whether to give him a heads-up that I was even worse at Christmas ...

Nah.

“And thank God for that,” he muttered.

With a haughty look, I gestured at my Wednesday Addams outfit. “You’re just jealous because you *so* want one of these costumes.”

“Yes,” he said, his voice dry as the desert, “It’s been on my birthday list for decades.”

I felt my lips split into a smile. “Ooh, sarcasm suits you. I want to see more of this. You totally work it.”

Seemingly fighting an eye roll, he heaved a good-natured sigh.

He’d been gifting me with similar sighs ever since I shook up our villa’s décor with my Halloween decorations a few nights ago. The poor guy seemed to have expected me to merely hang up the occasional garland and maybe set out a few props. He hadn’t been prepared for the fake cobwebs, strings of pumpkin lights, hanging ghosts, plentiful amount of votive candles, or the plastic spiders I’d attached to the windows.

The singing cauldron hadn’t gone down well with him either. Or the fake cat skeletons. Or the spooky lanterns.

And when he’d walked outside the next morning to find several pumpkins, tombstones, and dismembered body parts in the front yard, he’d done a double-take.

I’d offered to take some, if not all, of the decorations down—both inside and outside. But he had shaken his head and said, “*I can handle them for three days.*”

He’d commented no more about the decorations. Except for the cauldron, which he’d threatened to trash if I didn’t permanently switch it off because he was “done” listening to a creepy voice repeatedly sing about a wicked

witch being dead. I'd called him a whiner but had turned it off nevertheless.

"Let's eat before our food gets cold." He pulled the stainless steel covers off our plates, filling the air with the scents of hot meat, tomatoes, and garlic.

Fairly salivating, I dragged the yummy smells into my lungs. "I'm starving."

"I don't know how you could possibly be hungry when you've been stuffing candy down your throat practically all day."

"Candy isn't filling." I grabbed my glass of wine from the counter. "You don't need to put my plate on the table, I'm going to eat in the living room tonight."

His brow creased slightly. "Why?"

"Because that's where the TV is."

"And?"

"And I've reached my it's-horror-movie-time portion of the evening."

Another self-suffering sigh. "Right."

Even as I knew he'd turn the offer down, I suggested, "You should join me. Take a peek into my world. See how the TV can be used for more than merely watching live sports."

Exasperation tinged with humor once more flickered in his gaze.

"Come on, it won't be the worst thing ever. Or do you have a hate-on for scary flicks?"

He shrugged. "I don't mind them. Though I've yet to watch one that is actually scary."

Feeling my lips curve, I latched onto his wrist without thought. "Oh, my friend, some do exist, I swear. Allow me to educate you."

Dax glanced down at where I'd wrapped my fingers around his wrist. Feeling awkward, I was about to release him.

But then he twisted his hand, joined our palms, and tugged me closer. “What’s my incentive?” he asked, gently bumping the tip of his nose against mine.

I double-blinked at his unexpected move, my belly going all aflutter. “Uh, what?”

He loosely fisted the end of one of my braids. “I’m going to need an incentive,” he said, adopting his bedroom voice, conveying what the nature of the enticement would need to be.

My hormones perking right up, I said, “Fine, I’ll ... um, I’ll ride you on the sofa when the movies are over.”

His gaze narrowed. “Movies plural?”

“Well, of course. I mean, it’s Halloween.”

“Funnily enough, I’d noticed,” he deadpanned.

Snorting, I rolled my eyes, not quite managing to bite back a smile. “Are you going to join me or not?”

Letting out a long hum, he idly curled my braid around his fist. “All right.”

I felt my lips part. “You will? Really? I thought you’d say no.”

“You only asked because you thought I’d decline?”

“No, I asked on the off-chance that—for once—you’d do your civic duty as my husband and watch TV with me.”

His mouth tipped up. “My civic duty?”

“Yes. You’ve neglected it thus far. You should really correct the oversight.”

He released my hair. “Hmm, then let’s wheel the trolley into the living room so I can get started on that.”

“Boom,” I said, delighted. “I’ll carry our glasses.”

I thought he’d sit apart from me, but he settled at my side on the sofa—our plates balanced on the cushions we placed on our laps. “Have you seen *The Conjuring 2*?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Prepare to be creeped the fuck out.” Using the remote control, I threw the movie on and then swiftly dug into my food.

We didn’t say much as we ate, both mostly focused on the movie. The combination of creepy music, jump scares, the ghost’s grating voice, and the weird-ass nun had tension gathering in my muscles.

Once I’d finished my meal, I put the plate on the coffee table in front of me and took a sip of my wine.

“What is it about this movie that scares you?” asked Dax, the confused note in his tone saying he simply didn’t get it.

I threw him a skeptical look. “I’ll bet my life your heartrate has gone up a time or two—no, don’t deny it; I won’t believe you.”

I set down my glass and turned my attention back to the rather intense scene playing out on the TV. I jumped *ever* so slightly at one part, and the idiot beside me started chuckling.

“Up yours,” I snarked, gently shoving his arm.

Smirking, he caught my offending hand and pulled, making my body slide to the side and fall against his, my head hitting his shoulder. “There. Stay.”

Utterly taken aback, I went motionless. My pulse, on the other hand, began skipping like crazy. Especially when he kept possession of my hand.

“The nun can’t get you now,” he mocked.

*Asshole.* Forcing my muscles to unclench, I sniffed. “Valak could totally take you.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“Not sure if you’re paying attention, but it’s a demon. We’d be outclassed and outmatched.”

A pause. “We?”

I frowned. “I wouldn’t let you battle it alone. We have each other’s back at all times, remember?”

A long moment of silence passed, and then he gave my hand a little squeeze. “Yeah,” he replied, his tone slightly deeper. “Yeah, I remember.”



Exiting my office building two days later, I shoved my purse strap a little further up my shoulder. I usually left work at five o’ clock on the dot—or as near to it as possible. Today, however, I’d been delayed a full twenty minutes due to a micromanaging client dragging out a phone call so they could nitpick and question my decisions.

Funsies.

I’d dealt with such clients before. While they wanted someone else to take over, they struggled with not managing every aspect. That dissatisfaction often translated into them finding faults and changing their mind on this or that to regain a sense of control.

Like those before him, this particular client had eventually conceded that all was going well. He’d basically just wanted to have his say—and he’d wasted my time in the process. Lovely.

Happy to finally be heading home, I started to cross the lot as I strode toward my car. I was halfway there when I noticed Grayden hovering close to it. *Crap.*

I hadn’t seen him since the evening he’d turned up at my home to advocate for Felicity and ask Dax to show her mercy. Right now, he didn’t look good. He was pale and sported dark circles under his eyes. Deep lines were carved into his face. His hair was unkempt and a little frizzy, not gelled down as usual.

I’d heard that one of his friends had passed away unexpectedly during the weekend, so that would account for

his appearance. It didn't explain why he was here, though. Unless ... he wanted to talk to somebody else who'd lost someone close to them.

Inwardly, I sighed. Did it make me cruel that I wished he'd approached another person, such as one of his fellow grieving friends? Probably. But I didn't appreciate that he thought he had the right to *pop* in and out of my life whenever he pleased. He'd been doing it since the day we'd first broken up—sometimes in person, sometimes via phone or email.

I'd thought it would stop once I married Dax. When Grayden recently dropped off my radar, it had seemed as though I was right to think so. But the current situation would suggest otherwise.

As I neared him, my train of thought faltered. Because when I got a good look at his expression, I saw that it wasn't one of despair and devastation; wasn't one of loss.

The dude was pissed.

Clutching the handles of my satchel, I slowed to a stop a few feet away from him. "What are you doing here?"

His posture stiff and his neck corded, Grayden fisted his hands. "A pact, Addie?" he practically spat. "You married Dax because of a *pact*?"

Everything in me stilled in shock. *What the hell?* There was no way he could have found out—none of the people in my circle would ever have blabbed the news to anyone, and I didn't believe that any from Dax's circle would have done so either.

And yet, somehow Grayden knew.

Going for clueless, I frowned and asked, "Whatever gave you that idea?"

He hurled a look of utter exasperation at me. "Don't bother playing dumb. I overheard Jagger and Maverick talking about it."

*Shit.*

“I couldn’t understand why you’d marry Dax, it made no sense. But you know what?” Grayden leaned toward me, his eyes diamond hard. “Neither does this. Unless the pact is legally binding, which I very much doubt, you didn’t need to go through with it.”

I sighed. “Grayden—”

“Look, I know how much you want marriage and kids. But this is *far* from an answer to your problems. Jesus Christ, Addie, you’ve committed to a guy who feels nothing for you.”

A streak of pain lanced my windpipe. Indigestion. It was just indigestion.

“Trust me, there’s nothing easy about being tied to someone you don’t love and who doesn’t love you. I know that, because it’s where I am now in life.”

I felt my frown deepen. “You love Felicity—”

“I care about her, but I don’t love her the way I once did—and vice versa. We’re not together for the right reasons anymore.”

“The difference is ... you didn’t marry her thinking that would ever be the case. You thought you’d get a happily ever after with her. I knew what I was walking into with Dax.”

“And it boggles my mind that you still did it,” he fairly bit out.

I bristled. “Not my issue. There’s no need for it to be yours. What I do doesn’t concern you.” I was getting damn tired of trying to get that message across to him.

“It shouldn’t. And I wish that it didn’t. But it does.” Torment swirled in his gaze. “I don’t want this for you. I want you to have what I don’t. It goddamn hurts to see that you gave up on finding something meaningful and settled for an arranged marriage.”

“So you thought you’d track me down and tell me to leave Dax?”

Grayden grimaced. “I’m not here to push you to divorce him. I’d be the biggest fucking hypocrite in the world



if I urged you to walk away from a weak relationship—I sure as shit haven't left mine. But I would have if it wasn't for my daughters, Addie. So before you go having babies with Dax, think real hard about whether you want to trap yourself in an empty marriage that way." He stalked off, marching straight to his vehicle.

With a silent curse, I hopped into my own. Plonking my purse and satchel on the passenger seat, I let a long breath slip out of me. It hadn't occurred to me that anyone would hear about the pact—let alone Grayden, of all people.

He *probably* wouldn't spread the news to others. I honestly couldn't be sure. We weren't exactly chums these days.

I reversed out of the parking space just as he sped out of the lot. Would I care if he did some gossiping? Yes and no. While neither Dax nor I required the approval of others, I'd rather he wasn't the subject of gossip all over again. Christ knew he'd had enough of that growing up.

I also didn't want to deal with people constantly asking if it was true and offering their opinion on it. Moreover, I didn't want some deeming our marriage emotionally invalid due to it not being a love match.

Another thing I *definitely* didn't want was for women who coveted him to feel they didn't need to respect the vows that he and I had made to each other. But if they felt the marriage wasn't "real," they might. That could lead to them thinking they were free to make moves on him.

Not that I believed he'd snap up any of those offers. I just didn't want them being thrown at him in the first place. I doubted any wife would, arranged marriage or not.

Driving home, I chewed on all Grayden said. I had to admit that, if the situation were reversed, I might have had the same thoughts he did. I wouldn't have sought him out to express them, but I probably would have felt sad that he was heading down the same sad road I had. Except ... that wasn't really the case because, as I'd tried explaining to him, our situations were entirely different.

He'd married for love. I hadn't.

I still didn't harbor any regrets about honoring the pact. If that ever changed and I felt the urge to dissolve the marriage, that was what I would do—children or no children. But then ... it was easy for me to say that now, wasn't it? Really, it would be hard to break up a family that way.

I wasn't sure if it was always best for children to live with both parents if it meant they grew up in a negative environment, but I supposed it depended on the situation. There might not be a right or wrong answer, whatever the case.

The truth was that I wouldn't really know exactly what I'd do in such a scenario unless I came to that bridge. All I could do was hope I never did.

When I finally arrived home, I found Dax in the pool. From the patio doorway, I watched him cover the length of the pool with strong, confident laps, his muscles tautening and rippling. He was so at home in the water he was like a damn fish.

I padded outside, careful not to stand in any of the wet footprints—the last thing I wanted was to go ass over tit. Spotting me, he slowed to a smooth stop. I flashed him a smile. “Hey, Nemo. How's the water?”

Standing upright, he swiped a hand down his wet face and narrowed his eyes on me. “What's wrong?”

Ugh. He read me far too well. “A little something went down that I figured you'd want to know about. It's nothing terrible. Just irritating.”

Raising an expectant brow, he came toward me.

I poked the inside of my mouth with my tongue. “I bumped into Grayden.”

Dax's eyelids lowered slightly. “Bumped into him?”

I felt my nose wrinkle as I jiggled my head a little. “Well, it was more that he was waiting near my car when I left work.”

His jaw hardened. “What did he say?”

“He made it clear that he found out about our pact and wanted to express his thoughts on it.” I gave a wan smile. “Apparently, he overheard Jag and Maverick talking about it.”

“Let me guess,” began Dax, the words smooth as butter but carrying an undercurrent of something dark, “Grayden felt compelled to convince you to leave me.”

“No, he basically just wanted to communicate that he feels I made a mistake and he worries that my future might one day be his present circumstance.”

“Which means what?”

“He isn’t with Felicity for the right reason; he’d leave their relationship if it wasn’t for their daughters. He feels there’s a strong chance I’ll one day want to exit this marriage but will feel trapped in it by a wish to ensure my children aren’t raised in a broken home.”

Dax pinned me with a probing look. “And what is your view on that?”

“He’s not seeing that the two situations aren’t the same. He and Felicity married for love, later fell *out* of love, and then wanted a divorce. That can’t happen to you and me, because we married for different reasons and we’re not relying on a sweet, fluffy emotion to keep us together. I’m not saying we might not ever find ourselves unhappy in this marriage—no one knows what the future holds—just that it isn’t the same.”

“So he didn’t pressure you to divorce me, but he put an idea in your head that might make you consider it,” Dax mused, the words again smooth but dangerous.

I pulled a face. “I don’t think that was his intention. He’s mad at me for deliberately putting myself in a situation that *he* resents being stuck in. Only, as I said a second ago, my situation *isn’t* like his—he just doesn’t see that.”

“Hmm,” Dax said, unconvinced. He planted his hands on the side of the pool and easily clambered out. “Did he say anything else?”

Watching the rivulets of water drip down his delicious body as he crossed to me, I cleared my throat. “No. That was it. The whole thing was over with fast, and it was very low-key in terms of drama. He probably wouldn’t have approached me at all if he wasn’t a mess over other things. I only mentioned it because I knew you’d want to know.”

Dax’s nostrils flared. “You’re going to ask me to let this be because you feel bad for him,” he correctly guessed.

I nibbled on my lower lip. “He’s grieving the loss of his friend. People aren’t always thinking straight when they’re grieving. We know that well, don’t we?”

Dax averted his gaze, a muscle in his cheek flexing.

“Look, if he’d caused a huge scene, it would be different. But he didn’t yell, didn’t touch me, didn’t toss out insults, didn’t talk smack about you, didn’t encourage me to sign divorce papers. He just expressed a very misguided opinion and then left.”

Finally, Dax’s gaze returned to mine, darkly intense. “There’s no need for him to *have* a fucking opinion on this—he has no relevance to you, me, or our marriage. Where he gets off on the idea that he’s so important his thoughts need to be communicated to you, I have no clue.”

I nodded. “He had no right or reason to do or say what he did, I know. But he’s in pain, it’s—”

“Not my concern,” Dax finished, a rough note to his tone. “*You’re* my concern, Addison. And I don’t like that he was lurking outside your place of work. He shouldn’t have cornered you that way; shouldn’t have set out to get you alone. That shit is not acceptable.”

“No, it isn’t. But he likely wouldn’t have done that if I hadn’t blocked his number.”

“I wouldn’t have been okay with him contacting you no matter how he did it—via phone, via email, via fucking pigeon post. He’s supposed to leave you alone. He promised you no contact, and he isn’t delivering on that promise. Far from it.”

I exhaled heavily. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

“Would you?” he challenged. “Would you ignore that one of my exes—or anyone, for that matter—approached me the way he did you?”

“No,” I admitted on a mumble. “No, I’d want to rip them a new one. I *would* rip them a new one.”

“Then you should get it. You only feel sympathy for him because you still have feelings for him, but that’s not—”

“What?” I burst out, my head flinching. “Whoa, backup. You’re way off base there.” I took a step closer to him, holding his gaze. “Dax, I swear to you, I feel nothing for him. Nothing.”

His eyes searched mine, broody and piercing. “Then why care how I handle this?”

I licked my lips, feeling my shoulders droop. “Because I said and did things I’m not proud of when I was grieving. I got a little lost. I was mad at everyone. At life. At the universe.”

I’d steadily become someone that I didn’t like. If it hadn’t been for the support of my friends and family, I might have continued to grow bitter and resentful. “People were more understanding than I deserved. They made allowances and gave me leeway and were so incredibly patient with me.

“I don’t know if you can relate to any of that. I don’t know how it was for you when you lost Gracie. But there has to have been at least *one* occasion when you fucked up but were fortunate enough to have someone overlook it when you needed them to.”

The anger in his eyes wavered, faltering in its intensity. “You really think I could overlook what Grayden did?”

“No. But maybe you could just settle for verbally warning him not to do it again?” I suggested. Moments of agonizing silence ticked by as Dax stared down at me, so many thoughts and emotions working behind his eyes.

“One,” he finally bit out. “I’ll give him one warning. But if anything like this happens again, I won’t settle for handling it with words, Addison. I will deal with it how I fucking please.”

I gave a slow nod. “Understood. Thank you for—”

“Don’t thank me. Don’t think I feel one bit sorry for him. I don’t care what’s happening in his life. Like I said before, he’s not my concern. *You* are.”

“Just as you’re my concern,” I assured him. “So I get it. I’m not thanking you for *his* sake. I’m thanking you because I appreciate that you put my feelings first.”

“Where he’s concerned, I won’t do it again. I won’t allow him to flit in and out of the picture, like what you want and need doesn’t matter. Like you being married to *me* doesn’t matter.” Dax’s eyes flared with intensity. “It fucking matters. It’s going to matter every day for the rest of your life, because I’m always going to be part of it. He needs to understand that. And I will get that through his head one way or the other. What measures I need to take to ensure that will all be down to him.” Dax then strode away.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Sipping wine in the living room of my previous home at Oakengrove one mid-November evening, I watched with an inner smile as my sisters squabbled. We made an effort to get together for a girls' night at least one weekend a month. Sometimes we spent it either here, my place, or Harri's house. Other times we hit the movies, a bar, or a restaurant. Always they'd end up bickering over something.

Curled up in the corner of the sofa, Alicia swiped out her arm. "No way. I'm not doing it."

Harri pouted from the other end of the long couch. "Oh, come on, live a little."

Alicia's lips flattened. "See, this is why I don't like playing truth or dare with you when you're shitfaced—you always come up with the most immature dares."

"I'm not shitfaced. *You* are."

"Nu-uh. I'm just a little tipsy."

There was nothing at all delicate about the snort that popped out of me. "You passed the tipsy line. We *all* did." Hence why my head felt all light and warm and fuzzy.

Alicia let out a prim sniff. "Well, I'm not doing the dare—and that's final."

I tucked my legs under me on the plush armchair. "Then, as I see it, there's only one solution to your problem. If you don't want to go through with the dare, you'll just have to answer Harri's question and fess up to why you left Dario."

Alicia glowered. "I don't wanna."

Our baby sister rolled her eyes. "You're going to have to tell us at some point. Why not do it now?"

"I don't wanna," Alicia repeated.

Harri twisted her mouth, briefly averting her gaze. "Okay, I wasn't sure whether to tell you this or not, but"—she

took a long breath—“hetextedmeyesterday.”

Alicia’s spine snapped straight. “*What?*”

I winced at the shrill note to her tone. Harri had called me last night to tell me about the text, unsure what to do. We’d both agreed it was best that our sister be informed of it, just as we’d agreed we would do what it took to ensure that Alicia didn’t give him the reaction he wanted—even if it meant us both sitting on her.

“I’m guessing he got my cell number from my business website,” Harri added. “It was only a short text. He insisted I tell you to contact him; that he had things to say you needed to hear.”

“That son of a bitch.” Her face hard, Alicia set her glass down on the table with a trembling hand.

“I didn’t reply to it, I—”

“Why didn’t you call me after he messaged you?” Alicia demanded, her eyes glittering with an anger I knew wasn’t directed at our sister but at Dario.

“I wanted to tell you in person so I could stop you from doing anything dumb like contacting him. Don’t you see? He knew you’d be mad he texted me; he’s trying to goad you into finally acknowledging his existence.”

“Of course I see he’s trying to manipulate me! But you still should have told me right away.”

Harri inched up her chin. “*You* wouldn’t have told *me* right away. You’d have done exactly as I did.”

“So?”

Snickering, I cut in, “So don’t be a hypocrite. Get off Harri’s case—she made the best call and you know it. No, don’t object unless you can honestly say you’d have reacted differently in her shoes.”

Alicia clamped her mouth shut and crossed her arms over her chest.



“It’s not Harri you’re really mad at anyway. It’s Dario.” Cocking my head, I gave her a soft smile. “Why don’t you want to spill why you left him?”

Alicia looked down at her lap. “It’s not my idea of fun.”

“Why not?” I gently pushed.

“Because I’m furious at myself.” She bit the inside of her cheek. “Maybe even a little ashamed.”

I felt my brows snap together. “Ashamed? Why?”

“Yeah, what possible reason could you have to feel that way?” asked Harri, frowning.

Alicia let out an annoyed sigh. “I’m not a person who brooks bullshit. I don’t allow people to get away with the kind of stuff he pulled. I should have walked away long ago. Don’t get me wrong, if he’d been violent or cheated on me, I would have left him. But the things he did were so petty and minor and dumb they were easy to write off. I got into a pattern of letting it all fly over my head—even the way he tried making me distance myself from my own family.”

“It’s not like you let him,” Harri soothed.

“But I tolerated it.” Alicia looked at me, her eyes glinting with self-condemnation. “Your hubby wasn’t exactly instantly welcomed into our family, and Dad has been a total asshole toward him at times. But at no point has Dax ever tried to drive a wedge between you and us.”

“Dax isn’t a guy who requires approval, though,” I pointed out. “Dario’s different.”

Alicia grunted. “He got all upset and sulky because none of our family likes him. And even though you all tried getting to know him better to see if you could change that, he didn’t make that same effort. He just *expected* your approval. And when he wasn’t instantly adored, he decided none of you were worth his time.”

I leaned forward, careful not to spill my wine. “He tried poisoning your mind against us?”

“No, it was more a case of him playing the victim. Whenever I told him I was going to Redwater, he’d say dramatic crap like, ‘How can you want to be around people who hate me?’ or ‘If you loved me, you’d be on my side.’ I’d explain there were no sides, but he wouldn’t listen.”

Harri’s nose wrinkled. “Do you think he actually believed any of that, or were they just attempts at emotional blackmail?”

“The latter for sure,” Alicia replied, unfolding her arms and letting them slump to her lap. “But they didn’t work on me, so then he’d try other things. He’d create a problem either the day before my flight to Redwater, or a few days before. He’d declare he was ill, or pretend he was in pain and needed to go to the hospital. He even faked a heart attack once.”

“Jesus,” I breathed.

Sighing again, she rubbed at her forehead. “He wasn’t like that for the first year; he was so different in so many ways. Bit by bit, his asshole ways started to leak through. But it was petty rather than cruel, you know? You can roll your eyes at ‘petty’ and get on with your day, because it’s mostly just annoying.”

I nodded. “You can get used to it, too. So used to it that it even feels normal.”

“Yeah,” agreed Alicia. “To be honest, though, if I wasn’t so focused on building a following for the yoga channel, I probably would have walked away a lot sooner.”

Harri tilted her head. “What made you finally pack your bags?”

Alicia pulled her legs out from under her. “Do you guys remember I got contacted by that Hollywood agent who wanted me to be a body-double in a particular movie for an actress she represents?”

The memory made my lips kick up. “How can I forget?” I’d been super delighted for Alicia when she’d told me.

“He didn’t like it. Didn’t like that such attention came my way.” Alicia scratched her shoulder. “He considers himself the main star of the yoga channel. When people would recognize us and come over for photos, he lapped that shit up. He was truly in his element.”

“And he couldn’t stand the idea that you’d do something big without him,” Harri surmised.

“Basically, yes.” Alicia dropped her hands to her lap again. “Dario would talk as if she’d asked me to star in goddamn porn. She didn’t even want me to be naked, for Christ’s sake—all I had to do was remove my pants and tee, as if I was in the process of getting undressed. The director just wanted close-up shots of my stomach and legs.”

“I’m not surprised,” I told her. “You’re not only seriously toned, your skin is amazing.”

Harri nodded hard. “I can’t tell you how much I envy you that.”

Alicia’s amused snort was weak. “He was pissed that I agreed to do the scene. He called me insensitive for not caring that he didn’t want other men ogling his woman.”

“But ... you flash your stomach and legs when doing yoga videos,” said Harri, voicing my own thought.

Alicia pointed at her. “Exactly. And I can tell you right now that if an agent had made the same offer to him, he’d have snapped it up. Anyway, I ignored his whining and went ahead with the filming—it was done and dusted within a day. When I got back to the condo, it was to find him positively smashed ... as were a lot of my belongings, because he’d trashed the bedroom.”

I felt my lips part, anger crackling in my gut. “He’s such a freaking shit stain.”

“I know, right?” Alicia shook her head, her mouth tight. “We had a huge row. He called me everything from a stuck-up bitch to a traitorous whore. Even threw a plant at me. That was it. I was done.”

Harri spat a curse. “Did he try to stop you from leaving?”

“Nope.” Alicia gave a humorless smile. “He laughed. Said I’d be back when I missed the fame, because I was no one without him.”

Harri’s nostrils flared. “What a narcissistic motherfucker.”

*My thoughts exactly.* “You made him feel outshined, Alicia, and he just couldn’t hack it. He should have been proud of you. Pleased for you. Instead, he felt threatened, and he made you pay for that.” *The dick.* “Why does he keep calling you?”

“According to the voicemails he left, he thinks we should ‘try again.’ Claims he regrets that we ‘gave up on us.’”

Harri’s face scrunched up. “Seriously? Why would he think you’d go back to him? And why would he want you to?”

“He’s not interested in me, he’s interested in protecting his channel,” Alicia explained. “Our audience were couples, not single people.”

“So those viewers are now subscribing to channels that feature other couples practicing yoga,” I realized.

“Yup. He tried fixing the problem by including his ‘new girlfriend’ on his videos.” Alicia huffed. “That backfired. Numerous people commented on what an ass he is for moving on so fast.”

“It *does* make him an ass,” Harri asserted, to which I gave a curt nod.

“He claimed in his voicemails that she’s really just a friend. One I mysteriously never met in all the time we were together.” Alicia rolled her eyes. “Like I’d buy that.”

“He must hate that your own channel is doing so well,” I wagered with a smug glee.

“He swears he’s proud of me, but I don’t believe that. I don’t believe a single word he says. But he doesn’t seem to

think I'm well-aware of his real motivation for calling me, so he just keeps doing it."

Harri leaned toward her. "What can I do?"

"Nothing except ignore him," replied Alicia. "It's honestly the best way to deal with this. Any sort of interaction would only encourage him."

She was right, but it would be so much more satisfying to make him pay somehow. I bit my lip. "If you told Dad—"

"He'd overreact," Alicia finished. "That's what he does. You know his style. I don't want Dario to have his career ruined or his dark secrets exposed to the world. He's not evil, he's just a trivial prick at times." She planted her palm over her forehead. "I want to slap myself for putting up with his crap for so long."

I gave her a hard look. "You have no reason to feel any shame. There's a difference between letting someone walk all over you, and letting small stuff fly over your head while trying to find a balance in a relationship. You didn't allow him to isolate you from your family. You didn't tolerate the emotional blackmail. You didn't let him control your decisions. You asked him to stop his behavior, and you gave him chances to do that. When he took it too far, you left."

Alicia rubbed at her nape. "I kept thinking he'd go back to the way he'd been during the first year we were together. That we were just going through a 'bad patch.' But that patch just stretched on and on, until I realized things weren't going to get better."

"There's no reason to be mad at yourself for not wanting to give up on him or the relationship until you felt positive there was nothing left of it," Harri told her.

I dipped my chin, in full agreement. "You're being ridiculously hard on yourself. If it was me or Harri, you'd say the exact same thing."

Alicia only looked down at her hands and began fiddling with her fingers.

Harri growled. “I’m totally gonna set Dario on fire if I see him again.”

Alicia barked a surprised laugh. “He’s not worth the jail time.”

“But you are.” Harri tossed back the last of her wine. “He hurt you. He should suffer for all eternity.”

“He will, because he’ll mess up his life in no time at all,” said Alicia.

“But I want a hand in it.”

Hearing my phone beep, I carefully bent down and fished it out of the purse I’d set on the floor, thankful I managed not to spill my wine. I looked down at the screen. *Dax*. My pulse did a crazy little skip.

He’d typed: *You need to do something about this cat.*

Checking out the photo he’d attached of a dead bird lying on the floor near his patio chair, I couldn’t help but wince. I replied: *She’s just letting you know she loves you. It’s a gift.*

Three dots danced on the screen for a few seconds. *It’s a dead animal.*

*A gift*, I repeated.

*Yeah, if you’re a psychopath.*

My lips twitching, I placed my phone on the armrest. This had become a thing over the past ten days or so. He occasionally texted me about this or that. With anyone else, it wouldn’t mean anything. But Dax wasn’t much of a texter, and he generally didn’t reach out to people—especially not about casual matters.

He also wasn’t a person who sought company. Yet, he’d taken to watching TV with me sometimes—especially true-crime stuff. He also invited me to join him in the pool on occasion, or to accompany him when he paid short visits to his siblings or parents.

In other words, he'd been doing some out-of-character things lately.

Obviously, I was pleased that the moat between us seemed to have narrowed. What *didn't* please me were my responses. My pulse jumped whenever I received a text from him. My stomach went all fluttery when he joined me on the sofa to watch TV. My chest went tight whenever he invited me to swim with him or check in on his family.

People weren't supposed to have such reactions to an attempt by a friend to reach out to or spend time with them, were they? They should maybe smile or feel light or even get excited. More specifically, they should feel touched in a *platonic* way. That wasn't quite the case with me. And I'd come to realize two things.

One, I was beginning to care for Dax as far more than simply a friend.

Two, I could potentially fall for this man.

I'd known I might grow to care about him *one day in the future*. That could happen to two people who spent years of their life in the same house, raising children and building good memories. But there were levels of "caring," weren't there?

There was the kind of love you felt for a friend, relative, or someone you held in high regard—unromantic, warm, jovial, and long-lasting. It was all intertwined with fondness and familiarity.

Then there was a whole different kind of love. One you usually felt for your significant other. It ran deeper and could feel crucial to a person's existence. It was passionate, profound, often selfless, and could easily become obsessive.

I hadn't anticipated that I might experience the latter with Dax. As a teenager, I'd fallen for people easily. Not Dax, though. With him, I hadn't felt in danger of toppling into the love pit. As such, I hadn't expected it to happen now either.

But now that I thought about it, I realized that back then—knowing what we had could only be temporary—I'd purposely kept a distance from him in an act of self-

preservation. This time round, I hadn't. And it scared me that I could end up in a situation where I loved someone who didn't return that love.

Being bound to a man who only "valued" me, a man to whom I'd always be second choice, would suck the most mega balls in history. But I could be worrying for nothing, couldn't I? There was a possibility that I wouldn't grow to feel that deeply for him. Especially when I generally never fell for emotionally unavailable men—Dax was the epitome of that.

"Major Addie, this is Ground Control."

I snapped to attention at Alicia's words and blinked twice. It was only then I realized she was standing right in front of me. "Sorry, what?"

She gestured at the bottle of wine she held. "Want a top up?"

I lifted my glass. "Oh, absolutely."

Our conversations thereafter were lighter and playful. We went through at least another bottle of wine before we finally decided to call it a night. As promised, I texted Dax to let him know I was ready to go home—he'd insisted I not walk back to the villa.

He arrived mere minutes later, gracefully stalking into the room looking more appealing than anyone had a right to.

Slipping on my shoes, I looked up at the personification of raw sex appeal, hoping I wasn't wearing a dreamy expression—my hormones certainly were. "You really didn't have to come all this way."

"It's a five-minute drive, if that," he reminded me. "Do you think you can stand without help?"

"Of course." Except ... my effort to push out of the chair didn't work too well.

With a sigh, he snagged my hand and helped me rise to my feet. "Let's go."

After I'd exchanged goodbyes, hugs, and cheek-kisses with my sisters, I let him guide me to the car with a hand



cupping my elbow to keep me steady. Inside the vehicle, I clicked on my belt, plopped my purse on my lap, and closed my eyes. Damn, my head was *swimming*.

Sliding into the driver's seat, he said, "Don't pass out."

"But it could be fun."

"I can't fuck you if you're unconscious, and I want to know what drunk sex with you is like."

Even as my body fired up, I opened one eye to shoot him a cautioning glance. "I'm not gonna let you do freaky stuff to me, no matter how interesting it might sound. Come near me with, like, a unicorn dildo or an anal hook probe and we're gonna have problems." I didn't judge those who used them—in fact, I felt such people should be praised for having the guts to go there—but, no, those kind of toys weren't for me. I wasn't quite that adventurous.

His brow creasing, he switched on the engine. "And how do you know such things are available?"

"I read, don't I?"

"Maybe I should be asking more questions about *what* you're reading." He pulled out onto the road. "So, you had a good night, I take it."

I smiled. "The best. I *might* have missed you. A teensy bit. Maybe. Or not."

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Did you get rid of the bird?"

"Yes. Though getting rid of the cat might be better."

I scowled, pointing at him. "Not happening, Mercier. No way, no how. Me and Gypsy are a package deal. If she goes, I go. Even though leaving you would break my pussy's heart and send my hormones into a state of full-on depression, it'd have to play out that way."

Another twitch of his lips. "We can't have that, can we?"

"No, so she stays. Deal?"

A few fine lines creased his forehead. “I didn’t realize we were negotiating anything.”

“I’m saying I’ll stay so long as Gypsy can.” Obviously. “Keep up.”

He shot me a sideways glance. “You’re not going anywhere, psycho cat or no psycho cat.”

“Excuse me, she’s not a psycho.”

“She killed a baby bird.”

I gasped, putting a hand to my chest. “It was a baby?”

“Yes. Somewhere out there its mother is probably chirping and shrieking and calling out for its—”

“Stop, stop,” I pled with a groan.

He didn’t bother stifling a smile.

“You’re an ass.”

“But I don’t snatch chicks out of their nests and kill them, so there’s that.” Pretty soon, he pulled into our driveway. Switching off the engine, he slid me a brief look and snapped off his seatbelt. “Wait there.” He then exited the vehicle.

Ordinarily, I would have had my door open by the time he reached it, but my seatbelt was being stubborn tonight. I peered up at him. “I don’t think your car wants me to leave.”

He reached in with a sigh, unclipped my belt, and then helped me hop out. He frowned down at my feet. “Why did you take off your shoes?”

I shrugged. “Felt like it.”

Another sigh.

Clutching my purse to my chest with one hand, I plucked my shoes out of the car with the other. “You sigh at me, like, *a lot*.”

“You regularly give me reasons to.” He took my shoes from me. “Come on.” He shut the door, wound an arm tight around my waist, and lifted me a few inches off the ground.

Surprised, I looped one arm around his neck, my free arm hugging my purse. He walked to the front door, my weight not seeming to affect him in any way. “Whoa, strong like bull, huh?”

He set me down. “You barely weigh anything.”

Uh, *so* not true.

Still holding my shoes with one hand, he unlocked the door and then shoved it wide open. Once more, he heaved me off the ground effortlessly.

As he entered the villa, I smiled. “Aw, you’re finally carrying me over the threshold. It’s a little late for that, really, but better late than never.”

Casting me a distinctly unimpressed look, he carefully lowered me again and then closed the door behind us. “Do you think you can manage to walk up the stairs without falling flat on your face?”

“Absolutely.” I hooked my purse over my shoulder and held up my hands. “I got this. Watch.” I did in fact manage it, though there was some staggering and swaying, so I was thankful for the steadying palm he kept plastered to my lower back.

That same palm guided me into our bedroom. It also took part in undressing me. And stroking me. And finger-fucking me. And gripping my ass tight while he railed me with his cock, pretty much fucking me into the mattress.

Afterwards, we lay on our backs on the bed, struggling to catch our breath.

My eyes closed, I said, “Okay, so I did miss you.”

I felt him go still, but the tension swiftly leached out of his muscles. “Good.” The word was spoken so low that, honestly, I wasn’t sure it was spoken at all.

I opened my eyes, about to ask him if he’d just said something, but his mouth then latched onto mine as he kissed me slow and deep ... and I completely forgot what I was going to say.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

I woke the next morning to a yucky taste in my mouth, a pounding pain in my head, and a horrid churning sensation in my stomach. Hello, hangover.

I swallowed around a dry throat, the sound audible. God, I felt like complete shit. With cherries on top and everything. I would have rolled onto my side and curled up in a tight ball if I didn't worry I might hurl.

At least I had no plans or commitments for the day. I could die in peace.

As the final sleep motes left my mind, clearing it, I became aware of something. Something that made my brow weakly knit in confusion.

A warm, heavy weight was resting on my stomach.

Wary of the light, I lifted my eyelids only slightly and gave my eyes a few seconds to adjust. I then very slowly turned my head, ignoring that it made the ache in my skull sharpen, and blinked hard to clear my blurry vision. And there was Dax. He lay flat on his stomach, sound asleep, one arm tossed over my front.

My pulse spiked. Well, this was different. A singular occurrence, in fact.

I would have been embarrassed if it was a case where I'd scooted over to him, but I wasn't on his side of the mattress. He wasn't on *my* side either. We'd seemingly edged closer to each other and met somewhere in the middle during sleep.

My chest went tight and warm, touched that he'd left his "spot."

My brain, however, insisted that this would be an anomaly and not to read shit into it.

Personally, I felt it *would* be dumb to let myself imagine that it meant anything. But I could hope, couldn't I?

The trouble was ... I'd done a lot of hoping over the years when it came to relationships. Clinging to faith had never paid off before.

Ugh, I was too hungover to mentally juggle all this.

Switching my gaze to the ceiling, I pressed my fingertips hard against my pulsing temples. I needed painkillers *pronto*.

My memories of the previous night were a little fuzzy in places, but I didn't seem to have huge gaps in my—

I stilled as a particular memory hit me. Oh God, I told him I'd missed him.

*You dumb heifer.*

Slapping a hand over my eyes, I groaned in total mortification.

Dax stirred beside me at the sound, pulling in a breath. "Morning," he greeted, his voice all thick and rumbly from sleep.

"I hate wine," I whispered, not in the *least* bit impressed when I sensed his shoulders shake. Removing my hand from my face, I looked at him again, my gaze narrowing at the amused smile he wore. "Something funny?"

Ignoring my question, he raked his gaze over my face, not bothering to shrink his smile. "How do you feel?"

"Peachy."

His smile amped up a notch, taking on a superior quality. "You have no one to blame but yourself."

*This motherfucker.* "That was plain insensitive."

He gave a slight shrug. "Doesn't make me wrong." He eased onto his side, pulling back his arm. "Go shower. You smell like a winery."

"Flatterer." Given he'd be well-aware I was in no condition to indulge in shower sex, I had no doubt that I'd be showering alone this morning.

We didn't regularly shower together. When we did, it always went the same way: we each took care of washing our own bodies and hair, he sat back and watched while I finished since he was always done first, and then we'd fuck.

It was never planned. He just ... *appeared* in the stall sometimes—no prior warning, not even a hint that he might join me. I got the feeling he simply liked to keep me on my toes.

My movements a little clunky and uncoordinated, I threw back the covers, edged out of bed, and carefully stood—so damn thankful the room didn't spin. My footsteps dragging, I padded to the ensuite bathroom. Inside, there was a whole lot of fumbling and weaving as I did my business.

I winced when I got a good look at my reflection in the mirror. *Dear Lord*. It was galling to know that Dax had seen me like this.

My eyes were mere slits. My face was all puffy. Smudges of mascara were beneath my eyes and smeared across my cheeks. And my hair ... oh, my hair. I wouldn't be surprised to find baby birds in it.

*Shit, the baby bird!* He'd better have been kidding about Gypsy's most recent "gift."

Tugging open the door of the wall-mounted cabinet, I dug two painkillers out of a small bottle and quickly downed them. Silently praying my headache passed fast, I took a swift shower. As expected, he didn't join me.

Having wrapped a fluffy towel around myself. I padded back into the bedroom and—

I halted.

On my nightstand stood a tall glass of water and also a glass of what looked to be coconut water. My stupid heart squeezed, so easily touched by the little things he did. Which made me feel far too vulnerable; granted him too much power. Neither of which I could do anything about.

In between pulling on comfy clothes and brushing my wet hair, I took swigs of both drinks until each glass was

empty. Downstairs, I found Dax making coffee in the kitchen. The smell upset my queasy stomach. *Fuck wine.*

He looked at me, taking in my poor posture and no doubt haggard face, and his lips winged up. “You look more ill than you did when you were actually ill.”

I snarled. “I was about to thank you for these,” I began, tipping my chin at the glasses I held, “but now I’m not gonna.” He could go swivel.

His amusement not dimming, he drank from his mug. “Did you take painkillers?”

“Yes,” I pretty much grunted. “They haven’t kicked in yet.” Setting the glasses on the counter, I yanked open the dishwasher. “Stop smirking.”

“It’s not my fault you’re cute when you’re hungover and crabby.”

He didn’t say “cute” like it was a compliment. It was more of a patronizing statement. Like I was a bunny trying to squeeze through a small hole. *Dick.*

“Tell me Gypsy didn’t really kill a chick,” I pled.

“If I did, it would be a lie.”

I groaned and loaded the glasses into the dishwasher. “I’m just gonna pretend you’re full of shit.”

“All right, you do that.” He chugged down more coffee. “I’m going to take a shower. I ordered breakfast. It’ll be here soon. Try not to fall back asleep while I’m gone.”

I could give him no guarantees.

As usual, he showered and dressed in record time. Our food arrived shortly after he returned downstairs. Once we’d wheeled the trolley onto the patio, I slumped in my chair, my shoulders hunched. I learned he’d ordered me a full greasy breakfast, knowing it might help with the hangover.

I sniffed. “I’d thank you if you weren’t finding so much humor in my disposition.”

He shrugged, unbothered, the high and mighty bastard.

I managed to eat more than I'd thought I would. By that point, my stomach was beginning to settle and my headache wasn't quite as aggressive. But I still felt like shit warmed up.

I rested my head on the cool table with a low, pitiful moan. A particular rumbly sound made my shoulders tense. "That better not be laughter I hear. Have a little compassion. It's your job as my husband to feel sorry for me."

"My job?" he echoed, *still* amused.

I straightened in my seat, narrowing my eyes. "You weren't being judgy last night, no, you were all too happy to engage in drunk sex."

"Hmm, I'll bet you'll never look at your hairbrush in quite the same way now that it's been used to paddle your ass."

I felt my cheeks flush. He was right on that. I'd tackled my hair with one of my other brushes this morning. "I'm not sure what bugs me more. That I let you paddle my ass, or that I didn't realize you were actually using my hairbrush until after it was over."

He chuckled low and deep. "Just be glad I didn't use the side with the bristles. I thought about it."

I felt my lips part. "You wouldn't honestly do that."

His brow slowly inched up. "Are you sure about that?"

No. No, I wasn't. Because he was not the most predictable of lovers, and he had no issue doing things in bed that drove me nuts. "You'd really scratch my skin to shit like that?"

"Not so bad it caused you more pain than you like, but enough that it would mark you." His eyes went hooded. "I like to see you marked."

I knew that. Rough as he was, he bit me often and left fingerprint bruises. Truth be told, I liked looking at those marks. I just never told him. "Well, bristles are a no-no for me—let's be clear on that."



He only smiled, probably feeling confident that he could get me to agree to it when I was all fired up and desperate to come.

After he'd loaded the tray and wheeled it outside to be collected by a member of staff, he returned to me. "I have to leave for a few hours. I need to meet with Rafael before you and I head to my parents' house for dinner." He paused, studying my face, and then arched a brow. "You didn't forget about it, did you?"

Yup. Totally. "Of course not."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "Hmm," he said, all skepticism. "Before I leave, I want to show you something. Come with me."

I followed him into the living room, where he snatched a bag from the floor near the sofa. I felt my brow crease. "What you got there?"

He held it out. "Something to keep you occupied while I'm gone."

Sparing him a curious glance, I took the bag and peeked inside. My mouth parted in surprise when I examined the contents.

"I noticed you have plenty of other books by those authors."

I met his gaze. "These novels haven't been released yet." I knew it, because I'd spent months impatiently waiting for them to be made available to purchase.

He shrugged. "As the owner of the publishing company, I can obtain early copies."

Excitement fluttered in my stomach at the same time as tenderness bloomed in my chest. "You can't know how psyched I am right now. The book bug in me is mentally jumping for joy." I flashed him a bright smile. "Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me."

"Tough. Just did." I set down the bag and locked my arms around him, pinning his own arms to his sides.

“What are you doing?”

“The book bug in me wants to hug you,” I said against his chest. “Man up and deal.” I felt his chin rub against the top of my head.

“I thought the term was ‘bookworm.’”

“I don’t like worms. Prefer bugs. And no, the two aren’t the same.” Finally, I released him. “Tell Rafael I said hi.”

“Not many people ask me to pass on their hellos to Rafael.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not crazy pleased that you’re close buds with a criminal mastermind. But I figure, if he’s your friend, there must be some good in him. Nobody is one-dimensional, after all. But even if I didn’t feel that way, I’d still be nice to him for your sake.”

Pausing, I took a step back and picked up my bag. “Now, I have books to bury myself in. Please forgive the fact that I won’t remember you exist until you get home and interrupt my reading. It’s genuinely nothing personal.”

His lips hitched up for the briefest moment. “So noted.”

Looking up at the large, three-story Victorian manor later that day, I smiled. “I know I’ve said it before, but I *love* this house.” It boasted all the features I loved about this style of building—bay windows, a gabled roof, turrets, towers, stained glass, and a pretty porch.

As we walked up the path toward it, I cast Dax a sideways glance. “Did you live here throughout your whole childhood?”

“Most of it,” he replied. “Up until I was eighteen months old, we lived in a penthouse apartment. Obviously, I don’t remember those days.”

Looking at the upper windows, I nudged him. “Are you going to show me your old lair while we’re here? You never have before.”

His brow furrowed. “My old lair?”

“The room you used to sleep in,” I clarified as we climbed the porch. “The place I’m sure you debauched many teenage girls when you were just a teen yourself.”

“Debauched?” he repeated, his lips curling.

“Well, you debauched me plenty back when I was a teen.” Though not here.

Heat flared in his eyes. “I remember.” He pressed the doorbell.

It was Kensey who answered the door. Her mouth curving into a grin, she welcomed us both inside, dabbing a quick kiss on Dax’s cheek and then on mine. “Glad you could make it.” She gestured for us to follow her and then walked further into the house.

The first time I’d come here, I’d done a lot of gaping. The interior was as striking as the exterior. It had ornate lighting and high ceilings. There seemed to be a fireplace in pretty much every room. And the geometric terracotta floor tiles were beautiful.

As we strolled down the hallway, I let my gaze skim over the framed pictures on the walls—most were of Dax and his three siblings at different ages. “You were such a cute kid, Dax. But it isn’t fair that you don’t seem to have had a gawky phase—mine was horrendous.”

Kensey chuckled. “He takes after his father that way. No ugly duckling moments. They were swans from the day they were born.”

As she led us into the dining room, Blake looked up from his seat at the table. He rose and slapped Dax on his back as they exchanged hellos. His attention then zipped to me, and he offered me a warm, authentic smile that was at total contrast to the formal ones he used to flash me. “Addison, glad you could come.”

“As if I’d miss out on Kensey’s cooking,” I said, my lips kicking up.

I still wasn't certain what made him change his attitude toward me. I'd asked Dax, but he'd only said I won Blake over.

While father and son talked business, I helped Kensey carry the plates and drinks to the table. She and I each then took a seat beside our respective husband.

Across from me, she leaned forward to get a better look at the intricate dragonfly on my arm. "Caelan mentioned he gave you a tattoo," she said, a proud glint in her eye. "My boy's good. He did some for me, too." She turned both her sparsely inked arms this way and that, giving me flashes of them.

One caught my eye, and I pointed at it. "That quote. I know that quote. It's from one of my favorite books. You read Nina Bowen?"

She started in surprise. "I do."

I put a hand to my chest. "I won't lie, I *love* her. I have a major crush on her fabulously creative brain."

Her lips tipped up. "Dax told me you're a big reader. He says you have more books than I do."

Chewing on food, Blake snorted. "That can't be possible."

"Oh, it's possible," Dax told him, cutting into his salmon.

A slow blink from Blake. "You're serious?"

"Deadly. You should see the size of her bookcase. It's even bigger than Mom's."

Blake shook his head, clearly doubtful.

"It is huge," I conceded, lifting my cutlery. "I adore it."

"It has rails with sliding ladders." Dax ate a chunk of salmon. "There's hardly any spaces on the shelves. Addison has amassed one hell of a collection of books."

"I'm not seeing the problem," I said, raising my shoulders.

“No, neither am I,” Kensey cut in.

Blake slid her a quick look. “You would say that. Reading is an addiction for you—plain and simple.”

Kensey flicked up a challenging brow. “And?”

With another snort, he resettled his gaze on me. “How’re your parents doing?”

“Fine.” I scooped up a forkful of lime rice. “My dad says you two confer regularly over whether you think this marriage could be on the rocks.”

Blake eyed me, clearly doubtful. “I’m not sure why he’d say that. In fact, I’m quite sure he wouldn’t have. You’re calling my bluff.”

I smiled. “Am I?”

Blake looked at his son. “Is she?”

“I don’t know.” Dax lifted his glass and took a sip of his water. “But you probably *do* confer with Dane.”

Blake scoffed. “I have far better things to do than gossip about your marriage.”

“And yet, you’re very likely still doing it,” Dax hedged.

His mouth curving, Blake sliced off a chunk of salmon. “He likes you, you know. He just doesn’t like that he likes you. He’s determined to loathe you, as a matter of fact. But he’s struggling with it.”

I heaved a tired sigh. “I think it’s all so dumb.”

Kensey nodded, her mouth full.

“When you have kids of your own, you’ll understand his struggles,” Blake told me.

I shook my head. “No, even then, I really don’t think I will.”

Again, Blake cut his gaze to his son. “You will.”

“Yeah, I will,” Dax agreed.

Lifting my glass, I cast my husband a sideways glance. “I’d like us to get along with whoever our children’s choice of partner happens to be.”

“I’ll get along with them just fine.” Dax dipped a small slice of salmon in his sauce. “I’ll simply never for a moment make them feel welcome.”

I frowned. “I don’t see how the two can go together.”

“They will. You’ll see.”

Yeah, I really didn’t think so, but whatever.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

“You’ve dumped your friends for cock.”

Turning away from my office filing cabinet later that week, I frowned at Sabrina. “What?”

Standing in front of my desk with her arms folded, she briefly inclined her head as she conceded, “Okay, so, *occasionally* you’ll meet me and Tamara for drinks or whatever. But that’s the problem—you only do it occasionally.”

I sighed. “You act like you rarely see me.”

“Spending time with you at work isn’t the same thing. It’s not socializing.”

“True.” There was a low screech of metal as I pulled open a cabinet drawer. “But just because I’m not going out with you on the regular doesn’t mean I’m blowing you off for dick or anything else.” I tugged a file out of the drawer and then closed it. “Dax and I swore we’d spend time together at home like other couples do. *As you’re well-aware.*”

“Yeah,” Sabrina begrudgingly allowed, “but these past few weeks, you’ve been spending way more time with him than you used to.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Uh, yeah, you have.”

Yes, I had. Because I liked being around him. A lot.

I looked forward to going home to him. I enjoyed having dinner with him, spending time with him, and hearing about his day. And I loved that we’d developed a strong, healthy rapport. None of which I cared to share with my friend, since I didn’t want to admit that I was growing to care for the man I’d married as part of a damn business transaction.

A little annoyed by my emotional situation, I slapped the file on my desk. “I’m a homebody. You know that.”

“You like being at home and cozying up with a book, sure, but you also like to venture out and meet friends for drinks and stuff. Lately, though, you’ve been a total hermit.”

“I’m sorry if I made you feel neglected. Where is it you want us to go? I’ll make it happen.”

She pursed her lips. “Nowhere in particular.”

“What date did you have in mind?”

“I don’t have any in mind.”

I felt my shoulders drop as a long sigh slid out of me. “So, basically, you’re just taking an opportunity to moan.”

Sabrina took a step closer to the desk. “What I’m doing is noticing that you’re happily spending *far* more time at home than you used to. So either you’re becoming emotionally attached to Dax’s penis, or to him.”

I stilled, my insides seizing. “It’s neither.” The words came out flat and stiff.

Her face went slack. “Oh my God, it’s the latter,” she somehow sensed.

“No, it’s not,” I snapped, sounding defensive even to my own ears.

“Don’t live in denial. It’s boring.”

“I’m not in denial, I’m just ... denying it to you.” I returned to my seat. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

She took the chair opposite mine, her expression soft. “It seemed a given that you two would eventually develop a companionable bond of sorts—one that comes with sharing important life-milestones together, like having kids and stuff. But I wasn’t expecting it to happen quite so soon.”

I felt my brows draw together. “I don’t know if I could say we’ve bonded. Dax is quite the emotional loner.”

She hummed, thoughtful. “Let me ask you a question. Is *he* home more than he used to be?”

I twisted my mouth, considering it. “Yes.”



“So maybe you’re not the only one catching feelings.”

“You say it like they’re germs.”

“They infect a person, attach themselves to your insides, and make a home for themselves there. That can be inconvenient if it’s one-sided. But ... maybe it’s not with you and Dax.”

I liked to think it wasn’t. Liked to think I wasn’t reading too much into the changes in our dynamics—such as how he’d become slightly tactile, how he sought out my company, how he joked with and teased me, how he was coming to trust me little by little. There had even been more instances when I’d woken to find that we’d closed the distance between us in bed while asleep.

I propped my elbows on the table. “He does do things sometimes that make me think he might care for me, but not in the sense that I believe he feels anything deep for me.” I wasn’t sure if that would ever be the case. “To be fair, though, *I* might not grow to feel deeply for him either.” It sucked that, however, I strongly suspected I would.

“But you’re not mere friends anymore?” she asked.

“No, we’re more than that.” That was enough for now. It would have to be.

A knock came at the open door as one of our team, Megan, took a single step into the office. She gave me a sheepish smile. “Sorry to disturb you, but there’s a woman here to see you. Says her name is Mimi.”

I went very still. *Ah, shit.*

Sabrina sucked in an angry breath. “Is that bitch for fucking real?”

I’d relayed some of what had happened with Mimi to Sabrina—minus the part where the woman had a thing for Dax. Needless to say, my BFF was now not a fan of hers. Neither was I, but I didn’t intend to send Mimi away. No, I wanted to know what had inspired her to haul ass here. I also had a few things I’d like to say to her.

Sitting up straighter in my seat, I spoke to Megan, “Send her in, please.”

With a nod, Megan disappeared.

I refocused on Sabrina. “I’ll handle this. You go back to—”

“No way am I leaving you alone with that skank,” she declared, folding her arms. “She’s gonna come in here and say more about how Dax shouldn’t have married you and doesn’t care for you blah, blah, blah. You need me here for moral support.”

I shot her an impatient look. “You only want to stay because you’re nosy as hell.”

“Well, you don’t give me specifics,” she defended. “And I don’t like bullet-point versions.”

I pointed at the door, pinning her with a stare that said I would not change my mind. “I’ll come by your desk when I’m done here.”

Her lips thinning, she stood. “Fine.” The drama queen marched to the door, the image of indignance, and almost bumped into Mimi in the doorway. Sabrina volleyed her with a glare that could singe flesh and then stalked off.

Mimi blinked, seeming taken aback by the cold reception.

Uninterested in rising from my seat to greet her politely or any of that crap, I sank back into my chair, interlinked my fingers, and rested my hands over my stomach. I didn’t speak, knowing from my father that sometimes the best way to make a person get to the damn point was to simply look at them blankly.

Glancing around, she leisurely made her way to the seat Sabrina had vacated. “Nice office,” Mimi told me as she sat. “Very chic. A little girly, though.”

I almost rolled my eyes at what was intended to be a taunt. I *was* a girl, in case she hadn’t noticed. And I had not one issue with “girly.”

She shifted slightly in her seat. “I suppose you’re wondering why I’m here.”

Naturally.

“I suppose you’re also feeling far from pleased to see me.”

Accurate.

“And it’s got to be weird for you to sit across from the mirror image of the only woman who the guy you married has ever loved.”

Hmm, no, not really. I didn’t look at Mimi and see Gracie—the differences in their personalities set them apart in a major way. Especially since their personalities leaked into their behavior. It meant they had different mannerisms, smiles, postures, and gesticulations.

“But I wanted to talk to you,” she added, as if I hadn’t gathered that much by her coming here. “There are things I want to say.”

I raised a *Such as?* brow.

Sighing, she scratched at her scalp. “I didn’t mean what I said to Dax. I would never talk to the tabloids about him. I was just ...”

“Feeling pissed and jealous because he married someone other than you,” I supplied.

A hardness slid into her eyes. “You can’t know what it’s like to want someone and hate yourself for it.”

Maybe not, but I was entirely positive that I wouldn’t have handled the situation in the same ways that she did.

She licked her lower lip in an awkward gesture. “When Gracie died, I felt like he’d be the only one who really understood how bad it hurt, so I often came to him to talk. He loved her so much. I don’t think I realized how much until after she was gone. And the more time I spent with him, the more I came to care for him.” She paused, twiddling her fingers. “And the more I grew to loathe myself.”

“Yet, you keep putting yourself in his path,” I pointed out. “Why do that? The rest of your family aren’t in contact with him. There’s no reason for you to be either.” I, personally, would have removed myself from the equation for the sake of both myself and Dax.

She shrugged one shoulder. “Maybe I’m punishing myself for feeling what I feel.”

I inwardly snorted. “You can’t feel that bad about it if you keep trying to seduce him.”

A pink flush crept onto her face. “You’ve seen me when I’m plastered. I don’t exactly have many inhibitions in that state.”

I scoffed. “If that was all it was, you’d just avoid drinking around him. But you do the opposite. Probably because you need some good ole Dutch courage to make a move, but also because you can then blame the alcohol if he turns you down.”

“No, I—”

“You might resent what you feel for Dax. You might wish you could switch it off. But what you wish most of all is that he returned your feelings.”

Her brow furrowed. “You think I have the slightest hope he’d ever love me?” She let out a derisive snort. “I’m very much aware he’ll never feel for another woman what he felt for Gracie. Losing her took something out of him. Or *she* took something out of him when she left. He isn’t whole without her.”

“Of course she took a piece of him with her. It was hers to take. That’s how it goes.” It didn’t mean he was broken or had some gaping hole inside him, but Mimi persisted in seeing him as if he was half a person.

“Maybe, but he’s *always* going to cling to his perfect little Gracie,” she clipped, bitterness dripping from every syllable. “A Gracie who wasn’t really so perfect.”

I felt my eyes narrow. “If you have something to say about her, say it. Don’t hint at it.”

Shifting in her seat, Mimi averted her gaze. “I just meant that, you know, nobody’s all good.”

Maybe. Maybe not.

When she’d first insinuated there was something Dax didn’t know, I’d thought that she would have surely told him anything that would break his connection to Gracie. But ... I had two sisters who I loved with everything in me. Sisters I’d do *anything* for. Sisters whose secrets I’d protect.

Mimi might be a tool, but she had loved her twin dearly; she would surely keep a secret for her. Especially if exposing it would taint others’ memories of her.

I could push for more information, but it wasn’t my right to do that. And the last thing I wanted was to learn something about Gracie that had the potential to hurt Dax. We’d promised each other honesty, so I’d feel obliged to tell him, and it would suck large to have to do it.

As such, I let the matter drop and instead asked, “Why are you here?”

Mimi poked her tongue into the inside of her cheek. “I figured you of all people would understand how it is for me. We’re in the same boat. We love Dax. Love a man who doesn’t, and never will, love us back.”

Oh, she just relished taking any opportunity possible to drum the idea into my head that he felt nothing for me.

Her head very slowly tilted to the side as she studied me. “Or are you thinking that will change for you some day? It won’t, you know. Others held that same hope. It was crushed every time.” She paused. “There was one woman I thought he might grow to care for. She was technically a bed-buddy, but they had something. Emotionally, I mean.”

And I was apparently supposed to feel upset and jealous on hearing this—that was the reaction Mimi was so obviously looking for. She craved that response from me because it was how *I* made *her* feel—she wanted to level the playing field.

The thing was ... yes, it stung hearing he'd cared for others. But at the same time, I would never wish he'd been alone all these years feeling nothing for no one.

"I don't know if her name is really Angel or if that's a stage name," Mimi continued. "She works as a stripper in the club he used to own. That's how they met." A sly smirk pulled at one corner of her mouth. "I heard he was like a sex addict with her. It was as if he just couldn't stay away from the girl. Some said he was obsessed with her."

Okay, yeah, that made my gut twist painfully.

"But what they had wasn't just physical. He was very protective of Angel. Possessive, too. He put a stop to the lap dances because he didn't like her being that close to other men. I could see she meant something to him."

"You must have hated her, then."

Mimi's smirk faltered. "No. I want him to be happy. She made him happy."

Uh, no, Mimi wanted him to be happy *with her*, no one else. As for Angel ... if she really had been so important to him it was weird that they'd had nothing more than a bed-buddy arrangement. "Just to be clear ... you feel that all this is relevant because, what?"

Her face reddened as her taunting expression morphed into a resentful glower. So much scorn and bitterness whirled in her gaze it was a wonder she wasn't shaking with the force of the emotions.

"It's relevant because obsession never dies," she retorted. "*His* sure didn't. He's still in contact with Angel; still heads to the club to check on her; still fixes all her problems for her, like he's her own personal white knight. He even gives her money if she needs it."

Hurt tried to bubble up, but I mentally shook it off, sure he wouldn't keep from me that he played such a strong part in one of his ex's lives that way.

"You don't believe me?" Mimi dug her phone out of her purse, tapped the screen several times, and then held it up

for me to see. “Look. *Look.*”

I cut my gaze to the screen, and the bottom fell out of my stomach. It was a photo of Dax and an incredibly beautiful blonde. They stood intimately close on a sidewalk outside the strip club, their bodies mere inches apart as they faced each other. His head was tilted down toward hers, and she was grinning up at him.

My body went stiff as so many emotions blindsided me. Shock. Hurt. Betrayal. Fury. Disillusionment. Every single one of those emotions was a sharp, crippling stab to my tightening chest.

Unlinking my fingers, I fisted my hands and ground my teeth against the primitive drive to punch something; to snatch her phone and throw it across the room; to ream Dax’s ass for taking a shit on my trust and ... and ... But that didn’t sound like him.

The photographic evidence was *right there*, yes. But I couldn’t make the betrayal “fit” with what I knew of him. I just couldn’t.

Sitting there, I vacillated between devastation, anger, and disbelief as I took a long, hard look at the picture. At him. Her. The background. The lighting. I searched for signs of tampering but found none. The photo seemed real, seemed ...

My thoughts halted as something occurred to me. Something that sent a wave of relief washing through my system, sweeping away the dark emotions that had taken hold of me. I drew in a centering breath, relaxing my fists.

“See?” snapped Mimi. “I can’t say whether or not they’re sleeping together, but they sure look cozy, don’t they?”

I only hummed.

Lines of confusion creased her brow. “This doesn’t bother you?”

“It would ... if that wasn’t an old picture.”

She tensed. “What?”

“The dingy nightclub in the background right beside the strip club? It was shut down over a year ago. I know this, because I arranged for several bachelor parties to take place there before ownership of it changed hands. It was given an entire makeover and is now a strip club exclusive to women.”

Pausing, I cocked my head. “Should I be concerned that you used to take pictures of him in the street like some stalker? Is it something you still do? Because if so, I’ll have a problem with that.”

She shot to her feet, her nostrils flaring, clenching her phone tight. I thought she might storm out, but she stayed right there, breathing hard and glaring at the wall behind me.

“What is it you’re trying to do here?” I asked, anger once more flickering to life in my belly. “Hurt me? Sow seeds of distrust? Cause arguments between me and Dax? What?”

Her glare slammed on me, the rage there morphing into ... shame?

“If you came here with the half-assed plan to make me believe Dax is cheating on me so that I’d leave—”

“That isn’t why I came,” she said, closing her eyes. Plopping her butt back down on the chair, she exhaled a long breath and then reopened her eyes.

“Really?” I drawled, skeptical.

“Really. I actually had no intention of showing you the photo at all. It didn’t even occur to me until I got seriously annoyed by you sitting there looking all indifferent. I acted on a dumb impulse. And just to clarify, I didn’t take the picture. A friend did; they sent it to me, wanting me to see for myself that he’d moved on, hoping it would make *me* move on.”

I watched her steadily, not so certain that the contrite vibes spilling from her were entirely authentic. I couldn’t say I’d be moved if they were.

“I came because ... I’m leaving Redwater,” she blurted out. “I don’t know when I’ll be back. It won’t be for a while.”



Even as I did a mental fist pump, I kept my expression blank.

“But before I left, I wanted to talk to you alone. I wanted to get a feel for what kind of person you are.” She dragged a hand through her hair. “I wanted to understand.”

“Understand what?”

“What it is about you that would make him give you what he wouldn’t give the others,” she admitted, a pained note to her voice. “He probably would have married Gracie. But those who came before and after her? No, he pointblank refused to take a walk down the aisle with them. Didn’t even propose to any of them.

“I found out that you two had a fling years ago, so I know you have history. But even that doesn’t explain why he’d marry you. He can’t have been pining after you all this time; he wouldn’t have stayed away—Dax goes after what he wants.” She raised her shoulders. “None of this makes any sense to me, and *he’ll* never answer my questions.”

I got it, then. Just as I couldn’t reconcile the Dax I knew with a man who’d cheat, she couldn’t reconcile the Dax she knew with a guy who’d commit himself to a woman. The issue was that, as he’d once pointed out to me, she didn’t really *know* Dax. “Look, Mimi—”

“I wasn’t lying about Angel. I mean, no, he’s not in touch with her *now*. But she did matter to him back when they were involved with each other. So did some of the others in his past. But he didn’t put a ring on *their* finger.”

“Just because a person matters to you doesn’t mean you’ll want to marry them. Surely you yourself have had boyfriends who, however much you might have cared for them, you didn’t feel inclined to marry.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And why did you feel inclined to marry Dax? He doesn’t love you. We both know that.”

The words sliced me like a hot blade. Shouldn’t. Weren’t supposed to. But they did.

“Maybe you’re wrong,” I said, since I had no wish to tell her about the pact or anything else so personal. “Maybe you can’t read him as well as you think you can. It would explain why you’ve been so certain he’ll never move forward, *and* why you keep throwing yourself at him thinking he’ll ever do anything but reject you.”

She dragged in a sharp breath. “You can’t honestly think you’ll ever matter to him the way Gracie did.”

“Why? Because *you* never mattered to him that way?”

She flinched, but I didn’t feel bad. Not after all she’d said and done to Dax, and not after all she’d said and done since walking into my office.

She straightened her shoulders. “Believe I’m wrong if it makes you feel better about doing something as dumb as marrying someone to whom you’ll always be second choice. But I can promise you this: By the time I next return to Redwater, you’ll be out of the picture,” she stated, firm and cocky. “You’ll have reached a point where you can’t hide the truth from yourself any longer, and you’ll have left him.”

“And that’s honestly what you want for Dax? You want for him to be alone? If so, that’s not real love, Mimi. Not even close.”

Her smug look wavered.

I leaned forward in my seat and braced my lower arms on the table. “Now that you’ve had your say,” I began, my voice severe with a harsh edge, “allow me to have mine. Like it or not, Mimi, I’m a permanent fixture in Dax’s life. I’m not going anywhere. I’m here to stay. And *you* need to get your head out of your ass.”

When she opened her mouth to snap a retort, I barreled onward, saying, “You’ve disrespected his feelings and wishes for far too long. It ends now. All of it. He’ll never be yours. Never. He didn’t want you when he was single, and he sure as shit doesn’t want you now that he’s married. Accept that and move on with your life instead of trying to force your way into his.”

She'd looked furious before. *Now* she looked fit to skin a motherfucker. I half-expected her to launch herself across the table and go for my throat or something. She didn't. She sneered at me, grinding her teeth.

"You really think you're here to stay?" She all but cackled. "Oh, that's funny. Really. Don't you get it yet, sweetie? When it comes to Dax, no woman is here to stay." She pushed to her feet. "If you genuinely think differently, I guess all I can really say is ... prepare yourself for the rude awakening you're going to get someday soon."

"Right back at you." I remained in my seat as she practically barged out of the office. Letting my head tip back, I sighed long and loud, feeling like I'd been through the ringer.

And I *shouldn't* feel that way. The thought of Dax betraying me shouldn't have made me feel crushed, but it had. No, not simply crushed. Ravaged. Eviscerated. Demoralized.

Yeah, I'd been fooling myself by thinking I was only *beginning* to care for Dax. The truth was ... I'd cared for him for a while now, and those feelings were growing and growing.

*Fuck this shit.*

Sabrina hurried inside and cast a glance at the door. "Mimi did *not* look happy just now. What was all that about?"

Not wanting to get into it all—especially when I wouldn't be able to hide from Sabrina just how dangerously hurt I'd been when I almost fell for Mimi's little trick—I fudged, "She's still not pleased that Dax moved on with his life. She felt the need to communicate it yet again."

It was a damn good thing for her that she was leaving Redwater, because he was not going to like that she'd come here. Not even a little bit.



Later that day, the sound of the villa's front door closing snapped me out of the story I was reading. Curled up in my armchair with a hardcover book in my lap, I looked at the vintage wall clock. Dax was home an hour later than usual, but it was no surprise—he'd texted me to let me know that he'd had to attend a last-minute meeting.

On returning home from work, I'd retreated almost immediately to my reading den, needing to immerse myself in another world so I could stop thinking about the Mimi fiasco. I wasn't much calmer than I'd been when she first left my office. Mostly because I knew I'd have to share what happened with Dax.

A guy should be able to come home at the end of his workday and relax, unwind, and chill. Especially a man like him, whose days were hectic. He shouldn't have to come home to yet more issues, and I wanted to be *the last* person to dump them on his lap.

But keeping what happened from him wasn't an option. Not after the promises we'd made to each other. So I was going to have to tell him something that would piss him off, wreck his mood for the evening, and quite possibly hurt him. *I* would sure be hurt if one of Lake's relatives acted in such a way, and I'd hate that Dax was forced to deal with that crap.

In no rush to spill the earlier confrontation to him, I tried to once again bury myself in my book. But, too on edge about the upcoming conversation, I failed miserably.

I was just considering whether to go track him down when I heard footfalls heading toward the den. Moments later, he strolled inside with a casual, easy grace. Despite the rock of aggravation in my stomach, I felt my mouth hitch up slightly at the sight of him.

He hummed. "Thought I might find you here."

I let out a mock long-suffering sigh. "I don't have much of a choice in the matter. I mean, you gave me several books. They aren't going to read themselves."

Sparks of amusement danced in his eyes. “Right.” He planted his feet. “On another note, my mother is finalizing her plans for Thanksgiving. She wants to know if we’re definitely going to be eating dinner at her table.”

“I told you we would,” I reminded him.

“Yes, you did. But I know that your parents have been trying to change your mind.”

Oh, they’d given it all they had. I had no clue why. It wasn’t fresh news that I was more stubborn than both of them put together. “I refused to reconsider but promised we would have dinner with them next year *if*—and only if—my dad and Ollie’s behavior toward you improves.”

One side of Dax’s mouth kicked up. “Cunning.”

“Thank you, honey pie.”

*And* his smile faded. “You really have to stop with that.”

“Nu-uh, I’m on a mission to find the perfect pet name for you. I don’t give up easily.”

“Make an exception,” he said, enunciating every word.

“Oh, but—”

“No, I don’t need or want a pet name.”

“Sometimes, we *think* we don’t want something. But then when we get it, we can’t imagine life without it.”

“I can safely assure you that at no point would I want anything *but* to live without it.”

I gave him a haughty look. “I beg to differ, but we’ll see.” I closed my book and took a preparatory breath. “So. Something happened today.”

His eyelids lowered slightly. “I’m not going to like this, am I?”

“It’s doubtful that you will,” I admitted, setting the hardcover on the nearby table.

“Go on.”

I shifted position, untucking my feet from beneath my butt to straighten my legs. “I had a visitor at work.”

His eyes went slitted. “Grayden?”

I gave my head a slow shake. “Mimi.”

Something dark crawled behind his mismatched eyes as tension crept into his muscles, turning his posture from lazy and casual to stiff and wooden. “She went to your office?” he asked, his voice dead.

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“When?” The quiet question was as abrupt as the lashing of a whip.

“This afternoon.”

One brow slinked upward. “And you sent her away, yes?”

Hesitating, I pulled a face. “Not exactly.”

A hoarsely spoken curse flew out of his mouth. “Why would you agree to see her, Addison? And why the hell didn’t you call me?”

Uh, apparently there was something we weren’t straight on. It seemed best to rectify that problem now. “Where there’s a chance of physical danger, I will call you. Other times? No. I’m not some fragile creature that can’t handle her own shit.”

He clenched his jaw. “I told you that Mimi can get handsy.”

“I’ve got news for you—so can I. If she ever comes at me, she won’t walk away unscathed. So I suppose it’s fortunate for her that causing me physical pain wasn’t on her agenda today.”

“What did she say to you?”

“A lot. To summarize ... she would never talk to the tabloids about you, she loathes herself for wanting you, she’s certain you’ll never love me or anyone else, she wants to understand why you married me, and she believes that only

one woman from your past other than her sister really meant something to you.” My belly began rolling at the mere thought of the latter part. “Mimi talked about her quite a bit.”

His brow knitted. “Who?” he asked with complete bewilderment, as if he had literally not one idea who Mimi could possibly have named.

“Angel.” Careful to keep my tone even, ignoring the way my gut twisted, I added, “Mimi said you were obsessed with her. Very protective and possessive.”

His frown deepening, he gave a dismissive shrug. “Angel and I had a brief fling—nothing more,” he stated so firmly I couldn’t doubt him for even a second.

And once again, the world became a fabulous, most wondrous place.

My insides no longer churning, I said, “Either Mimi doesn’t believe that, or she just wanted to convince me differently. She certainly tried convincing me that you were still involved with Angel.”

His shoulders stiffening, he did a slow blink. “Say that again.”

“She showed me an old photo that she has saved in her phone—apparently her friend took it from afar and then sent it to Mimi to show her you’d moved on. It was a picture of you and Angel looking quite cozy together while standing outside the strip club you used to own. Mimi tried making me believe it was a recent photo. She was unsuccessful at that, which pissed her off somewhat.”

He stared at me, his jaw tightening, his expression chilling. “She insinuated that I could be cheating on you?” he asked, a rough quality to every word, as if he was fighting back a growl.

Nibbling on my lower lip, I nodded. “Yup.”

A cold rage swam into his eyes, icing them over. His neck corded, he smashed his lips together and dragged in a breath through his nose.

“I don’t know if she went to my office with the intention of playing that game. She claimed it was a spur of the moment idea that she ran with because I remained aloof in the face of her attempts to goad me.”

“Whether or not she planned it is irrelevant,” he gritted out, every word sharp as a blade.

“I agree, I’m just saying I’m unsure if she intended all along to tell such a tale. Whatever the case, she was set on making me feel how she feels—hurt, angry, jealous. But she couldn’t claim you cared for *her* to wrench such reactions out of me, so she chose one of your past bed-buddies instead.”

“You shouldn’t have given her the time of day.”

I jutted out my chin. “It was my opportunity to get the message across that I’m here for good and she needs to deal with it.” Not that she’d believed me. “I just want her to leave you alone. I don’t like that she does things that hurt you. I don’t like that she won’t accept what you want and don’t want. It’s no different from you wanting to communicate to Grayden that he needs to back off.”

Dax’s mouth set into a hard slash, his eyes flaring. He hadn’t yet told me what got said between him and my ex. All he’d said was that it had been “sorted.”

Shaking his head in incredulity, Dax turned his body slightly and pinned his gaze on a spot on the wall.

I pushed to my feet. “Her behavior can’t be that much of a surprise to you. You *had* to know before we got married that Mimi might make a nuisance of herself.”

“I didn’t suspect she’d go this far,” he replied without meeting my gaze. “Act out in petty ways? Yes. That’s always been her style. But try to cause serious problems in my marriage? No. That’s a whole other level of vindictive.”

“If it makes you feel any better, she didn’t do it to hurt you. That was an attempt to hurt *me*.”

His brows slamming together, he turned back to me. “That doesn’t make me feel better at all. Far from it. You’re mine. She has no fucking right to go anywhere near you. And



it pisses me off that I wasn't able to shelter you from her bullshit. I didn't see it coming."

Everything in me went all gooey at the protective comment.

His gaze sharpening, he tilted his head. "The photo she showed you ... You didn't even suspect it was recent?"

I sank my teeth into my bottom lip. "I'll admit, there were a few seconds where—completely taken off-guard—I assumed it was. But cheating goes against who you are. I couldn't believe you'd do that to me. I just couldn't. So I took a closer look at the picture, and I noticed background details that clearly spelled out it was from years ago."

An emotion I couldn't quite name leaked into his eyes, thawing some of the rage there. Those same eyes roamed over my face with blatant possession. "I don't think anyone has ever trusted me quite as much as you do."

The question "*Not even Gracie?*" was on the tip of my tongue, but I held it back. It wouldn't be a fair thing to ask. "Mimi also said that you watch over Angel. I'm not accusing you of anything," I hurried to add. "I just know you're a protective person, so—"

"Only to those under my protection. I haven't been in contact with Angel since we ended our bed-buddy arrangement."

The last knot in my belly fell away. "In better news, Mimi's actually leaving Redwater for a while."

He let out a low snort. "Of course she is. She doesn't want to face me after pulling this stunt."

He whipped out his phone, unlocked the screen with a press of his thumb, tapped said screen a few times, and then put the cell to his ear. The room was quiet enough that I heard the dialing tone, heard it ring and ring and ring, heard a muffled automated voice, heard a distinct *beep*.

"Low, Mimi," Dax rumbled. "What you did today was *low*. Apparently, I haven't made myself perfectly clear, so I'll rectify that now. You are to stay away from Addison. Don't

contact her, don't approach her, don't even look at her. Fuck with me over this, fuck with *her* ever again, and I swear to Christ you will pay in ways you don't want to imagine." He hung up with a heavy exhale.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "She won't believe you. You know that, right?"

"I do. Just as I know that it's my own fault. Where she's concerned, I've let too many things slide for far too long. No more. If she calls my bluff on this, I'll make her wish she hadn't."

"I don't think you'll hear from her again in a while." A delightful prospect. "She'll want to give you plenty of time to calm down." Recalling something, I added, "Believe it or not, she's convinced that I'll be gone from the picture by the time she's back."

His face hardened. "She's wrong."

"Yes, she's wrong. Let's hope she doesn't pull another dick move when she sees that." But honestly, I wasn't holding my breath.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Strolling into Dax's office the following afternoon, I gave him a little wave as I half-greeted-half-sung, "Surprise."

Sitting behind his desk, looking the emperor of his domain, he locked those mismatched orbs on me, the set of his mouth softening. "I didn't know you were coming."

I closed his door and then walked toward his desk. "Of course you didn't. It wouldn't have been a surprise otherwise."

His gaze dipped to the plastic bag I was carrying. "What's this?"

"Grub. I spoke to Benjamin," I added, referring to his delightful PA. "He said you didn't have a lunch meeting today and would be here, so ..." I lifted my shoulders, feeling a teensy bit awkward at the thought that he might well dislike my having appeared uninvited. But something warm and intense seeped into his gaze, relaxing my insides.

Dax pushed out of his chair. "I see. And what inspired this?"

"Nothing in particular. It just occurred to me that wives sometimes do this sort of thing. I can't neglect my civic duties any more than you can neglect yours." Or, more to the point, I'd quite simply wanted to see him and I saw no need to fight it.

He hummed and ushered me over to the lounge area. "You succeeded in surprising me. Not many people manage to do that. Yet, you do it frequently."

Resting the deli bag on the coffee table, I felt my mouth curve. "I admit, I find some enjoyment in keeping you on your toes." It was only fair. He kept me on mine.

His lips hitched up. "I'd sensed that much for myself."

"For the record, do you class my lunchtime visit a good surprise or a bad surprise?" I asked, keeping my voice casual,

not wanting to show just how much it would sting if the answer happened to be “bad.”

He dipped his head slightly, his eyes diving into mine, gleaming with something I couldn't quite name that made my belly flutter. “Good.”

Relief warming my insides, I gave him a winning smile. “Excellent answer.” A *whoosh* of air sounded as I sank onto a leather chair.

He claimed the seat across from me, reminding me of the last time I was here. So much had happened since then that it felt like a lifetime ago, but not in a negative way. It was more as if my life now felt split into *Before Dax* and *After Dax*.

“So,” I began, “did you make anyone cry today?”

“Cry?” he echoed, his brow puckering.

“Yeah. You know. Sob. Weep. Bawl. Wail.”

He responded with a flat stare. “I know what ‘cry’ means. I simply have no idea why you think I might reduce someone to such a state. I’m not your father.”

Snickering, I rummaged into the deli bag and pulled out two bottles of water. I could not deny that my dad was renowned for making his employees blubber. “You think I’m fooled because you’re all ease and charm toward your coworkers? *Please*. You make a point of knowing them all by name and making them feel ‘seen’ so that they’ll be even more scared to disappoint you than they already were.” I set the bottles on the table. “And it works.”

Mirth swimming in his eyes, he rubbed at his jaw. “Hmm. Well, as far as I know, there have been no tears shed among my employees today. But it’s early yet.”

“Somehow, I knew you were gonna add that last bit.” I dug out a club sandwich and handed it to him. “Here.”

“Thank you. How’s your day going so far?”

“Pretty well.” I fished my own sandwich out of the bag and then unwrapped it. “I spent all morning in my office, as

usual.”

“So did I,” he told me, nabbing his drink. “I have some external meetings coming up, though.” He unscrewed the cap from his bottle. “What are you doing this afternoon?”

“I have a meeting with a museum manager who wants to throw a cut-the-red-ribbon event to celebrate the opening of a new exhibit.” I took a bite out of my sandwich, almost groaning in delight as the tastes of eggs, cress, and mayonnaise exploded on my tongue. “I also have to meet with a wedding photographer, but that shouldn’t take long.”

Between sips of our drinks and bites of our food, we chatted about this and that. It was nice. Different. And I regretted not having done it sooner.

I hadn’t been sure how he’d respond to my showing up like this without warning. I’d almost called him earlier to check if he’d be okay with it. But I’d decided to instead take the chance and surprise him. I was glad I had, and I made a mental note to do it again at some point in the future.

Once done with our lunch, we used the wet wipes to clean our mouths and hands. I tossed all the trash into the deli bag and then looked at Dax, about to ask if he wanted one of the complimentary mints. Instead, I stilled ... because a heat was building in his eyes.

“What?” I asked, my stomach doing a little flip.

He drummed his fingers on the armrest, his focus solely on me. “I was just remembering when you walked into my office months ago. Remembering how I wanted to bend you over my desk and fuck you right here.” His fingers went still. “I’ve decided I’m going to do it now instead.”

Before I knew it, I was behind his desk, my front plastered to its surface, my skirt hiked up around my waist, and he was pounding into me like he was in the grips of a goddamn sexual fever.

I was so high on the bliss coursing through me, making me wind tighter and tighter, that I was barely aware of the

buzzing sound that came from his office phone until he ceased thrusting and pressed a button.

“Yes?” he asked flatly, nothing in his voice giving away that he was smack bam in the middle of fucking. Hell, he didn’t even sound out of breath.

“Sir,” began Benjamin, “A Mr. Grayden Ackehurst is at the reception desk downstairs. He wishes to speak with you.”

The words sliced through my pleasure-filled daze, making me go stock-still.

“Does he now?” Dax muttered, rearing his hips back, withdrawing his cock in a smooth glide until only the thick head was inside me. “Tell them to let him up.”

*Let him up?* Ugh. Both frustrated and disappointed that we’d have to stop, I reluctantly began to straighten. But a hand pressed down on my nape, pushing me back down against the cool wood, eliciting a surprised gasp from me.

“No, we’re going to finish,” Dax rumbled, shoving his cock deep. “When he walks in here, you’re going to have my come inside you.” He resumed fucking in and out of me, his angle perfect, his thrusts hard, his pace wild.

I grabbed at the edges of his desk to anchor myself as the tension in my belly built and swirled and contracted. A hand sank into my hair and roughly wrenched up my head. He said something, but I didn’t hear it, because my orgasm chose that moment to swallow me whole.

He slapped his palm over my mouth to muffle my scream and powered into me harder and faster. With a grunt-growl-groan, he wedged his cock unbearably deep as his own release burst over him.

Normally, I’d have gone pliant against the desk as I recovered from my orgasm, but I didn’t have time for that. As soon as Dax withdrew, I mentally pulled myself together, straightened up, and then turned to face him. “Just so you know,” I said, panting, “I’m making a mental note to bring you lunch at least once a week from here on out.”

His mouth quirking, Dax zipped up his fly, once again fully presentable since he hadn't so much as opened a shirt button, let alone removed any clothing. "I'll make sure I'm available."

"I'll hold you to that." I made quick work of righting my clothes and snatched my panties—the only layer I'd shed—from his office chair. "What could Grayden want?"

He gave an uncaring shrug. "No idea."

"Is it normal for him to show up here?"

"No." Dax smoothed a hand down his tie. "He's never done it before."

Huh. "It's kind of weird, then." Especially since, considering Dax recently gave him a verbal warning to stay away from me that would *not* have washed down well, Grayden would surely be in no way inclined to seek him out.

"Hmm. It would be best if you—"

"Don't ask me to leave." I lifted a hand. "If it turns out he's here on business or something of the like, I'll go straight away and let you both get on with it. But I want to first make sure he isn't here to confront you or cause problems."

Tipping his head to the side, Dax let his gaze roam over my face. "Always determined to have my back."

"It'll be easier for you to not fight it."

"As it happens, I don't wish to fight it."

"Now that's a great response." I took a step toward the private bathroom attached to his office.

"Don't clean up yet."

I tilted my head in question, confused. But then his earlier words came back to me ... *When he walks in here, you're going to have my come inside you.*

I hadn't taken it as anything other than a comment said in the heat of the moment. Until right now. I studied his expression. "You're serious?" He *looked* it.

“Humor me.”

A knock right then came at the door.

Muttering a curse, I swiftly pulled on my underwear, ignoring the light of amusement in his eyes.

“Yes?” Dax called out.

Benjamin pushed open the door, a placid smile on his face. “Sir, Mr. Ackehurst is here to see you.”

“Send him in,” said Dax.

Grayden entered with purposeful strides, his spine straight, his shoulders back, his head up, his expression all-business.

His step faltered at the sight of me, and the reserved look on his face cracked like a frozen lake. “Addie,” he said in surprise.

I absently smoothed a hand down the back of my unkempt hair. It was impossible not to feel awkward right now while I stood here freshly fucked, my knees rubbery, my mind a little sex-dazed.

A muscle in Grayden’s cheek ticked, and his jaw turned to granite. Well, it didn’t take a highly observant person to sense what had happened here before he arrived—my skirt was all wrinkled, my cheeks were all flushed, and my eyes probably still had a post-orgasm glaze going on.

Benjamin looked from me to Dax, nodded politely, and then left.

The sound of the door closing seemed to jolt Grayden into action. Clearing his throat, he wiped all emotion from his face, sliced his gaze back to Dax, and took a few more steps into the room.

His own expression equally neutral, Dax stared back at him. There was nothing at all welcoming in his eyes or posture. Or even *unwelcoming*. There was just ... indifference.

Looking at the two men now, it was hard to believe they’d once been friends, even though it had been back when



they were teenagers. They were total opposites nowadays.

Grayden straightened his tie. “I didn’t realize you had company. Actually, it’s good that Addison is here. This matter concerns both of you, after all.”

I blinked. It was strange hearing Grayden refer to me as “Addison” rather than use an abbreviated form of my name—he’d never done it before, not once.

Why this “matter” would relate to myself *and* Dax, I didn’t know. God, if this was about Felicity or Blaise again ...

“What do you want?” Dax asked him, very little interest in his tone.

Grayden planted his feet. “Mimi asked me to speak with you on her behalf.”

I frowned, confused. “Mimi?”

Dax glanced down at me. “He’s her lawyer.”

Oh. I hadn’t known that.

“She relayed to me the conversation she had with Addison,” Grayden told him.

“She did, did she?” asked Dax, passing by me as he rounded the desk to stand a few feet away from his visitor.

“Yes. She feels bad about it.”

I pulled a face. *Unlikely.*

“She *should* feel bad,” said Dax.

“I don’t dispute that,” Grayden assured him. “Neither would Mimi.”

*Beyond* doubtful and in a whole new realm of skeptical, I folded my arms. “If that’s the case, why hasn’t she so much as sent an apologetic text to him?”

Grayden seemed to grudgingly slide his gaze to me. “She feels that what she did warrants a face-to-face apology. But she knows that Dax is too angry to see her, and he made it clear that she isn’t to approach you again.” His focus returned

to Dax. “She asked that I be a voice for her; express her regrets and pass on her request for you to hear her out.”

Ah. Given that this had to be *the last* place he wanted to be, Grayden probably hated that Mimi had asked this of him, but he’d come anyway. It was a reminder that, though he might have been something of a pain recently, he was actually a good guy. Considerate. Supportive. Always there for his clients. He just had a habit of recklessly tossing around promises like they were candy.

Dax twisted his mouth. “Well, I’d say you’ve earned your fee, then.” He cast a look at the door—a gesture for Grayden to leave.

Instead, Grayden sighed and gave him an imploring look. “Will you at least consider meeting with Mimi? I understand that you’re angry with her, but all she wants is the chance to apologize. You’re important to her, Dax. There aren’t many people who are. She doesn’t want to lose you.”

“Then she shouldn’t have fucked with my wife.” Dax gave a slight shrug. “Simple.”

Grayden pressed his lips together for a long moment. “Mimi is confused. Hurting.” He shook his head slightly, adding, “She doesn’t understand why you would marry someone out of the blue the way you did. Maybe if you explained, maybe if you sat her down and told her about the pact, she’d feel better.”

A line appeared between Dax’s brows. “I don’t need to explain anything to Mimi.” He paused, looking Grayden up and down. “I don’t know what it is with you and her, but both of you seem to believe that my marriage is somehow your business. It isn’t.”

Amen.

Grayden’s eyes flared, and he looked as though he’d bark a retort. But then he pulled in a steadying breath and unclenched his jaw. “Have a heart, Dax. Mimi would have been your sister-in-law had fate not been such a bitch. She’s

not asking for anything other than maybe a few minutes of your time. She just wants to mend things.”

Dax very slowly cocked his head. “Do you know what she said to Addison?”

Grayden averted his eyes. “Mimi gave me a rundown of it, yes.”

“Then why would you think I’d feel inclined to pander to her feelings?”

A good question for sure.

Grayden shot him a sardonic look. “Let’s be fair here, neither you nor Addison are all that wounded. The things Mimi said would have hurt a couple deeply in love, but that’s not the situation we have here. You simply wish to make a silent but firm statement that you won’t tolerate certain behavior toward your ...” He trailed off.

Dax lifted a taunting brow. “My, what?”

Hesitating, Grayden coughed into his fist. “Look, I appreciate that you and Addison are married—”

“Do you, though? Because that’s not the impression I get from you.” Dax took a single step toward him. “Nor do I get the impression that you’ve acknowledged to yourself that you no longer have any rights to her. No contact—that was what you promised her when you left her. Correct?”

“Yes,” Grayden gritted out.

“But you didn’t stick to that promise, did you? You kept finding excuses to see or contact her, because you didn’t want her to forget you and move on too fast. Even when I later entered the picture, you didn’t do the smart thing and fully drop off her radar. And now here you are, yet again involving yourself in business regarding her.”

Grayden’s head flinched back as his eyes widened. “Whoa, I’m here on behalf of my client—nothing more.”

Dax’s expression called him a liar. “You’re not truly here for Mimi’s sake. The truth is that you don’t like being on the outside of Addison’s life. You’ll use any excuse to

somehow touch it; to remind her that you exist. And I have to tell you, Grayden, I'm fucking done with it."

"That's not—"

"It's time you let her go," Dax stated, his tone nonnegotiable. "I get that you'll struggle with it—maybe even for a while. But you're going to need to push past that. Some men might get off on others coveting their woman, but I don't."

A dark spite surged to life behind Grayden's eyes. His cheeks reddened, his jaw hardened, his breaths came faster. "Well, you know what I don't like? I don't like when a guy I once considered a friend marries my ex."

"She was mine first."

"Yours?" An ugly scoff came from Grayden. "You two had a fling *years* ago. That hardly counts. And you might now be her legal spouse, but that's just paperwork. It doesn't equal a relationship. She's no more yours now than she was back then. She's not in any way important you. No. *You* might have married her, but *I* love her."

I gaped at the sheer *nerve* of this motherfucker. He'd broken his promises to me. Walked away. Reconciled with his ex. *Defended* said ex and her son when they recently screwed with me. And now he was claiming he loved me? Honest to God?

"Don't give me that shit." Dax shot him a look that was a perfect blend of impatience and disgust. "You don't love her."

Grayden's brows snapped together. "Fuck that, Dax, I —"

"In fact, I don't think you ever did."

His mouth dropping open, Grayden jabbed a finger at him. "That is not true." His gaze cut to me. "You *know* that is not true."

"If you honestly cared so much about Addison, you wouldn't have given her up."

His eyes flying back to Dax, Grayden dropped his hand to his side. “I went back to Felicity for my kids’ sake. Nothing else could have made me leave Addison. Only my girls.”

“So you say. And maybe that’s true. But you share Felicity’s bed, don’t you? Share the bed of a woman *you know* made a play to destroy the happiness you had with another.”

Grayden spluttered. “It wasn’t like that.”

“It was exactly like that,” Dax asserted. “If you loved Addison, you’d be hating Felicity for what she did. You’d loathe her for making that play; loathe that it worked; resent every minute you spent with her. You wouldn’t be able to kiss her, touch her, sleep with her.”

Grayden stared at him, lost. He’d never looked at the situation that way before, I realized. The truth was ... neither had I. But yes, Dax was right. And the fact that none of this hurt me really showed just how totally over Grayden I was.

“W-what am I supposed to do?” Grayden demanded, defensive. “Take a vow of celibacy?” His gaze sliced back to me. “He’s twisting things, Addie. It’s ... I ... You know he’s wrong. You know I love you. Don’t you?”

Not bothering to hide my doubt, I steadily stared back at him.

His lips flattened. “You can’t really agree with him on this.”

“Of course she can, because she isn’t stupid.” Dax took another step toward him, his eyes twin points of intensity. “We live with our choices, Grayden. You made yours—it wasn’t her. Like it or not, she’s mine. Any baby that grows in her belly will be mine. The come that’s right now leaking out of her is mine. *You* have not one thing to do with her. Focus on your kids and the ex-wife you went back to. They’re the ones who need your time and attention.”

It was really wrong how much the whole M word dazzled my hormones when it came out of Dax’s mouth. I should be used to it right now; shouldn’t get all tingly hearing it anymore. But no, I hadn’t yet built an immunity to it.

A crimson flush swept up Grayden's neck and face. "I hear a lot of 'She's mine.' You know what I don't hear? I don't hear you say you care about her. Can you look me in the eye and honestly tell me, hand on heart, that Addie means anything to you? Can you? Seriously?"

Dax leaned toward him slightly. "Yeah. Yeah, I fucking can." Quiet words that carried the punch of truth and made my heart squeeze.

Grayden's mouth snapped shut so hard I wouldn't be surprised if he'd cracked a tooth.

"Now get out of my office," Dax told him. "And if Mimi tries sending you to do any similar errands, don't bother obliging her. I have no time for you or her."

Grayden dragged in a rattling breath. He looked at me, his eyes tormented and his face expectant ... like he thought any moment now I'd speak up and insist that, no, he loved me.

Yeah, nah.

Finally, he muttered a curse and then barreled out of the office, not bothering to close the door behind him.

I blew out a long breath. "That was intense, to say the least. I must admit, I was not expecting Mimi to make this move. Has she used an intermediary before?"

Staring at the open door, Dax gave his head a small shake. "No, though I suppose it's possible that she made the request of someone. This could simply have been the first time anyone agreed."

I doubted many people would have felt inclined to try involving themselves in Dax's personal business this way, especially in a matter so sensitive. But, as he'd already covered, Grayden had an ulterior motive. He'd wanted to poke into *my* life, resenting that he was on the outside of it.

"It's weird that she sent him to you," I remarked. "I know you and Grayden were once friends, but it's no secret that you're currently at odds with him, his partner, *and* his stepson. She'll be well-aware that you wouldn't want to see

Grayden. I have to therefore question where she saw the wisdom in having him advocate on her behalf.”

Dax turned to fully face me. “The answer is: She didn’t. She sent him here because she’s pissed and felt this was a good way to annoy me.”

“Playing games again,” I muttered. Someone really needed to tell her that she was a grown woman. “At least Grayden should now stay off the scene. After all you just said to him, I don’t believe he’ll try contacting me again. You gave him a wake-up call.”

Dax pursed his lips. “I don’t think it was so much what I said that got through to him. It was what you *didn’t* say. It was that you didn’t step between us, speak in his defense, or swear that I had it all wrong.”

I felt my brow crease. “There was nothing *to* say in his defense. He was way out of line. And full of shit. In any case, I wouldn’t have spoken up for him. My loyalty is to you.”

Dax’s gaze brushed over my face, warm and unwavering. “Yeah, I know,” he said with an easy confidence.

I swallowed, my throat thickening and my chest squeezing. There were times I thought the day would never come that he fully trusted I’d always stand by and with him. And now here it was, and it hit me far deeper than I’d thought it would or could.

Motherfucker, I was falling hard for this man. Seriously, seriously hard. And fast.

## Chapter Thirty

Post orgasm-bliss was a wonderful thing. It could make you breezy about a lot of stuff. Such as your husband delivering suckling bites to the side of your neck that would for sure leave marks. The kind of marks your makeup concealer stood no chance against.

It wasn't rare these days for me to find on waking that we'd edged toward each other during sleep. Sometimes we lay on our sides, our fronts touching. Sometimes one of us would be doing a little spooning. Sometimes I'd be snuggled against his side, my head using his chest as a pillow.

Not once in the past two weeks had we drawn attention to it or awkwardly pulled away when we'd woken. Nor had we ever mentioned it afterwards. As if we had a silent agreement to just let it be.

This morning, I'd woken to feel his front plastered against my back, his cock pressed against me, and his hand playing with my pussy. This wasn't all that rare either. Before long, he'd thrust inside me. Though Dax generally liked to take his time during sex—even if only to make me crazy—that was never the case first thing in the morning. He fucked hard and fast, making no apologies for it.

Oh, no apologies were needed. It was freaking awesome.

Just then, he withdrew his softening cock and flopped onto his back with a languid sigh.

I rolled over to face him, my breathing still a little out of whack. “You could totally give a crash course on the art of fucking. Just sayin.”

His lips curved as his shoulders shook. Only lightly panting, he spoke, “No one ever has or does compliment me quite like you do.” His tone conveyed that he found the whole thing part-weird, part-amusing. I could live with that.



“I’m just saying what other women from your past were thinking.” *The skanks*. Okay, so—with the exception of those who talked to the press—they weren’t skanks, but no one would ever make my possessive hormones think differently.

“No, Addison, I’m pretty certain you’re the only one who’s ever had these thoughts.”

“Whatever. I don’t mind being different.”

His phone alarm began beeping, and he reached over to switch it off. I didn’t activate my own alarm anymore—there seemed no point when I would have set it for the exact same time as his.

Before he could vacate the bed to start getting ready for work, I said, “I wanted to run something by you.”

He paused in his attempt to sit up, instead settling on his elbows. “Go on.”

I really couldn’t put into words exactly how warm and fuzzy it made me feel when he stopped whatever he was doing to give me his full attention this way. “So, you know how you said you wouldn’t mind if I put up a Christmas tree?”

It looked like his eyelid was about to twitch, but it didn’t. “Yes.”

I hadn’t been sure whether or not he’d put up a protest, since he would know from my behavior at Halloween that I wasn’t shy about hanging up all kinds of decorations. But, though he’d cast me a sigh, he’d told me it would be “fine.” And when I’d asked if he was sure, he’d grunted his agreement.

I sat upright. “Well, I know you’re probably going to say no, but I thought I’d ask anyway.”

“Ask what?”

I fought back the urge to nervously chew on my bottom lip. “If you wanted to come with me while I go choose a tree,” I replied.

He frowned. “It’s only the first day of December.”

“Which is when I routinely pick and then decorate one.”

“Every year?”

“Every year.” It was a tradition I’d picked up from my mom, who I hadn’t seen since Thanksgiving. As pre-agreed, Dax and I had first gone to his parents’ home for dinner and then later had eaten dessert with my family.

Both meals had gone smoothly. My mom had been as warm and welcoming toward Dax as his parents now always were to me. The same couldn’t be said for my dad or Ollie when it came to Dax, but they hadn’t glared at him even once. I considered that progress.

I had the feeling my dad had behaved himself in the hope that Dax and I would then have Christmas dinner at my parents’ home this year. But I hadn’t taken them up on their offer, because I didn’t trust that neither Dane nor Ollie would make shitty comments once the alcohol started flowing—*particularly* my brother, who tended to be brutally honest at such times.

Dax’s parents had issued the same invitation to us, but we’d politely turned it down. There would have been a huge fuss if we’d agreed to eat at his parents’ table when we’d spent most of Thanksgiving day with them. We’d placated everyone by promising we’d still pay them a visit on Christmas.

“Does this mean you’re not working today?” he asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“No, I’m still going in. But I’ll only be staying until lunchtime. Then I’ll be heading to a tree farm.” I could tell by his unenthusiastic expression that he was going to veto accompanying me. It was no shocker—he had nothing against this particular holiday, he just didn’t feel compelled to throw himself into any celebratory activities.

I got it. I respected it. And I wouldn’t want him to be part of things he’d find no actual enjoyment in. That wasn’t what the holidays were about anyway. But, with how much I’d

come to enjoy us doing things together, my stomach sank in disappointment all the same.

Having no intention of letting it show, I gave a casual shrug. “It’s fine if you’d rather sit this one out. I know you’re super busy, and I know the thought of Christmas doesn’t exactly get you excited. I just wanted to make the offer, since this is your home and I figured it was possible you might want some input. But if you do want input without having to make the trip, I can text you pictures of trees I like and you can then tell me which you prefer,” I offered.

He watched me steadily for a long moment. “Do you usually do this alone?”

“No, I generally rope someone into coming with me. Usually one of my sisters or Ollie unless—” I stopped speaking and twisted my mouth.

“Unless you have a boyfriend at the time,” he guessed, the warm languidness in his eyes beginning to cool.

“Uh-huh. But I often tended to be single during the month of December.”

“Why?”

“No reason. It wasn’t a purposeful thing. It just regularly turned out that way.” For the first time in years, I wouldn’t be alone for the holidays. I’d wake up Christmas Day to someone sleeping beside me.

Though my relationship with Grayden had been serious, we hadn’t been together Christmas morning. He’d rightfully spent the night before in his own home with his daughters—he and Felicity used to spend alternate Christmas Eves with them.

Dax exhaled a long sigh. “I’ll go with you.”

I blinked, taken aback. “You will?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

I felt my lips part. “Now I feel bad.”

His brow pinched. “You feel bad?”

“It’s just that I can quite clearly see that you don’t want to go, and I don’t like that I’m pulling you into something you’d prefer to not do. Why *are* you agreeing to come?”

He pushed off his elbows. “Just because I don’t have many personal traditions doesn’t mean I don’t understand how important they are to people. If this is something you do every year, it’s clearly important to you—I respect that. And I might as well get on board, since it has now become my tradition by virtue of us being married.”

I cleared my throat and plucked at the coverlet. “Oh. Well. Than—”

“Don’t,” he threw out, narrowing his eyes.

Feeling my brow crease in confusion, I cocked my head. “Why don’t you like me to thank you?” It always seemed to annoy him.

“You thank me for things that it’s only natural I do, given you’re my wife.”

Really, though, he didn’t need to do such “natural” stuff. We still weren’t a couple in the truest sense of the word. He was free of many expectations wives generally had for their husbands. And yet ... he was going to accompany me, because he took things that were important to me seriously.

I swallowed hard, touched. He might not care deeply for me, but he cared what mattered to me. That meant a lot.

The moat that existed between us had narrowed over the past couple of weeks. I felt it. Heard it in his words. Saw it in his actions.

“I’m a person who likes to express her gratitude,” I said.

“Well, don’t.”

I sighed. “But I don’t want you to think I take you or the things you do for granted.”

His face softened. “I already know you don’t, because I know *you*. So, you can keep any thanks to yourself in future.”

That wasn’t likely to happen, and he’d just have to suck it up.

He flicked back the covers. “Closet. I want to choose what you wear today.”

I felt my forehead crease. “You only usually ask to do that on days we spend apart.”

One brow crawled up. “Is that a no?”

I shook my head. “I’m just making an observation. Are you ever going to tell me why it ‘pleases’ you that I consent to this?”

“Probably not.”

“Because you’d prefer not to, or because you like that *not knowing* vexes me as much as it does?”

Humor danced in his eyes. “A little of the first, a lot of the latter.”

I barely held back a huff. *Ass*. “Maybe I should start not telling *you* things, like ... I don’t know, but I’ll think of something.”

His mouth quirked. “I’m sure you will. But it should make you feel better that you’ll be leading me around a Christmas tree farm this afternoon.” A pained expression took over his face.

“Please don’t cry. I’m not good with sobbers.”

He spared me a hard glance before swinging his legs over the side of the bed. “Closet.”

“I heard you the first



Later that day, I tipped my head to the side as I drank in the sight of the red cedar we’d placed in the corner of the

living room. “I think that’s a good spot.”

Beside me, Dax grunted in agreement. “The one I had last year was set up near the window. It looked out of place.”

I frowned, surprised. “You had a tree last year?”

Another grunt—this one of confirmation. “Mimi hauled one here on Christmas Eve to surprise me,” he explained, frustration lining his forehead. “I only allowed her to set it up because her aunt had just died and she wasn’t in a good place.”

I would bet that Mimi had counted on him making such allowances for her. She was no stranger to manipulating him. “Did she ask to stay over?”

“Yes. But that wasn’t something I was going to consent to, no matter her situation. It certainly didn’t help her case that she made yet another ... sexual overture that was subtle enough she could play off as a joke. So I told her to leave.”

Annoyance arrowed through me on hearing about her “overture.” I wondered if she’d thought he might make a more vulnerable “target” during the holidays; that she’d have more chance of successfully seducing him while he’d surely be feeling lonely. “I’m guessing she didn’t take that well.”

“She smashed a few baubles on her way out.”

My mouth flattening, I shook my head. “The woman is unreal.” Neither of us had heard from her again since the day she appeared at my office, and she hadn’t attempted to communicate through intermediaries a second time. In fact, it seemed that she truly had left Redwater and was now in the wind.

“Well, shall we get started?” he asked, unenthusiastically gesturing at the box of tree ornaments I’d asked him to pull out of storage.

I gave him a winning smile. “Works for me.” When I earlier asked him if he’d help me decorate the tree, I’d thought he’d respond with a hard no. Instead—wearing the most tortured expression—he’d agreed, the words sounding torn from his soul. I’d offered him an out, but he’d waved it off.

As he ripped open the box, I pulled up a music playlist on my phone. I'd no sooner pressed "play" than he straightened and shot me a flat stare.

"No," he said.

Much as I'd guessed this would be his reaction, I pushed, "Why not?"

"I've agreed to help you with the tree, but I draw the line at listening to holiday music the entire time."

Cutting off the song, I sniffed. "Fine, Scrooge."

"I'd rather be Scrooge than a Christmas elf like you."

A surprised chuckle bubbled up. "My mom is worse than I am, believe it or not."

"I don't believe it."

I snickered. "I'm serious. She turns into a cookie-making monster. Growing up, we had trees in several rooms. She played Christmas tunes throughout most of December. And from the seventeenth to the twenty-fourth, we would watch a holiday movie every night as part of the countdown. Didn't your family have any traditions?"

"Some. Most were outdoor activities—a parade, a theater show, a market, a food festival, a short skiing trip. Things like that. We did them every December without fail."

"And they scarred you?" I asked with mock sympathy. "Made it impossible for you to find enjoyment in the holidays as an adult?"

Exasperation flickered across his face. "I don't dislike Christmas. I simply don't feel the need to make it the focus of an entire month."

"Gotcha." Hiding my amusement, I patted his arm. "Well, don't worry, I won't drag you into my plans to attend a Christmas festival or hit an ice rink. Mostly because I want to go with someone who'll enjoy it—it's otherwise not as fun."

He took a long look at the boxed-up decorations. "You have a lot of stuff in here."

“I’ve collected it all over the years.” I pointed to the nearby shopping bag that I’d retrieved from my reading den a few minutes ago. “Those there are new. I always buy at least three newies each year.”

He selected a glittery red bauble. “The larger ones go on the bottom, the smaller ones go on the top. Yes?”

I grinned. “Clever boy.”

As we hung up ornaments and baubles, I deliberated on what exactly to buy him for Christmas. Whenever I considered it, I came up blank. What did you get for a guy who had pretty much everything he wanted?

Seeing that he was looking at me funny, I leaned my head back slightly. “What?”

“Why are you decorating the back of the tree? No one is going to see it.”

“I’m not going to lumber this beauty with a bald spot. That would just be mean.”

He squinted. “In other words, you just love decorating trees so much that you’re going to cover every last inch of it,” he correctly guessed.

“Don’t judge.” We went back to hanging up the other ornaments and baubles, until finally there was only one thing left. I held up the tree topper. “Will you do the honors?”

He took it from me, eyeing it strangely. “This is a red panda.”

“Wearing a Santa hat, I know. Cute, huh?”

“Since when do people stick these on the top of their trees?”

“Most people likely don’t. But I do. Stars and angels are boring. Red pandas, however? Not at all boring. So ... ” I waved a hand at the tree, smiling when he fixed on the topper with an aggravated sigh. “Thank you.”

A muscle in his cheek flexed. “I told you not to—”



“Whatever.” I took a few steps back to properly admire our handiwork. “It looks good.”

He gave what appeared to be a reluctant nod. “Better than I expected.”

“Should I be offended by that? I feel like I should be.”

Grunting, he tipped his chin at the three other boxes he’d hauled down for me. “What’s in those?”

I felt my mouth curve. “Just a few finishing touches,” I replied vaguely.

He mostly stood back and observed as I set up candles, gnomes, nutcrackers, musical ornaments, and the fireplace garland. His scowl did ease when he realized I’d bought him a Christmas stocking—a Grinch-themed one, as I thought it fitting. He then helped me with not only hanging up the door wreath but the outdoor lights.

Once we were done, I gave him another smile. “You had fun. Admit it.”

“Fun,” he repeated in a toneless voice. “Right.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine, you’re sobbing inside because you loathed every minute of it—whatever. Speaking of misery ... I’ll be having my office Christmas party in a few weeks. Are you going to be my plus-one without complaint, or am I going to have to mope and sulk until you agree?”

“No moping or sulking will be necessary. I’ll be having my own Christmas party at some point. I’ll expect you to accompany me.”

“I’ll be there.” I set my hands on my hips. “Now, I need to put these empty boxes back into the storage cupboard. After that, I have plans to watch a movie while sipping hot chocolate. It’s one of my traditions.”

He sighed. “You really do go all-out to celebrate the first day of December, don’t you?”

“Yup. Care to join me? I’m thinking of throwing on *Die Hard*, but I’m open to suggestions.” I was also well-aware that he was going to walk away, shaking his head, eager for

some alone-time. I'd commandeered the majority of his day, after all.

"I have a few emails to send," he said, collecting the empty boxes, waving away my attempt to help. "Start the movie without me. I'll join you when I'm done."

Thrown, I double-blinked. "O-okay."

He walked away, taking the boxes with him.

Once I'd made a mug of hot chocolate, I settled in the living room and started to watch *Die Hard* on a streaming service. I'd been expecting him to show up near the end of the movie, but it had only been playing for fifteen minutes when he entered the room.

He sank onto the sofa beside me and draped his arm over the back of it, sitting so close our thighs touched. He didn't hesitate to do that these days when we watched TV together. Not that we cuddled or—aside from the time when we'd watched *The Conjuring 2*—he urged me to lean into him or anything. He just had no issues boldly invading my personal space, as if he saw it as his right.

I flicked a glance at the mug I held. "Want a taste?"

"Yes." He slowly swooped down and then lowered his mouth to mine. He licked and sipped and savored, waking up my body, making every last cell *zing*.

My belly fluttering, I tried deepening the kiss.

He pulled back and shook his head. "You wanted to watch a movie."

"Yes. *Did*. Past tense." I cupped his dick through his jeans. "Now I want this."

He let out a low grunt, heat flaring in his eyes. "Do you?"

"Yes."

He removed my hand and set it on my thigh. "You'll just have to wait."

I gave a playful pout. “It’s mine. I should be able to have it whenever I want it.”

Something rippled across his face, his eyes now burning with an indecent lust that hit me in my core. “Yes, it’s yours,” he readily agreed. “But you had your way last night, didn’t you?”

I had indeed. He’d lay back and let *me* do the exploring and teasing for a change—which I’d done a lot of. “But—”

“No, I wouldn’t dream of stepping on your traditions,” he said, all mock consideration. “That wouldn’t be right.”

*This motherfucker.*

He cupped my jaw with a no-nonsense grip and turned my face back to the TV. “Watch.”

It was one word. Just one. But there was such sexual power in it, such sheer assertiveness, that it all but seized my compliance ... even as it demanded nothing.

I knew why he insisted we wait until the movie was over. In a strange sort of way, this was foreplay. A barefaced tease. He was well-aware I’d be sitting here wanting, craving, needing.

I barely registered the scenes playing out on the TV. Couldn’t focus for shit. My thoughts were centered on him, on what would soon come, on the expectation of his touch.

Tension sparked. Grew. Coiled. Stretched out like a rubber band.

A feverish anticipation began to skip along my prickling skin. My pulse skittered each time he moved ... but he kept his hands to himself. Didn’t touch me even once.

I would have complained if I thought it would get me anywhere. But I could sense he was in one of those moods where he was intent on getting his way. In truth, I couldn’t say I hated it, because the wait was infuriating in the most decadent way.

Once the movie was over, I thought he’d turn to me and claim my mouth again; maybe tell me to strip or bend

over. Nope. He started doing the things that he normally did before we went to bed—putting dirty dishware in the kitchen, switching all the electronics off, and locking the house up tight.

Not about to hang around waiting for direction, I headed upstairs. At this point, sexual restlessness had flooded my brain and body. A restlessness so raw and edgy it was almost painful.

Once I'd placed my shoes on a shelf in the closet, I made my way to the en suite bathroom so I could shed my clothes and dump them in the hamper there. My reflection caught my attention, and I silently groaned. *Mascara goop.*

Who didn't love mascara goop?

I gently removed it from the corner of my eye and then washed my finger. I'd just finished drying it with a small towel when he came breezing into the room. In the mirror's reflection, his gaze caught mine. Darkened. Glittered. Stripped me bare in every sense.

My heart excitedly pounding in my chest, I didn't move. I simply watched him slowly move closer and closer. The moment stretched out, making my stomach all light and fluttery.

Dax came up behind me, keeping his hands by his sides. He settled his nose behind my ear and inhaled deeply. "Face me."

I did so, my chest lightly brushing his. Possession shone in the mismatched orbs that watched me *so damn intensely*. As always, being the focal point of such unwavering attention short-circuited my brain. My pulse kicked up, going faster and faster until it was racing.

"I want you to be still for me. Very, very still," he specified, his voice liquid enticement, sheer dominance threaded through every note, luring me to follow and please, promising carnal pleasures.

I allowed myself to be swept under, submerging into that mental state where I felt only calm, safe, protected, and so

supremely turned-on I ached with it.

He sensed my ceding of control, and a predatory satisfaction gleamed in his eyes. Pride was there, too. And ownership.

“Always so good at pleasing me,” he murmured, his eyes following the path of his finger as he dragged it down the side of my neck in a whisper-soft movement. “Last night, you got to play. Tonight, it’s my turn.” His arresting gaze sank into mine, a warning there. “And I’m not in the mood to play nice.”

That didn’t sound like anything I’d find myself complaining about at any point.

“I want you naked,” he said, his captivating pitch so deep, so steady, so molten. When I went to reach for the bottom of my tee, he gave a slow shake of the head and added, “I’ll be the one who strips you.” He lightly tapped my lower lip with his finger. “Fuck dolls can’t undress themselves.”

My mouth went ahead and dried right up.

He removed my clothing one piece at a time. He didn’t rush, but he didn’t drag his heels either. He was *all* business—distant, clinical, determined.

Once I was bare, he took his time letting his gaze roam over me. Pure male avarice settled into every line of his face. “Absolute perfection.”

He dipped his head and took my mouth with a sensual expertise that seemed as easy for him as breathing. The kiss was a lure. A seduction. A claiming. It had chemicals doing a full-on jig in my system and racing through my veins like wildfire.

I moaned into his mouth. He swallowed the sound with a gratified hum. And then the kiss roughened, deepened, became laced with a gluttonous need.

He palmed my pussy, his hold nothing short of proprietary. Moaning again, I fisted his shirt, an edgy need buzzing in my blood. I was now so unbelievably wet and—

He broke the kiss with a hard nip to the corner of my mouth. “Turn around.”

I blinked, taken aback. What, no sensual torture this time? Then I remembered his earlier words ...

*I'm not in the mood to play nice.*

Huh. I did as he requested.

“What a well-behaved fuck doll you are,” he praised with something akin to pride, his eyes twin gales of intemperate lust. “Grab onto the counter.”

I grasped it tight, licking my lips. I heard the rustle of clothes, the jingle of a belt buckle, the lowering of a zipper. Something warm and hard slapped my ass.

I swallowed. “I need—”

“You *should* need.” His jaw hard, he kicked my legs further apart. “You should need me every bit as much as I need you.”

He really didn't sound all too pleased about the needing me part.

His lips grazed my ear. “I hope for your sake that you're wet, baby, or this is going to hurt.” He swiped the broad head of his cock along my slit once, twice.

Then he slammed home.

My breath caught as my aching core was stuffed so full it stung. But I *was* wet, so it wasn't too much. Which was good for me, because he didn't give me a single second to adjust.

He bounced me on his cock. Literally. There was no thrusting, no. He didn't fuck me. He was using my body to get off—simple.

The hands firmly clamped around my hips forcefully yanked me onto his cock, his pace frantic and unrelenting as he treated me like the fuck doll he'd called me. And I reveled in it—moaning, whimpering, drinking in his every grunt and groan.

His thick shaft mercilessly abraded my slick inner walls. The friction was maddening. The fullness was overwhelming. The winding tension was all-consuming.

His hold on my hips becoming tighter, he locked his gaze on mine again. “Look at you, all flushed and owned and blissed-out.”

I gasped as he shifted me slightly. The new angle made his cock slide even deeper each time he roughly hauled me to him. I scraped at the counter with my nails, biting so hard into my lip I was surprised I didn’t taste blood.

The tension inside me began to coil and sharpen as my release came closer and closer. My thigh muscles bunched and quivered. My breaths started coming hard and fast. My moans rose in volume. My grip on the counter became white-knuckled.

A finger rolled my clit. “Come.”

The heat in my belly boiled over and *exploded* outward, wrenching a hoarse cry out of my throat, making my pussy tighten and ripple.

He didn’t stop bouncing me on his cock. He roughly used me like it was his God-given right, completely unapologetic about it, making it clear that he wasn’t done.

The skin of my hips hurt from his bruising grip, but I didn’t care. Didn’t care when he began handling me even more roughly as he spoke of all the unspeakable things he wanted to do to me.

My breath caught as a wet fingertip whispered over the puckered hole between the cheeks of my ass. I clenched against the intrusion without thought, and he let out a dark chuckle.

“You can’t keep me out, baby. This ass is mine.” As if to prove it, he pushed his finger forward and breached the tight ring of muscle. “It’s always been mine. I claimed it long ago. I never gave it back.”

He started impaling me even harder on his cock, the move also filling my ass with his finger. Holy fucking shit, I

was going to come again super soon. The dual assault was wrecking me.

I burned, I shuddered, I spiraled with mindless need. Tension began to gather and simmer low in my belly again—it built fast, poised itself to strike. And then it crept closer ...

My inner walls rippled. My breathing went to shit. My grip on the counter tightened.

“That’s it, come for me again,” he rumbled.

Oh, I came all right. A blinding, far-too-intense pleasure roared through me over and over in what felt like an endless loop of euphoria. My head whipped back as a silent scream robbed me of breath and my pussy clamped down on him.

Dax grunted. “Fuck, Addie.” *Then* he started to fuck me, ramming his hips forward over and over, making his belt buckle jingle. It was brutal and pitiless and violent.

I felt his cock thicken and pulse just before he buried himself unbearably deep. He bit out something crude as he exploded, blasting out whip after whip of come.

Then we both kind of slumped.



## Chapter Thirty-One

“I really appreciate this, Addie,” said Marleigh the following Saturday as we stood on her front door step. “The shower was everything I would have wanted.”

Neither Sabrina nor I had told her that we’d been planning to throw the baby shower for her. We’d only sprung the news of it on Marleigh yesterday, and ... well, she’d cried. The heavily pregnant woman did a lot of that nowadays. She was close to crying again right at this very moment—her eyes were actually welling up.

“It’s like you have an endless supply of tears,” I teased.

“It’s the hormones,” she sniffled before placing a hand on her swollen belly. “And the back pain. And the whole waddling like a penguin thing. And have you *seen* the size of my bump? My grandmother asked me *twice* if I was sure I wasn’t having twins. My aunt said she wouldn’t be surprised to hear it was triplets.”

I kissed her forehead. “Ignore those people. You look beautiful, even with your eyes all red and puffy.”

Hearing the purr of a car engine, we looked to see Ollie parking at the curb. He exited the vehicle with a smile, but his brow furrowed as he saw his fiancée trying to smother sobs.

He made a beeline for her. “What’s wrong?” he asked, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Did you struggle to zip up your boots again?”

She socked him in the gut, seeming to delight in his *oof*. “I get no sympathy from you. None.”

He chuckled. “Did you enjoy your baby shower?”

Her glistening eyes lit up. “I did.” She grabbed his hand. “Wait until you see all the gifts for the baby. There are even some for me.”

“Did I get any?” he asked, sliding his arm around her shoulder.

“Nope.”

His brow pinched. “Hey, how’s that fair?”

She offered him a brittle smile. “Oh, I’m sorry, are *you* carrying our child for nine months?”

He grimaced. “No—”

“Then you get no rewards.”

“Rewards, huh? Okay.” He nodded at me, his mouth curved. “Thanks, Addie. I really appreciate it. And thanks to you, too, Sabrina,” he added as my BFF materialized.

She inclined her head. “You’re very welcome, my dear almost-brother-in-law. But if you let Marleigh do as she threatened and call the baby Winchester—”

“Threatened?” echoed Marleigh, her nose scrunching up.

“—you and me are gonna have a huge fallout.”

Marleigh sighed at her sister. “I didn’t *threaten* anything. I mentioned that I very much like the name and just might choose it if the baby’s a boy.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Winchester,” Ollie cut in.

Sabrina blinked. “You’d be naming your son after a gun *and* a haunted building. What on Earth makes you think that would be a good idea?”

How my BFF didn’t see that the couple was fucking with her, I didn’t know. “You’re all ridiculous.” I tugged on Sabrina’s arm. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Fine,” she huffed.

After the hugs and goodbyes were done and dusted, she and I walked toward our respective car.

“Well,” began Sabrina, “I think we did awesome, considering we’ve never thrown a baby shower before.”

I shrugged. “Of course it was a success. We’re good at what we do.”

A glint of pride glowed in her eyes. “This is true.” She paused, nudging me with her elbow. “Just think, we could be throwing a baby shower for you sometime next year.”

That was my hope.

As I drove home, I reflected on how—for the first time in a long while—I had true confidence that my personal goals would be met in the near future. I’d *thought* I’d been so hopeful with Grayden, but I realized now it wasn’t quite the case.

Back then, in truth, I’d simply wanted so desperately for it all to work out that I’d firmly told myself it would. I’d ignored my doubts, ignored my reservations, ignored the voice in my head that warned he still had feelings for Felicity.

And that was my fuckup.

I had no such reservations when it came to Dax or what lay ahead for us, despite that we didn’t have a conventional marriage. There was no part of me that watched him warily or worried he’d toss aside the promises he made to me. I didn’t feel at all insecure with him—he gave no room for that to happen; reassured me both through words and actions that I had no need to be.

On arriving at the villa, I strolled through the hallway, peeking into rooms as I went by, finding no sign of Dax. I was just about to call his name when I noticed him through one of the kitchen’s floor-to-ceiling windows—he was sitting on one of the comfy loungers near the pool. No, straddling it, his back stiff. And he was fully clothed.

I slid open the patio door and stepped outside. “Hey, what you doing out here?”

Sipping whiskey, he looked at me. And I stopped dead. His expression was sober and shuttered, and his eyes were two wells of sheer weariness.

Goosebumps swept up my arms. “What’s happened?”

A long sigh slid out of him. “Nothing,” he replied, sounding both tired and distracted. “It’s just been one of those days.” He went back to staring at the rippling pool water.

“Dax, don’t blow me off,” I said, my voice firm but gentle. “We don’t do that to each other, remember?”

No response.

I crossed to the lounge beside his and perched my butt on the edge of it. He didn’t even glance my way, just stared straight ahead of him, his gaze unfocused. Even though all I could see was his profile, I didn’t miss how utterly drained he seemed. Not physically drained, but emotionally.

Leaning forward to rest my lower arms on my thighs, I flicked a look at his half-empty tumbler. “What’s got you sitting out here drinking whiskey?” Still nothing. “Okay, we don’t have to talk. I’ll just sit and stare at you until you feel creeped out. I might even throw in some heavy breathing or hum eerie tunes just to bump up the ick factor.”

His head very slowly swung my way, and he gifted me with a half-hearted droll look. “I meant it when I said nothing has happened.”

“You also said it’s ‘been one of those days,’ which means it was—at the very least—relatively shitty. Tell me about it. Offload it all.” I felt my brow pucker. “Everyone’s okay, right?”

“Yes.” Sighing again, he pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s the anniversary of my maternal grandmother’s birthday, so I spent most of it with my mom. This day is always hard for her.”

I felt my jaw drop and my gut twist. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“Because I knew you were throwing Marleigh’s baby shower.” He lowered his hand to his lap. “You might have arranged the party, but you were just as much a guest as anyone else. You were looking forward to it. I wasn’t going to spoil that for you.”

“That’s not how this works, Dax. I get to be there for you—”

“You would have delayed telling me if things were the other way around.” He gave me a pointed look. “Don’t say

you wouldn't have—that would be a lie.”

I snapped my mouth shut, annoyed I couldn't disagree. “If you'd told me last week, when I mentioned that I'd settled on this date for the baby shower, I could have rearranged it.”

“For what purpose? There's nothing you could have done. And you had already dished out invitations by that point.”

I went to argue ... but then stopped. Because a dispute wasn't what he needed from me right now. Softening my voice, I asked, “How's your mom?”

“Not good. She and my grandmother had a complicated relationship, but they loved each other.”

I slanted my head. “What about you? How are you doing?”

He only made a noncommittal sound.

“That bad, huh?”

Another long sigh. “It's not easy to get through to somebody that their feelings of guilt are unnecessary when they won't even admit to experiencing such guilt.”

I frowned, trying to read between the lines. “Your mom blames herself for Clear's suicide?”

“Not quite. But she does feel she could have done more for her.”

“In what way?” I prompted when he said no more.

His gaze resettling on the pool, Dax took a swig of his drink. “My mom always suspected that Clear would kill herself after Bale was executed. She had my grandmother under constant watch, brought her to live with us, got her professional help, but ...”

But Clear had thrown herself in front of a bus and then died on the way to the hospital—I'd heard that much. I'd also heard whispers of there having been a suicide note in her pocket that had explained how she'd seen no point in life if she'd had to live it without the man she'd loved.

I swiped my tongue across my lower lip. “Did your grandmother genuinely love Bale?”

“She swore she did, but I don’t know if I’d really call what she felt for him ‘love.’”

When he again fell quiet, I reached over and gently poked the side of his knee. “I get that you’re not much of a sharer and that this has to be a *really* difficult matter for you to talk about, but if you won’t speak to me about it, at least call Caelan or Drey. I don’t like the idea of you bottling up all the stuff that’s right now flying through your head.”

His gaze cut back to me. “You really want to hear about this fucked up shit?”

“Not because I find it morbidly fascinating. I just want you to offload everything. You know I’d never repeat any of it.”

“I do know,” he softly confirmed.

The complete confidence with which he said that made my chest pang. “I never met Clear, but I saw her from time to time from afar. What was she like?”

He exhaled heavily and turned away again. I thought he might once more fall silent, but then he spoke.

“It’s easy to assume she must have been fucked in the head to marry a death row convict.” He scratched his chin briefly. “It wasn’t that. She was just a very wounded person who sought safety, protection, and love from the wrong kinds of people.”

I’d seen that behavior before in others. None of those people had gone on to wed a serial killer, but they’d gotten involved with partners who’d been bad for them.

Dax sipped at his whiskey. “She’d known abuse. Pain. Abandonment. Fear. But she hadn’t really processed anything she’d gone through. She’d dissociated instead. Lived in a bubble she’d created, where her world was exactly how she’d wanted it. Being in a relationship with a prisoner who would never be released meant she’d been was ‘safe.’ He could never harm her. Never cheat on her. Never dominate or bully or

control her. He'd *needed* her—she'd been his only real link to the outside world.”

Ah. While it was intellectually understandable, considering the psyche worked in the strangest ways, it was still somewhat difficult to grasp that someone would wish to marry a person like Bale. “She always seemed happy.”

“In her own way, she was. She'd loved me, my brothers, and Raven. Loved my mom with a fierce devotion. But Bale had come first to her, because of how he'd made Clear *feel*. Safe. Adored. Needed. Understood. Special. And when he died, she hadn't been able to bear not having any of that anymore.”

“He was like a crutch, then? She was dependent on him in some ways?”

Dax nodded, his expression turning grimmer. “There was never any changing that. We all tried—me, my siblings, my parents, even Clear's friends. It made no difference.”

“You can't help people who don't want help or can't see that they need it,” I softly pointed out, detecting that Kensey wasn't the only person in this picture who felt guilty for not having been able to reach Clear. “You were all good to your grandmother. A lot of people would have kicked her out of their lives, all things considered. Your family did the opposite, despite everything.” Which couldn't have been anything close to easy. “Any feelings of guilt here are misplaced.”

“Yes. And my mom knows that deep down, but it doesn't make much difference. What adds to her guilt is that they fought so much. They didn't used to. Not until after I was born. Clear would try pushing her to take me to see Bale. My mom refused, but Clear never let up over the years. She was the same regarding each of my siblings.”

“I can't say I blame Kensey for keeping you all away from him.” I doubted I'd have taken my children to a maximum security facility to meet a man who had butchered women.

“It hurt her that Clear would push and push even as she saw how her relationship with Bale affected her grandchildren’s lives. But in Clear’s mind, he was a changed, misunderstood man who loved his family.” Dax shrugged one shoulder. “As I said, she lived in her own personal bubble.”

I nibbled on my bottom lip. “Did you ever want to see him?”

“No. I won’t lie, I was curious about him. Curious about what was in the letters he wrote to me. He used to hand them to Clear and ask her to pass them on—my mom held them back, though. She did the same with the letters he wrote to my brothers and Raven as well.”

Personally, I felt it was best that Kensey had done so. “Did you ever ask to read them?”

“No. The only reason Bale was reaching out to me was to try to infiltrate my mom’s personal life. He saw her as his daughter. His angel. His bright spot. He cared for her in a way that only someone like him could care for another person. He didn’t like that he saw so little of her.”

“And he thought if he could win your affections, so to speak, you might pester her to take you to visit him ... and then he’d be able to see her,” I surmised.

Dax dipped his chin. “Yes. It was only ever about her.” He tossed back the last of his whiskey. “It sounds crazy to say it, but he wasn’t evil. Wasn’t one-dimensional that way. The parts of him that weren’t warped and twisted formed a deep attachment to her, and that messed with her head. As did the fact that she’d loved him when she was a kid. A kid who’d had no idea of the things he’d done. A kid who hadn’t even realized he wasn’t her biological father—Clear hadn’t told her that. She’d learned of it through gossip.”

“Shit,” I muttered with an inward wince.

“Yeah.” Dax inhaled deeply. “If what he’d felt for my mom had been a real, selfless love, he would have backed off completely. But the truth is he had no capacity to feel such an emotion. But Clear wouldn’t admit to that, or see any wrong in



having married him. So yeah, she and Mom had argued a lot when I was a kid. Especially when my name was printed in articles in connection with him, or when I'd come home covered in bruises after being in yet another fight—sometimes while defending Clear after assholes called her a serial killer's slut.”

I clenched my teeth as anger whipped to life in my belly. “And then you had to deal with people comparing you to him on top of all that. Why on Earth would anyone think that you brawling with other teenage boys even came close to the actions of a murderous sexual sadist?”

“When Bale was a teenager, he got into a lot of fights. He liked to give pain, and he liked to receive it.” Dax licked over his front teeth. “People insinuated we were similar in that way.”

I frowned, my head rearing back slightly. “But aside from liking to dish out a spanking during sex or whatever, you're not into that stuff.”

“No, I'm not. But some of Redwater's population liked to make out differently. It made good gossip, I suppose.”

I let out a sound of disgust. “People suck.” I cast a look at his empty tumbler. “Want a refill?”

“No.” He set his glass on the table between our loungers and then patted the spot between his spread thighs. “I want you to come kneel right here.”

I narrowed my eyes as his own began to heat and darken. “What'll happen if I do?”

“Many, many things,” he replied, the words practically dripping with liquid sex.

He wanted to forget, I realized. Wanted to shove everything out of his mind and seek the most basic form of oblivion. “You know, most people would just ask for a hug when they're feeling down.”

“Most people don't have a wife who's as good with their mouth as you are.”

I laughed, taken by surprise. “All right. I’m game for whatever you’ve got in mind.” I stood. “You’ve sure never let me down sexually before.”

His lips kicked up. “Right back at you.”

## Chapter Thirty-Two

A week later, Drey plonked my heavy shopping bags in my trunk with a grunt. “What have you got in those? Bricks?”

Feeling my lips wing up, I shrugged. “Christmas gifts, mostly.” I’d had more to buy this year, since my family had expanded on my marrying Dax. Which wasn’t at all a complaint. I loved shopping for gifts, especially during the holidays.

The creases on Drey’s forehead smoothed out as his mouth tipped up. “Did you get anything for me?”

“Of course.” I poked his arm playfully. “As if I’d leave out my favorite brother-in-law. What do you take me for?”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Favorite. Sure.”

I’d unexpectedly come across him, Jag, and Jag’s girlfriend Leonie a few minutes ago as I was leaving the mall. All three were on their way to the nearby bowling alley, where they would be meeting up with a few other friends. Drey had insisted on carrying all my bags to the parking lot for me first, the gent. And since he was a mountain of pure male strength—seriously, his muscles had muscles—I hadn’t objected. My damn palms stung from where the bag handles had been digging into my skin.

Using my key fob to close the trunk, I swept my gaze over the trio as I asked, “Have you guys done all your Christmas shopping yet?”

“Almost,” said Drey. “I do mine online.”

Jag grunted. “Same.”

“Yeah,” began Leonie with a curl of her upper lip, “who wants to walk around a mall?”

I gave her a bright smile. “Me.”

She let out a snooty scoff. “I guess shopping sprees are nothing new for you. Must be nice to have been loaded all

your life.”

*Eye roll.* It was safe to say that Leonie hadn’t warmed to me. She still felt it necessary to hold my trust fund and financial security against me ... as if I didn’t know what it meant to “struggle” or fight for what I wanted and needed in life and so wasn’t worthy of her respect.

I’d met people before who held such a viewpoint. I’d probably meet more in the future as well. And while I understood where they were coming from, I felt that they often failed to consider that *everyone* experienced struggles of some kind. Financial security didn’t provide a buffer from pain, problems, or loss. In fact, having money often came with its own set of issues.

But I had no intention of discussing it with her—I was too damn old to care what perfect strangers thought of me. So, ignoring the bitchy portion of her comment, I instead said, “Well, malls sure aren’t for everyone. In fact, they—Drey, no peeking in my bags!”

My brother-in-law straightened. “I was only looking at the wrapping paper. Do you really need that much of it?”

I smiled at the memory of one roll almost giving him a hellacious bitch slap when he earlier lifted my bags to stick them in the trunk. “Yes, because I have other gifts to wrap as well. Most of it is stuff I ordered online. I’m planning to do all my wrapping this weekend so I can stick the presents under the tree.”

“I still can’t believe you got Dax to help you put up a Christmas tree,” said Drey, blowing out an astonished breath.

“I still can’t believe he’s good with *having* a tree,” remarked Jag. “How did you get him to agree?”

As I wasn’t inclined to share the very sweet and private things Dax had said to me on this matter, I simply shrugged one shoulder and flashed Jag a mysterious smile. “I have my ways.” I then refocused on Drey. “I heard from Harri that Sabre’s doing better.”

“Your sister performed some kind of black magic on my dog—she denies it, but nothing else makes sense,” insisted Drey. “He’s still not quite right upstairs, and I doubt anything will change that. But he’s more chilled. Especially around Harri. He fairly trips all over himself to please her, tongue lolling, tail wagging. He absolutely adores her.”

“Harri’s easy to adore.”

The curve of his mouth said he agreed ... but not as a guy potentially interested in a girl. No, more as a guy who thought he had a super cool friend.

Ugh, these two were gonna drive me bonkers. Because honestly, I thought they’d make a good couple if they’d only consider crossing the “friend” line. “It would seem that Jameson certainly thinks so—he wants to take her out for lunch.” Harri had mentioned it yesterday via text.

A faint line dented Drey’s brow, making him look somewhat put-out. Huh. How very interesting.

“Isn’t he a little old for her?” asked Drey, his voice sort of gruff.

I snickered. “You sound like Alicia.” I didn’t miss that Jag’s shoulders slightly tensed on hearing her name. “But then, she thinks everyone’s too old for Harri.”

Drey scratched his jaw. “I saw Alicia from afar a few days ago. She was scowling at her phone like its very existence offended her.”

She had probably received yet another message from Dario. The asshole wasn’t giving up. I wouldn’t explain the situation to these people here, though. I liked Drey and Jag a lot, but Alicia’s business was *her* business. And I wouldn’t reveal any of it in front of Leonie anyway.

As such, I gave an aloof shrug and said, “Maybe she lost at a game of Solitaire or something. Right, I’ve got to dash. Thank you for the assist, it was good to see you all.” Or it was good to see the guys, anyway.

We exchanged goodbyes, though all I received from Leonie was a halfhearted wave that was no more than a flick

of her hand. Oh, how heartbroken I was.

I made my way to the driver's door and pulled it open. I was about to slide into the vehicle when I noticed two people standing near a parked car several feet away in the lot.

Felicity and Blaise.

Wonderful. Positively wonderful.

I straightened my shoulders, bracing myself for trouble. But ... I didn't receive my usual snarl from Blaise. He avoided meeting my eyes like they had the ability to hypnotize.

Felicity didn't sneer at me either. In fact, she weirdly flashed me a smirk. A mean-ass, superior, "*I almost pity you*" smirk.

I tensed. In what world would she ever pity me? Ever?

In a world where she knew about the pact.

That seemed the likeliest explanation. She could have learned of it from Grayden. Having such knowledge would definitely result in Felicity finding me nothing but a mere joke—that was how she'd view the situation.

Maybe I should have expected Grayden to tell her. He wasn't exactly a fan of either Dax or me at the moment. I'd seen him from a distance a few times while out and about. He spotted me on each occasion but made a point of looking the other way in a dismissive gesture.

"Well, hello, Addison," Felicity all but sang. "Hope you and Dax are doing well."

A nervous-looking Blaise whispered something into her ear and pulled at her arm, trying to lead her away. A smart decision on his part—and a sign that he'd hopefully turn his behavior around. She didn't fight him, shooting me a glance that said I wasn't worth her time.

Well, at least I wouldn't have to deal with any confrontations.

Personally, though, I doubted she'd walked away merely due to finding it darkly amusing that my marriage was a business arrangement. It was more probable that she'd kept her silence because she feared Dax's reaction. That fear had likely been what had stopped her from bitchily spreading news of the pact around Redwater.

Letting out a long breath, I hopped into my car, buckled in, and switched on the engine. The drive home was relatively short, so I was soon parking in my driveway. There, I hefted my loaded bags out of the trunk with an *oof* and then closed it. Once I'd locked my car, I headed inside.

Dax was just coming down the hallway, a steaming mug in hand, when I entered the villa.

Closing the door behind me, I offered him a smile. "Hey, there."

His brow furrowed. "You went shopping?"

"What gave it away?" I asked, deadpan.

He tossed me an impatient look. "I'm simply surprised because you said you were running errands."

"I did. They included buying Christmas presents." I paused. "I just bumped into your brother."

"Which brother?"

"My favorite one."

Dax let out a long-suffering sigh. "Right."

I felt the corner of my lips inch up. "I was talking about Drey, as it happens—he's hitting the bowling alley with Jag and my bestie."

"Your bestie?"

"Leonie, of course. I also saw Felicity and Blaise." I lifted a reassuring hand. "Don't worry, they didn't spout any crap. Felicity said hello, said she hopes you and I are well, and then kept on walking. Blaise said not one word to me."

Dax grunted. "They're learning."

“I have the feeling that Felicity knows about our pact. It was just something about the way she looked at me, all smug and superior. My guess is that Grayden blabbed.”

“Vented, more like,” Dax hedged before taking a sip of his coffee. “He wasn’t happy when he left my office after Mimi sent him. It wouldn’t surprise me if he went home and ranted to Felicity about the heated conversation that took place.”

“Yeah, that would make sense. Either way, I’m pretty sure she knows. As yet, she hasn’t done anything with the information, which just goes to show how much she’s reluctant to cross you again—the woman’s a terrible gossip.” I tilted my head. “Anyway, moving right along ... how was golfing?”

“Titillating.”

I snickered at his dry response. “I think you like it more than you let on.”

“I like golfing just fine. I simply don’t like spending the entire game with someone who wants to dance around the terms of a business agreement.”

“Understandable.” I frowned when he tried peering into my bags. “No, you’re not allowed to look.”

“Why not?”

“Your Christmas gifts are in there; I want them to be a surprise. Though I should warn you not to expect anything exciting,” I hastened to add. It seemed better to warn him in advance. “It’s difficult to buy for a guy who has everything.”

He gave a small shrug. “I’m sure I’ll like whatever you give me.”

“Don’t. Don’t be sure.”

He snorted.

“Have you bought me something, or do I need to buy presents for you to give me?”



His brow pinched. “You’d buy your own gifts from me?”

“Sure. I don’t mind. I’ll even wrap them for you. All you’d have to do is refund me the money ... otherwise all I’ve really done is buy stuff to give to myself gift-wrapped. That would just be weird.”

His frown deepened. “They wouldn’t truly be presents from me if you picked them, would they?”

“Yes. If, as I just covered, you refunded me. It’s no different from me telling you what I might like and you then go ordering it online or whatever. I’d—”

Knuckles wrapped on the front door.

With a surprised blink, I asked, “Are you expecting anyone?”

Pursing his lips, he shook his head.

Huh. I turned and opened the door. My jaw dropped as I found Brooks standing on the other side of it. Feeling my face split into a gigantic smile, I threw my arm around him. “Oh my God, why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

Laughing, he hugged me tight. “I wanted to surprise you.”

Well, he’d succeeded. I pulled back, gripped his arm, and then all but dragged him inside. “It’s so great to see you! Wait, how did you even know where Dax and I live?”

“A lot of people do, Addie. It wasn’t hard to find out.” He turned to Dax and held out his hand. “How you doing?”

His mouth curling, Dax shook his hand. “Aside from being annoyed by you having your hands all over my wife, fine,” he playfully replied, wrenching another laugh out of Brooks.

“You came here alone, then?” I asked as he closed the door.

“Yeah, Brittany and Manti couldn’t make it,” he said with a wrinkle of his nose, referring to his partners. “Her

family showed up at our home in Africa, so she couldn't just leave. We decided that Manti would stay with her. I'll only be in Redwater for a few days, but I had to come see you guys."

"I'm so psyched you did." He'd been a friend of mine for over a decade, and I'd missed him something fierce. "Let me go stash these bags and then we'll order food."

The next few hours were spent laughing, eating, ribbing, drinking, and catching up as we sat together on the patio area. Though Dax wasn't quite as open and relaxed with Brooks as he was with his closest friends, the two had a good dynamic. And it was clear to see that he held Brooks in high regard.

At one point, Dax's phone rang. Grumbling that he needed to take the call, he retreated inside. I stayed outside with Brooks.

Watching me from the seat directly opposite mine, he grinned. "You look happy."

I felt my mouth curl. "I am."

"No, I mean you look *happy*, happy. I don't think I've ever seen you this chilled and content." Brooks cast a brief look at the patio door. "If you don't love him yet," he added, lowering his voice, "you're well on your way to it."

Going very still, I automatically opened my mouth to object, uncomfortable admitting he was right.

Brooks granted me a firm look. "Don't go denying it, Addie, you'd be wasting your time. I know you too well for you to fool me about something like this."

Ugh, he *so* did. Feeling my shoulders sag in defeat, I exhaled heavily. "It turns out that Dax is easy to care for," I said, keeping my own voice equally as low. "You could have warned me of that before I married him. I'd have jotted it down on my cons column."

His lips quirked. "Then I'm glad I didn't, because you otherwise might not have walked down the aisle with him."

Honestly, just the thought that I could have made a different decision—that I wouldn't be where I was now, wouldn't feel as I did now, wouldn't have Dax in any way, shape, or form—took my breath away.

Brooks' expression sobered. "He cares for you, too, you know. I can't say how much—Dax's emotions are never easy to sense. But it's obvious by the way he treats you that you matter to him."

I gave a slow nod. "Yeah, he openly said something to that effect to Grayden." The memory warmed my blood and made it easy for me to breathe again.

Brooks frowned. "Grayden?"

"He acted like a bit of an ass." I relayed what went down in Dax's office, though I omitted the part where Mimi had a thing for him and simply said she didn't like that he'd moved on. "It was quite intense."

"Grayden must have been pissed," said Brooks with an amused snicker. "Dax sure didn't make any attempt to hide how possessive he feels, did he? I like that. And I like that he openly admitted it isn't the only thing he feels for you. I'm glad honoring the pact worked out for you both." He raked his teeth over his lower lip. "I was worried about you. Worried you'd both regret your decision but stay together anyway because neither of you like to give up on things."

"I feel no regrets. There was never a moment where I did."

Brooks cocked his head. "And will you still have zero regrets if you do grow to love him but it transpires that he'll never love you back? I'm not saying that'll come to pass, by the way. In fact, I'm hopeful that it won't. I'm just playing Devil's Advocate."

"Of course you are. It's your thing." I heaved out a long breath. "If I end up in the love pit but he doesn't join me there, well, it'll be hard. But I don't foresee myself experiencing any regrets. I mean, I walked into this marriage knowing that he didn't envision himself ever caring for me

that way—he wouldn't have otherwise put a ring on my finger. So I'm prepared for that future."

"Personally? I think you'll both be ten inches deep in that love pit you mentioned." He paused, watching me closely. "I'm going to say something that you might not like hearing."

I frowned. "Okay." The word came out edged in wariness.

He leaned forward, resting his lower arms on the table. "I was around when you were with Lake. I saw you two together. Heard the way you talked about and to him. You loved him, I know. But ... I never felt like he was the great love of your life, Addie. I never had a moment where I thought you'd found the person you'd spend the rest of your days with."

I tensed, my gut clenching. "Brooks—"

"Let me finish," he pled, his voice soft. "When someone dies, we often toot their horn in a major way. We talk of them in glowing terms, remember all their best attributes, and forget about their faults. Right?"

I sighed and reluctantly admitted, "Sometimes, that can happen, yes."

"And if they suffered before or when they died, it makes us even more likely to put them on a pedestal—I know that from personal experience. I did the same when my dad passed. Truth be told? He was a dick most of the time. But I felt guilty admitting that to myself, so I shoved it aside and clung to the good memories."

"Lake wasn't a dick."

"No, he wasn't," Brooks immediately agreed. "But maybe you see the good memories you have of him through a magnified, rose-tinted lens. Maybe you've forgotten the other things. Like how he sometimes put you down. Like how he could get ugly when jealous. Like how he prioritized his friends over you right up until he learned about the tumor."

I bit into the inside of my cheek. Shit, I really didn't want to reflect on all this. Because I couldn't actually claim

that Brooks was wrong ... and that made me feel like crap. “Okay, maybe I have clung tight to the good memories. But there are more good than bad.”

“I’m not saying there aren’t,” he said, lifting a placating hand. He then pointed at the table with one finger as he added, “But ask yourself this: Did you think Lake was your one great true love *before* he died?”

I went to say, yes, of course I did. But, honestly ... “I don’t remember.” Facing that, *fuck*, it was like I’d had the breath knocked out of me. I sat up straighter and put a hand to my twisting stomach.

Brooks gave me a bland smile. “I could sit here and have a similar conversation with Dax about Gracie, only there’s no point because he’d stare at me blankly and not say a word.”

I felt my brows pull together. “What do you mean you could have a similar conversation with him?”

Brooks scratched at his nape. “Look, people talk of how tight he and Gracie were. They loved each other for sure, but they weren’t tight, Addie.” He shook his head. “Their relationship wasn’t solid. How could it have been? He didn’t fully trust her. She knew it, and it ate at her. She made him pay for it in small, passive-aggressive ways.”

I blinked. “I never heard about the last part. Though ... Mimi likes to say that her sister wasn’t ‘so perfect.’”

“Nobody is, are they? But the fact is that people speak of Gracie like she was a freaking saint. She had a sweet disposition for certain. But she also had her faults, just like everyone else. She and Dax had their problems, just like every other couple. And, genuinely, I don’t think she was the great love of his life any more than I think Lake was yours.”

Feeling a weight settle on my chest, I licked my lips. “Why do you say that?”

“Because I sensed something tonight. Something I hadn’t expected.” Brooks propped his elbows on the table. “Dax trusts you—it’s right there in the way he talks about and

to you; in how close he sits to you; in how relaxed his body is while near you. The man is not one bit on his guard around you. I don't know if you realize how much of a big deal that is."

"I do realize," I said, absently rubbing my thigh. "I've seen for myself how deep his trust issues run. There were so many occasions where he seemed taken aback that I'd defended him or stood by him or backed him or whatever. He'd often look wary and suspicious at times, like he couldn't bring himself to believe I was someone he could count on. I thought maybe we'd never get to the point we're at now, but we have."

"And that's huge, Addie. There are people who've been in his life for decades—including me—who don't have his trust. It's not often that he lets people close enough to earn it. With you, he did. You have something from him that Gracie never did, so don't go letting people convince you that you'll always play second fiddle to her."

"I'm not *convinced* of it, I'm just not going to hope for too much."

"I get that. And maybe you're right to be leery. Maybe I'm wrong to think you'll both declare your love for each other at some point. But, Addie, if you *do* find yourself in a situation where you feel more for him than he does for you, don't let it eat at you. Remember what you *do* have; remember that you've won something he gives rarely. Remember that—" Brooks stopped speaking at the sound of footfalls.

Moments later, Dax slowly ambled outside. His eyes narrowed as he took in my too-bright smile and how Brooks was now looking all *overly* casual. "Something wrong?"

I shook my head. "Nope." My response was just a little too cheery.

"Not at all," Brooks assured him. "I was just trying to convince her to run away with me. I know it makes me greedy, since I already have two partners, but you know what they say about three being a crowd."

Dax stared at him, making it clear with his doubtful expression that he wasn't buying Brooks' bullshit reply. "It's a good thing Brittany wasn't here to hear that—she'd have your balls for even joking about it."

Brooks gave a dramatic wince. "Probably. She's a vicious little thing. But who says I'm joking?"

"I am." Dax sank onto the sofa, retaking his previous spot right beside me, and draping his arm over the back of it. "And if you weren't, you'd be wasting your breath. Addison wouldn't leave me." He said it with such conviction it made me smile.

Brooks hitched up a brow at him. "How can you be sure?"

"Because I wouldn't let her."

My smile fell away. The whole "let" part never failed to be annoying. "If I wanted to leave—"

"We'd talk about it," Dax finished. "And talk and talk and talk until you changed your mind. Which you would."

Considering he was very much the master of persuasion, I couldn't with all honesty argue that he wouldn't succeed in talking me round. "Whatever. In any case, I'm not considering leaving with Brooks."

"Good. It means I don't have to kill him."

Brooks grinned. "And aren't we all glad about that?"

## Chapter Thirty-Three

The following evening, I walked onto our bedroom balcony to find Dax relaxing on a lounge with his tablet in hand and a sleeping cat curled up on his lap.

Sensing my presence, Gypsy woke and lifted her eyelids slightly, regarding me carefully through mere slits. With a brief flex of her claws, she then closed her eyes once more.

I arched a brow at him and folded my arms. “You know, for a guy who claims he’s certain she’s a complete psychopath, you sure don’t have much of a problem letting her snuggle into you. I’m not sure how I should interpret that.”

He parted his lips to respond, but then his brow puckered as he saw that I’d slipped on a jacket. “Going somewhere?”

“I’m heading out for a walk, I won’t be long.”

His frown deepened. “A walk?”

“I always go for a stroll around my neighborhood this time of year so I can check out everyone’s outdoor holiday decorations.” I hadn’t spent a Christmas at Oakengrove before, so I was particularly curious. But Dax’s answering expression was one of blank incomprehension. I almost snorted. Well, of course he’d see no appeal in this, the grump.

“Surely you’ve seen some while driving in and out of the village,” he said.

“Yeah, *some*. And only fleetingly, because I was concentrating on the road.”

He briefly glanced at the balcony’s amazing view. “It’s dark out.”

“That’s the best time to do it; you can’t properly appreciate all the lights otherwise, and they’re not always switched on until it goes dark anyway.”



His jaw tightened. “I don’t like the idea of you walking around alone at night.”

Aw, bless him. I’d totally be lying if I said his protectiveness didn’t make my belly all fluttery. “Oakengrove is very safe. You know that.” Especially now that Dax owned it—few people would have the gumption to behave in ways that would piss him off.

He exhaled a heavy breath and switched off his tablet. “I’ll come with you,” he said, sounding the epitome of put-out.

I blinked. “What?”

Carefully holding Gypsy, he stood. “I don’t want you going out alone at this hour.”

“It’s not *that* late,” I said, my arms slipping to my sides. “I’ll be fine.”

One brow slinked up. “Do you have a problem with me coming with you?” His tone said he didn’t give a monkey’s left tit if I did.

“Of course not.” I’d prefer to have the company.

He set Gypsy down on the lounge. “Then let’s go.”

Before long, he and I were strolling around the village, our arms brushing with each step. We passed residence after residence—villas, bungalows, townhouses, apartment buildings—as I admired the pretty lights and various props. Some homeowners had kept it simple, others had gone *all* out.

Passing my previous house, I didn’t knock to bid Alicia a quick hi—the absence of her car in the driveway told me she wasn’t home. In terms of outdoor decorations, she’d gone with a sparse and simple look.

One of her closest neighbors, however, had done the complete opposite. Taking it all in, I let out an appreciative whistle. “It’s like a damn winter wonderland. But in summer.”

“Hmm,” was all Dax said, unmoved.

I hid a smile and kept walking. As we reached a bungalow that had a huge Santa with reindeers on the roof, all

lit up and flashing like crazy, I grinned. “Oh my God, I *love* them.”

Dax narrowed his eyes at me. “Don’t get any ideas.”

“But they would look awesome on our roof.”

“I don’t care.”

Neither did I, actually, but it was fun to tease him. “Oh, come on, get with the holiday spirit. Our roof is sorely lacking décor. They would be *perfect* for it.”

“Not happening, Addison.”

I huffed. “You’re such a Scrooge.”

“And you get far too hyper this time of year.”

Probably. “I fail to see how that’s a problem.” I gently bumped his arm with my shoulder. “You must have gotten excited for Christmas once upon a time.”

“Sure. But then I grew up.”

“Does this mean you don’t believe in Santa? That’s not good. If you don’t believe, he won’t come.”

The dry look Dax tossed my way almost made me cackle.

We continued meandering around the village, eventually reaching the strip of bars, restaurants, and cafés. All were packed to the brim, which was the usual case, since it wasn’t only residents who came to Oakengrove to eat and socialize.

Dax’s phone started to chime, and we both came to a halt as he fished it out of his pocket. He looked down at the screen and then cut his gaze to me. “I’ll just be a second. Wait here.” He walked away to take the call.

I figured his conversationalist was probably Rafael or someone else who Dax did not-so-legal business with. As he’d once cautioned me, Dax didn’t share anything related to that side of his life, refusing to allow it to filter down to mine.

It would have annoyed me if I thought it was a matter of trust; that he didn't feel certain I wouldn't leak any of what he shared with me. But that wasn't the case at all. He simply liked to keep that sort of business separate from everything else. I could—

Laughs sounded as a bunch of guys poured out of the bar in front of which I stood. As my eyes paused on one of them, I stiffened, feeling like I'd been punched in the solar plexus. So many memories surfaced, making my chest cramp and my belly churn like stale milk.

Catching sight of me, the tall, dark-skinned male froze just the same. We stared at each other for a few seconds, saying nothing. I thought he might simply walk away without a word, but then a nostalgic smile tugged at his mouth and he took a step toward me.

“Addie,” he said with a chuckle as he swept me into a huge bear hug—hence his nickname, “Bear.”

A little numb, I weakly hugged him back, mentally scrambling to get it together.

Pulling back, he studied me, a glint of pain in the depths of his eyes. “Jesus, it's good to see you. I was just thinking about you the other day. I haven't seen you since—” He cut off, his smile flickering out like a sparkler gone dud.

“The funeral,” I finished in a low voice.

“The funeral.” He cleared his throat and took a small step back as he gave me a quick onceover. “You look good.”

“Thanks, so do you.” Rocking back and forth on my heels, I flapped a hand his way. “How are things going with you?”

“Great. Couldn't be better.”

“Do you live here in Oakengrove?”

“No, we just wanted to hit one of the bars here,” he told me as he gestured at his companions, who stood at the curb waiting for him.

“Oh, right.”

Rubbing at the back of his neck, he cleared his throat. “Listen, the shit I said at the funeral? I was out of line, I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it ain’t,” he told me, his eyes sober. “I’m sorry, Addie. So fucking sorry.”

I gave him a faint smile. “Apology accepted. I’m sorry for what I said, too. How—” I stopped talking when his gaze drifted to something behind me. I didn’t wonder what had snatched his attention. I could hear footfalls approaching; knew the rhythm of that stride.

A splayed hand settled on my back as Dax sidled up to me, his body language both protective and possessive.

Noticing his blank expression, I said, “This is—”

“Bear,” finished the guy in front of me, holding out his hand. “And you’re Dax Mercier.”

Unsurprised that he recognized Dax, I watched as they shook hands.

“I’m an old friend of Addie’s.” Bear paused, his nose wrinkling. “Not *that* kind of old friend—I just realized how that must have sounded. She was my best friend’s girl back when we hung out.”

Dax imperceptibly tensed—I wouldn’t have noticed if he hadn’t been standing so close that I felt his muscles bunch slightly. “I take it you knew each other in college, then,” he guessed.

Bear nodded. “We did.” He looked at me. “I heard about you two and ... I just wanted to say that Lake would be happy for you.” He gave me a wan smile.

I would like to think he was right. I would like to believe that Lake would be pleased I’d found all that I’d found in Dax. Though, in the beginning, Lake would for sure have poked my forehead hard and called me all kinds of stupid for marrying someone to honor a damn pact.

One of the guys standing at the curb called out Bear's name and signaled for him to make his way over.

He gave his friend a quick nod and then slid his gaze back to me and Dax. "Sorry, gotta go. It was nice to meet you, Dax. Take care, Addie, yeah?"

I forced my lips to curve. "I will." As he jogged away, I let out a shaky breath and then looked up at Dax. "Shall we head back?"

His gaze pinned me with a probing stare. "Yeah. We can go back."

As one, we turned and began retracing our footsteps.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets. "Seeing him just ... it took me off-guard. But yeah, I'm okay." Clearing my throat, I faked a smile. "It's crazy that he doesn't look as if he's aged a day. Some of us get all the luck."

Dax hummed, long and low. "So he was a friend of Lake's?"

I nodded and sucked my bottom lip into my mouth. "They were very close. Super tight. You hear of best friends being opposites, but they were pretty much the same person. It was almost freaky."

Another quiet hum, this one pensive. "You felt awkward around Bear just now. Why?"

Grimacing, I scratched at the back of my head. "We, uh, we had a somewhat ugly dispute the last time we were around each other." I sensed more than saw Dax's shoulders stiffen.

"Which was when?"

I swallowed. "Lake's funeral."

"Why the dispute?"

I swiped my tongue over my lower lip. "I didn't wear black. I know you're supposed to, but Lake had asked me before he died to 'skip boring, gloomy black' and instead

attend the funeral in the dress I'd worn the night we first met. So I'd agreed. But Bear didn't know that Lake had asked that of me."

"He thought you were being disrespectful," Dax guessed.

I dipped my chin. "He was pissed. Flew off the handle. Refused to believe my explanation, even though Lake's brother backed me up. Bear just wouldn't hear me and ..."

"And, what?"

"He accused me of going out clubbing the night before; of doing the walk of shame straight from some stranger's house to the funeral." It had felt like a stinging slap to the face. "I don't think he truly believed that, I think he just needed to be able to yell at somebody."

"That's not an excuse," said Dax, a rumble of anger in his voice.

"No, it isn't. But I was no better. I unfairly called him out for not visiting Lake near the end—I knew it wasn't that Bear didn't care, it was that he just found it too hard. But he'd hurt me by saying what he said, and I wanted to hurt him back. Basically, both of us were feeling angry over Lake's death and we ended up arguing over something that wasn't really anything."

I'd felt like a sack of shit afterwards, and I'd tried calling him a few days later to apologize. He hadn't taken or returned my calls, though. But ... "He apologized for it just now. I apologized for what I said, too."

Silence fell between us, but Dax broke it when he said, "You don't talk about him much. Lake, I mean."

"You don't talk about Gracie much." Seeing the skin around his eyes tighten, I felt my chest twinge. "Maybe we should make an exception for this one night."

He looked away, his jaw clenching. I inwardly winced. I shouldn't have said anything. Should have just kept—

"You first. Tell me about Lake."

His unexpected acquiescence made me blink. Recovering fast, I tugged at my hair. “He was the life and soul of *everyone’s* party. His personality was electric. He was always smiling and laughing and joking, but he took shit seriously. Took his studies and his commitments seriously. Even when he found out about the brain tumor, even when they only gave him mere months to live, he just kept on living it large. Until he couldn’t.”

“The tumor was inoperable?”

“Yup.” An ache took residence in my chest. I could think of Lake without hurting anymore, but remembering those days of watching the cancer eat at him, taking him from this world a piece at a time ... It was impossible not to get choked up.

“He was more worried about everybody else; worried what it was doing to us to see him gradually fade,” I went on, a slight croak in my voice. “So he did his best to push us all away—friends, family, everyone—but we refused to budge.”

I’d understood his wish to be remembered as he was *before* the cancer hit him, but I’d also seen his fear and heartache. No way would I have left him alone at a time like that, even if I had felt inclined to walk away.

“I’ve never had to see someone deteriorate that way, but I’d imagine it would be a living nightmare,” Dax mused.

“It was.” I rubbed at my arm. “But I didn’t really feel the impact of it while he was alive. I’d refused to let the whole thing be about me; I’d shoved aside what I’d felt and focused on him.”

“So when he was gone, it all hit you hard.”

I nodded. “My friends and family got me through it.” I drew in a long breath through my nose. “How did you meet Gracie?”

A muscle jumped in his cheek. “She was always in my periphery, because we had quite a few mutual friends. We had our first real conversation at a party. I initially wasn’t

interested in anything more than a fling. But that changed the more I got to know her. Still, I fucked up with her.”

I felt my brow furrow. “How?”

“I took things slow, because that’s what I do,” he replied, a self-deprecating note in his tone. “She was so sure of me that she saw no need to wait. She pushed for us to move in together after only a few months. I said no.”

“Personally, I think most people would be hesitant to move in with someone that soon.”

“But I dragged my heels on it. Two weeks. We’d lived together for only two weeks when she died, all because I’d been so set on us taking shit slow and giving it time.”

*Not realizing their time together was running out,* I thought. “I wouldn’t say that means you fucked up—”

“But I did. Like you, there were things she wanted from life. But because I was stowing things for ‘down the road,’ she missed out. I didn’t know that road would be a short one, or I’d have done things differently.” He sighed. “I wasn’t even concerned about her op. I thought she’d be fine.”

“I don’t think anyone would expect an appendectomy to result in a nightmare. You hear that every operation has its risks. Doctors always warn you of it, so it can make you nervous when someone you care for goes under the knife, but you don’t really think there’ll be fatal complications.”

His gaze went unfocused. “I don’t think I’ve ever in my life been more shocked by anything than I was by her father’s call, telling me she hadn’t pulled through the surgery,” he said, his voice dead. “Her mother was wailing in the background, utterly destroyed.”

My heart hurt for him. I balled up my hands in my pockets, wishing I could console him, not knowing how; not knowing if he’d even allow it or if he’d instead pull away and then our conversation would be over. “Life is so unfair sometimes, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” He paused. “I don’t visit her grave, you know. Haven’t been there since her funeral. I don’t like remembering



her the way she was in that casket.” He stared at me, apparently expecting to be branded cold or disrespectful.

I gave him an empty smile. “I don’t go to Lake’s grave either.”

Dax’s brow briefly creased in surprise. “You don’t?”

I shook my head. “Some people no doubt judge me for it. And look, I understand why there are those who find comfort in visiting graves; why they believe and feel it’s the ‘right’ thing to do—it’s certainly not the wrong thing to do. But I also feel that it doesn’t help *everybody*. It wouldn’t help me. It’d be a one-sided visit—Lake isn’t there. What made him *who* he is, his soul or spirit or whatever you want to call it, is gone.”

Dax nodded in understanding.

“You know, Lake actually told me not to go—said I could have a mental conversation with him anywhere; that there was no need to do that in front of his grave. ‘*I won’t be there, Addie,*’ he said to me. ‘*All that’ll be left is the spacesuit that my soul needed in order to walk and breathe on this Earth, and that fucking thing has let me down—don’t pay it a tribute.*’”

Dax reached out and linked his fingers with mine, making my pulse skip. “Makes sense to me.” He gave my hand a quick squeeze, and he held onto it the entire walk home.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

As we walked out of the large building a week later, Harri gave a disappointed shake of her head. “I really didn’t think we’d be so bad at that.”

“Me neither,” said Alicia, appearing somewhat shellshocked. “I mean, we’re intelligent women. We all perform well under pressure.”

Fucking A. “We’ve each worked our way through bigger battles than that,” I said, gesturing at the building behind us with my thumb. “We should have easily been able to tackle them as a team.”

Harri pulled a face. “Fuck escape rooms. They suck.”

“More like *we* sucked,” I mumbled.

Alicia notched up her chin. “I blame the clues—they weren’t clear.”

“Dad will be so disappointed in us,” said Harri with a sigh as we began walking across the parking lot. “And Ollie will laugh his ass off.”

“Only if they learn of it.” Alicia touched her chest. “I personally think there’d be no harm in us, uh, keeping it to ourselves.”

Harri twisted her mouth, pensive, and then gave a slow nod. “There’s no reason for anyone to know. The truth wouldn’t in any way contribute positively to the lives of those around us.”

“Exactly.” Alicia loosely shrugged one shoulder. “We could let them think we kicked ass in there. Right, Addie?”

“Oh, agreed.” I was in no rush at all to confess how horrifically we’d performed.

“Then it’s settled,” proclaimed Alicia as we slowed our pace on nearing our vehicles. “You sure you don’t want to eat out with us?” she asked me. “Harri and I are thinking Italian.”

I gave them a grateful smile but shook my head. “I had a late night last night, so I’m wiped.”

Alicia’s eyes twinkled. “A late night, huh?”

“Not *that* kind—I swear you have sex on the brain.” Dipping my hand into my purse, I fished out my keys. “It was Dax’s turn to play host again for a guys’ night. They didn’t leave until the early hours of the morning.”

“Did you take pictures of them sitting around shirtless?”

I felt my brows knit. “They didn’t remove their shirts.”

“They did in my head. I can so easily picture them lounging around with their chests bare, muscles rippling, abs showing ...”

I rolled my eyes at the little perve. “You two enjoy your meal, I’ll call you both during the week.” They gave me quick hugs as we exchanged goodbyes, and then we all hopped into our respective cars.

As I drove home, I could admit to myself that, though I was wiped, I wasn’t *that* wiped. I didn’t feel a need to go straight home because I was tired. The truth was, I’d missed Dax.

Having made arrangements to head out early with his brothers for a game of paintballing they’d booked at a place just outside of Redwater, I’d only spoken briefly with him this morning. He’d caught a quick breakfast and left way before I’d finished my own food. I had been invited to join them, but I had plans of my own.

Dax and I had texted each other a few times during the day but, oddly enough, that had only made me want to see him more. I loved going out with my sisters. Loved our daytrips and girls’ nights and all that jazz. But right now, all I wanted was to go home, have dinner with Dax, and then maybe spend a little time with him.

As such, when I finally drove past the “Welcome to Oakengrove” sign, I inwardly smiled.

It hadn't come as a surprise that he'd asked to choose my outfit again that morning, considering he often did that when we would be spending most of the day apart. The teasing motherfucker still hadn't explained why, but I wasn't giving up on trying to squeeze the answer out of him.

Having come up with various theories, I'd questioned him on each of them ...

*Is it a control thing?*

*Is it that you only like certain outfits I own?*

*Are you secretly into some elements of BDSM?*

*Is this just all part of your liking to keep me on my toes?*

Each time, he'd responded in the negative. And he hadn't bothered to hide his amusement that being in the dark made me—

A massive impact slammed into the side of my car's rear end, sending it swerving.

My body jerked, and my head whipped sideways and hit the window hard. As the seatbelt snapped taut, I slammed my foot on the brakes and viciously yanked at the wheel. Tires screeched as my car roughly skidded and spun. A large puff of white rammed into my front, thrusting me back against the seat.

Abruptly, the car stopped, jolting my body yet again. A deafening silence fell, heavy and shocked.

My insides seizing, I stuttered out a breath and double-blinked, lost and confused. I couldn't think through the fog hazing my mind. Couldn't shake off the numbness steadily taking over.

My heart going a mile a minute, I shoved at the white cloud in front of me, making it shrink. *Airbag*, I thought.

I sat there unmoving, adrenaline coursing through me. Time seemed to slow. Or stop. I didn't know.

Sensing something warm and slick trickling down the side of my face, I briefly frowned and raised trembling fingers toward it.

The driver's door was ragged open. "Addison? Addison, are you okay?"

Blinking, I slowly turned my head just as Jenson leaned his own into my car.

He looked me over, a sense of panicked urgency in his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." I stiffly went to get out, but he placed a restrictive hand on my shoulder.

"Stay there. Try not to move." He patted his pocket. "Shit, I don't have Dax's number. Where's your phone?"

I swallowed. "Huh?"

"Your phone, sweetheart," he said, his voice calm and soothing. "Where is it?"

I weakly pointed at the cell in the cupholder.

"We need to call Dax, okay? Can you do that?"

"Sure." I lifted it with a shaky hand, dialed his number, and put the phone to my ear.

It rang a few times before he answered, "Yes?"

At the sound of his voice, awareness began to creep in, chasing some of the fog from my mind. "Uh ... I think I might need you to pick me up."

A pause. "What? Why?"

"I probably shouldn't drive my car anywhere right now. I guess I could walk, but ..."

*"Addison, what's the matter?"*

I touched the wetness tickling my face. My fingers came away with blood. Reality slammed into me like a punch to the solar plexus, and I started to shake.

Something had crashed into my car, making it swerve like crazy.

No, *someone* had crashed into it.

My heart leaped in my chest and I sucked in a breath, wincing as pain radiated through my smarting chest.

“*Addison, answer me,*” he gritted out.

Jenson held his hand out. “Give me the phone, hon. Good.” He put it to his ear and stepped back. “Dax, man, don’t panic; she seems all right. Thaddeus crashed his car into hers.” He broke off, jerking away from the cell with a cringe. “By the pool nearest your villa ... No, he’s gone. Ran like a coward ... She’s good, really, just a little out of it ... Yeah. Will do.” Jenson returned my phone to me. “He’s on his way.”

My breaths starting to come a little quicker, I licked my lips. “I need to get out,” I said, clumsily fumbling with the seatbelt. I didn’t want to be in here. Didn’t want to remember the last time I was stuck in a car.

His brows pulled together. “I don’t think it’s good for you to move until—”

“*I’m getting out.*”

He raised both hands. “Okay, let me help you, then.” Gentle and careful, he unclipped my belt.

I snatched my purse, clinging to it as if it was a lifeline, and allowed him to help me slide out of the car. My knees buckled, the bastards.

Jenson steadied me. “Easy, now. That’s it.” He guided me over to a nearby bench. “Sit right here, you’re good.” He took the spot beside me. “We’ll just wait here for Dax, yeah?”

I got the feeling he’d been *ordered* to remain with me.

Right then, I noticed a car parked at a weird angle in the middle of the road, its front all bashed in, smoke hissing from the broken hood. The driver’s door was wide open, but there was no one inside.

I knew that vehicle, though. It belonged to Thaddeus’s parents. And I would just bet that little shithead had been drunk-driving again.

I clenched my teeth, furious. I couldn't lie, the whole thing had shaken me up. But I was more mad than anything else. Mad that Thaddeus was such a selfish fuck.

I scanned the gathering crowd but saw no sign of him. Then I remembered Jenson's words ...

*He's gone. Ran like a coward.*

Which meant the little shit stain likely wasn't badly hurt. I wasn't either, thankfully. Though, now that the adrenaline was beginning to recede, some pains were making themselves known. My temple pulsed and burned, and my chest hurt like it had been struck.

I didn't think my single wound could be too bad—it seemed to have stopped bleeding already. I'd probably have to deal with a case of whiplash tomorrow, though. Awesome.

Jenson glared at the crowd creeping closer. "Give her some space, people."

I regarded him for a few seconds. "I normally don't like you." But he'd come to my aid, he'd alerted Dax, he'd helped me out of the car, and he'd stayed with me—even if only because ordered.

His mouth bowed up. "I've noticed that, sweetheart."

"You're not really so bad."

His face flushed slightly. "Thanks."

I heard the zooming of a car engine. Heard said car screech to an abrupt halt. The voices quieted as the crowd parted, and there was Dax—his eyes stormy, his shoulders tense, his fists clenched.

Relief flared through me, making my eyes burn and my throat grow thick. I gave him a shaky smile. "Hey."

He crouched in front of me, his jaw hardening at the gash on my temple. "Baby," he murmured, his voice thick.

One hand palmed the back of my head while the other curved tight around my nape ... and I felt like I could take my first real breath since before the crash.

Tension poured out of me. My muscles unclenched. A lightness filled my chest.

He was here now. Here and safe and solid and, oh fuck, I loved the son of a bitch.

I almost moaned in self-depreciation. Had I sensed it coming? Sure. But I'd hoped I was unnecessarily worrying that I'd grow to care that deeply for him. No, not "hoped," I'd *wanted* it to be an unnecessary worry. Deep down, I'd known I was doomed to fall hard for this person who might never feel the same for me.

He studied the wound on my temple without touching it. "Where else are you hurt?"

"Nowhere, thankfully."

Apparently not reassured, he took stock of me, patting me here and there.

"She's got no other injuries that I can see," Jenson told him.

Dax rudely didn't even spare him a glance. His gaze clung to me, like I'd disappear if he looked away.

"I'm okay," I assured him.

His nostrils flared, and he clamped his lips shut.

"Paramedics are on their way, they can check to be sure you're good," said Jenson.

Panic zipped through me. I was *not* going in an ambulance. *Been there, done that, got the worst news ever when I did.*

I grabbed Dax's shirt. "I just want to go home. Can we go home?" Even *I* heard the wobble in my voice.

His face softened slightly. "Once they've taken a look at you, yes, we can go."





Standing before me a short while later, Dax held out a tumbler of whiskey. “Drink this.”

Settled on the sofa, I reached out and took it. “Thanks.”

To be honest, I’d have preferred a hug. But he hadn’t touched me since that moment he’d crouched in front of me while I’d sat on the bench.

He’d remained close while the paramedics cleaned and applied butterfly stitches to the cut on my head. He’d also remained close when cops appeared—minus Lowe—and asked me questions. But after that, he’d kept his distance.

It wasn’t that he was being cold or insensitive. He was just so damn pissed that he was struggling to hold himself in check. It was clear by the vengeful glint in his eyes, the tension in his jaw, the stiff set of his shoulders, and the forced calm in his tone.

I could almost *see* him plotting what exactly he’d do once he had Thaddeus in his grasp. Could almost *see* the dark fantasies playing out in his imagination. Could detect the little flickers of sadistic promise in the depths of his eyes.

Dax had repeatedly warned me about the violent side of his nature. Intellectually, I’d known it existed. But it was only now that I got a real glimpse of it. He didn’t look like he wanted to punch someone, he looked like he wanted to bludgeon them to death. Not that I believed he would, just that a mere beating wouldn’t cut it for him in this case.

Really, I doubted he’d have settled on a simple beating even if it hadn’t been my car that Thaddeus barreled into tonight. Twice in the past Dax had told him to pull his shit together or deal with the repercussions. The shit had ignored those warnings, tempted fate, and now *he was fucked*.

I chugged down my whiskey and then winced as pain lanced through my chest. I rubbed it. “Hurts.”

“That’ll be thanks to the seatbelt,” said Dax, still sounding unnaturally composed, as he took the glass from me.

“Yup. I’m gonna be hurting like hell tomorrow.” Whiplash was a bitch. “I hope the same can be said for Thaddeus.” The asshole would deserve it.

“I spoke to his father on the phone,” Dax told me, setting the tumbler on the table. “The man is a mess. Angry at himself for being so lenient with his son all his life. Angry at Thaddeus for causing injury to another person. Angry at his wife for refusing to accept that their son has a drinking problem. But he’s also torn up because he knows I’m going to make Thaddeus pay for this.”

“Did he ask you to take it easy on Thaddeus?”

“Yes. As if I’d ever agree to that.” Dax’s flinty gaze roved over my face with a predatory focus. “He could have killed you.” His voice was low. Rough. Irate.

The dark promise of retribution that was buried beneath his words made a little chill dance over my nape.

“Not that the piece of shit will care about that.” He cricked his neck. “He’ll be sorry he crashed his car into yours, but only because of who you are to me. He won’t want to face the consequences.” Pausing, Dax rolled back his tense shoulders. “But he will.”

Hating to see him so steeped in anger, I patted the seat beside me. “Come sit here,” I invited, injecting a soothing note to my tone.

One brow imperiously flew up. “You think you have a chance of calming me down?” he asked. No, *mocked*. “That won’t happen any time soon.”

Well, yeah, I’d sensed that much. I reached out to grab his hand but stilled at the sharp look he gave me.

“Don’t,” he gritted out.

I dropped my hand with a sigh. I knew what was fucking with him. He’d lost someone before. I might not mean as much to him as she had, but he cared about me enough that it would have been a blow if he’d lost me, too.

He stepped back. “You should go to bed. I’ll join you in a little while.”

No, he wouldn’t. His intention was to keep his distance until his anger had cooled. I understood, but I didn’t want him to be alone. My gut told me that that wasn’t what he truly needed.

Of course ... telling him that would not help my cause. He’d get all offended and frowny. So I’d have to tell him something else; something that was equally true. “If you laugh about this I’ll hurt you, but I don’t wanna be by myself right now. Call me clingy and weak if you want, but I need you to stay with me.”

The ice in his gaze cracked, and he dragged in a long breath. “I’m not in a good place.”

I bit my lip. “Me neither.”

He hauled in another breath—this one longer, deeper, making his chest expand.

Moving stiffly, he sat beside me. Then he did the unexpected: He gently pulled me close, buried a hand in my hair, and palmed the side of my neck.

I melted into him and planted a hand on his chest. Silence fell between us. It wasn’t comfortable. It was tense and weighty and thick with emotion. So I broke it and said, “I was in a crash once before. A highway accident. There was a car pile-up.”

His lips grazed my unwounded temple. “I know, I heard. Brooks kept me updated on how you were doing.”

Oh. I hadn’t known that. “I would’ve thought that being in another crash would give me flashbacks, but it didn’t. Maybe because the first one was so different and so much worse. A lot of people were hurt. One car caught fire. Another was trapped between a truck and an SUV, so the people inside couldn’t get out.”

Pausing, I licked my lips. “I was able to get out of my car. It was only when I stood up that I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

I felt my throat thicken. “Why my pants felt so wet.” I fisted his shirt, feeling like I might suffocate on the anguish that tried to pull me under. “There was blood. So much of it.”

Dax froze against me.

“I knew what it meant, but I told myself I was wrong.” I swallowed, an insane pressure mounting in my chest. “I kept telling myself that. Kept insisting I didn’t need to panic. But it was no shock when the doctors at the hospital broke the news that the baby I was carrying hadn’t survived.”

Dax’s grip on my neck tightened. “Fuck.”

“Yeah,” I said around the frog in my throat, fisting his shirt tighter, smothering the sob that tried rising.

“Brooks didn’t tell me that.”

“He didn’t know. I hadn’t told many people I was pregnant.”

“Who was the father?”

“Just a one-night stand. He hadn’t been interested in playing a part in the baby’s life.”

Dax muttered something beneath his breath. “Then he’s a fucking waste of space.”

“So was the drunk driver who caused the pile-up. He walked away without a damn scratch. Thaddeus probably did as well, or he otherwise wouldn’t have been able to make a quick run for it.” The universe was such a shit at times.

Dax nuzzled my hair. “He’ll pay, baby. I have people looking for him. He can’t hide for long.”

We sat there like that for what could have been hours, saying nothing. In agonizingly slow increments, the tension in his body trickled away until only a little remained. Similarly, the anger that had snapped the air taut steadily dissipated—*most* of it, anyway. Some lingered, clinging to Dax like a foul smell.

At one point, the hand palming my neck slid upward, skimmed over my jaw, and glided up my face. His fingers idly and gently traced the skin around the gauze pad.

“I’m okay,” I said, softly.

He pressed his lips against my temple. “I fucking refuse to bury you.”

Like he’d buried Gracie, I thought.

My heart squeezing, I snuggled into him a little more. “I wish I could say you’ll never have to, but with any luck I’ll be old and gray and wrinkly when the time comes. And you’ll get a call that your ex-wife met her end.”

“*Ex-wife?*”

“Oh, you’ll have moved onto some superhot blonde by then. She’ll be, like, our daughter’s age. Her name will be ... I don’t know ... Candy or something like that. And you’ll know she’s a total gold-digger, but you’ll be helpless against those jaunty breasts. My saggy, wrinkly ones will never compete.”

He heaved a sigh. “Some seriously weird shit goes through your head on a regular basis, Addison.”

“So I’ve been told.”

His hand returned to my neck and gave it a light squeeze. “At no point will you be my ex-anything.”

“Even when Candy shakes her tits at you?”

“Even then.”

“Even when I have old lady breath and jowls down to my ankles?”

“Down to your ankles?” he repeated, incredulous.

“Hey, jowls are serious business.”

Another heavy sigh. “Jowls or no jowls, we’re not divorcing.”

“Good. I’d hate to have to slap you with my saggy boobs.” I almost smiled as he defeatedly shoved his face in my hair.

“Maybe we could have a normal conversation.”

“Now why would we want to do that?”

## Chapter Thirty-Five

“Tell me you’re not even thinking of going to work.”

Sitting upright against the headboard the next morning, I looked from my phone to Dax. He stood at the foot of the bed in only sweatpants, glaring at me. Hard.

I’d woken to the sound of him pattering around the bathroom, but I was so tired I might have fallen back asleep if it wasn’t for the dull pain and stiffness in my neck. Yeah, whiplash had struck, as expected. It was nowhere near as bad as the first time I’d had it, thankfully—small mercies and stuff.

When his brow flicked up in question, I twisted my mouth. “Well—”

“No,” he interrupted, his tone non-negotiable. “You’re staying home even if I have to sit on you to make it happen.”

Dramatic much? “Relax, jeez.” I idly plucked at the coverlet as I admitted, “I did *think* about going.” I wouldn’t have been able to drive, of course, but I could have called a cab or something. “But Sabrina will just nag me to go home, and I’m too tired to argue with her. I can answer important emails and stuff from here anyway.”

Plus, my parents and siblings planned to visit at some point. As news traveled fast in Redwater—especially around Oakengrove—I’d texted them with news of the crash last night. Alicia would have undoubtedly otherwise learned of it from Jenson. They’d all called me, as concerned for me as they were enraged with Thaddeus.

Dax grunted in a kind of grumpy satisfaction and held out painkillers. “Take these.”

I gladly did so with the help of the glass of water I kept on my nightstand.

“A dip in the jacuzzi might help.”

Ooh, good idea. “And wine.”

“Wine and painkillers don’t mix,” he reminded me.

I felt my face fall. “Fuck,” I muttered.

He placed the remote control for the TV on the mattress beside me. “You’re to stay in bed as much as possible,” he stated with all the authority of a medical professional.

I frowned. “That’s not really a viable option, considering I’ll need to scrounge up food here and there.”

“I’ll be doing that for you.”

I blinked twice. “You’re not going to work?”

“No. I’m staying here with you.” His tone said, *Obviously*. “Don’t tell me you’ll be fine on your own, Addie. I’m not leaving you. End of discussion.”

My belly flipped. That was the second time he’d called me “Addie.” The first time had been while I was mid-orgasm, so I hadn’t thought much on it. And now, well, now I wasn’t sure what—if anything—to think of it.

I swallowed hard. “Okay. Than—”

“Don’t make me bite you.”

I felt my lips curve. “But I kind of like it when you bite me.”

His eyes darkened. “I know. I won’t be doing it again until you’ve recovered, though.” He padded over to his dresser and fished out a tee. “I’ll go make coffee and order breakfast. What are you having?”

“A bagel with cream cheese, please.” I almost sighed in disappointment when he slipped on his tee. Just looking at his abs could improve my mood.

“I’ll be back in a sec.”

Once he’d left the room, I none-too-awkwardly made my way to the bathroom and did my business, wincing and flinching now and then. Whiplash was the devil.



Back in bed, I switched on the TV, intending to find something to watch. By the time Dax returned with a tray of culinary delights, I was a few minutes into a movie.

“What are you watching?” he asked.

“Okay, quick warning: it’s a romcom. But not a cringy or sappy one. You’ll like it.”

I half-expected him to say “count me out” and head to his home office. Instead, he stayed with me. Even after we’d demolished our breakfast, he didn’t leave, though I could tell he wasn’t enjoying the movie quite as much as I was.

When it was over, he looked at me. “You said it wasn’t sappy.”

“It wasn’t,” I lied.

“He gave her a compass as an ‘I love you’ gift. Though how a compass is supposed to convey love, I don’t know.”

“Where you not listening? He was telling her she’s his north, south, east, and west,” I explained. “That she’s his home. The only place he wanted to be. That everything he did would lead him back to her.”

“And you don’t find that sappy?”

Tilting my head, I allowed, “Okay, yes, but it was also a little sweet.”

His snort made it clear what he thought of that.

He vacated the room again but quickly returned—this time carrying his laptop. Without a word, he settled beside me again and ... did whatever he needed to do.

My heart—so damn easy for him—did a dreamy little sigh, touched by his determination to stay close. And he really *did*. The only times he left the room were to grab us food and drink or to answer the front door. I had a string of visitors in the form of my siblings, my grandparents, and also Dax’s brothers.

Both sets of our parents weirdly arrived at the same time. He guided them into the bedroom, and the two couples

gathered around the bed.

Blake smiled at me. “Hi, sweetheart, how are you feeling?”

“Never better,” I said, my voice dry.

His lips quirked. “I’m sure.”

“I’m so damn relieved you’re okay.” My mom planted a kiss on my cheek and asked me a billion questions—had I taken pills? Was I hungry? How were my stitches? Did I need another pillow behind my back? On and on it went until, finally, she seemed to feel reassured that I was fine. “I love your Christmas tree, by the way,” she then said.

Dane shot her a droll look. “You would.”

Dax met his gaze. “So Vienna turns six again during the holidays as well?”

“More like five,” replied my dad.

Vienna frowned. “Hey.”

“I’m not wrong, and you know it,” Dane insisted before dropping a quick kiss on my hair. He scrutinized my face. “How bad is the pain?”

“Not so bad I want to cry, so there’s that,” I told him. “I hope it’s worse for Thaddeus.”

Dane slid his attention to Dax. “Has he been found yet?” he asked, a silken threat lacing his voice.

“No, but he will be,” Dax swore.

Coming to my side, Kensey gave my hand a small squeeze. “It’s no coincidence that we’re all here at the same time. The four of us had a chat about something, and now we want to hear what you think.”

I straightened a little, curious. “What?”

She gestured at Blake and my parents. “We were thinking it would be nice if both our families got together for Christmas dinner.”

Tensing slightly, I exchanged a surprised look with Dax.

“Your parents said we could have it at their place, since their dining table is allegedly huge,” Kensey went on. “Vienna and I would share in the cooking and, between us both, could definitely make it work. But it will break our hearts—like, *wide* open—if you and Dax don’t agree to attend. We want everyone at the table or it won’t be the same.”

Dax sighed at her. “Just so you know, Addison doesn’t respond to emotional blackmail. Neither do I, as you’re already aware.”

Kensey grinned, unrepentant. “But you’ll come, right?”

He refocused on me. “Do you want to?”

“It depends on a few things,” I replied, sliding a meaningful look at my father.

Dane didn’t miss it. “I’ll behave. So will Ollie. I’m not saying I’ll ever like Dax—”

“You already *do* like him,” I said, impatient.

“—but I’ll be nice,” Dane promised, and I could see he meant it.

Pursing his lips, Dax shrugged at me. “I’m game if you are.”

Then it looked like both our families would be eating Christmas dinner together.

Needless to say, our parents were thrilled that we’d agreed.

I was just as psyched at the thought of us all being together like that. Even better, I had the guarantee that my dad would stop behaving like an idiot toward Dax. And since Ollie had earlier been the height of friendliness toward him, I wouldn’t have to worry about my brother being a pain either.

Later on, when Dax and I were once again alone, I closed the book I’d finished reading and said, “I know this is wrong—like really, really, really wrong—but I wish I could

strap Nina Bowen to a kind of writing treadmill so she'd churn out one book after another without pause. Inhumane and selfish, yes, but I'm lost whenever I finish one of her novels."

His lips twitched. "If you had a constant flow of them, you'd get bored of her style."

"No. No, I really wouldn't. That's an actual impossibility. It's—" I hissed as I accidentally aggravated the pain in my neck by moving too sharply. "God, I *loathe* whiplash. I loathe knowing it'll linger for at least another few days. There are a number of events I'm organizing that I was also intent on attending, and now I won't be able to."

"Your team can handle it," he said, scrolling through his phone.

I folded my arms with a petulant huff. "I'd better be back to normal by the time Christmas day rolls around." There was only a week left to go.

Without moving his gaze from his phone, he gave my thigh a gentle squeeze. "You should be mostly fine by then."

"I must say your bedside manner has improved from the last time I was unwell. You've actually been very nice to me today. Which is remarkable, considering I make a terrible patient."

He shrugged. "You don't do well with being made to sit still. I'm no better, so I get it."

It was good that he "got" it, because I was just as awful a patient as the days went by. And God, they seemed to pass at an agonizingly slow pace. The celibacy made me even grumpier. But he stayed home with me, batting off my moodiness like a champ.

It wasn't until day four that I had my full range of movement back. Dax and I celebrated that with a morning quickie that I'd *so* needed. A short time later, while we were waiting for our breakfast to arrive, he asked me to follow him outside; said he wanted to show me something.

Curious, I happily followed him out of the front door.

And came to a halt.

Sidling up to him, I cast him a sideways glance. “What’s this?”

“What does it look like?”

I returned my gaze to the large object in the driveway. “It looks like a car.”

“So observant,” he said dryly.

I snickered. “It’s parked in my usual space.”

“Because it’s yours. I had someone drive it here earlier.” He raised a hand. “I know you said you were fine with simply having your other car fixed, since there wasn’t a lot of damage. But you’ve been having nightmares since the crash. I’d rather you were driving something that doesn’t feature in those nightmares.”

I swallowed hard. “I appreciate that. I do. But this car is a brand newie.” Shiny and stylish and expensive. “It had to have cost—”

“Don’t make a deal out of the cost. We’re married. What’s mine is yours. And if you need something, I’m going to make sure you have it—end of conversation.”

He was making my chest feel all tight and warm again. “Then than—”

“Don’t,” he said, cutting me off as he slipped a hand into his pocket. A hand that then dangled a set of keys in front of me. “You’ll need these.”

I closed my hand around them and gently took them from him, pleased to see there was a fob attached.

His gaze searched mine. “Will you be okay driving? If you’d rather wait a few days, I can chauffeur you around.”

I felt my brows inch up. “Like I’m Miss Daisy? No, thanks. I’m good, I promise.”

“If that changes, if at any point you panic or feel uncomfortable, call me.”

I weakly saluted him. “Will do.”

His eyes burned into mine, unconvinced. “Promise me, Addison.”

God, the asshole needed to stop making me feel all gooey. “I swear I’ll call you if I get anxious.”

He gave a short nod of satisfaction.

I was about to head over to my brand-new baby and check her out, but something in his expression made me frown. “What is it?”

He poked his tongue into the inside of his cheek. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

My stomach winding tight, I allowed him to lead me back into the villa. God, what now?

He closed the door before he finally explained, “Thaddeus has been found.”

Instantly, my insides unclenched and my mood once again became bright. “And you’ll be having a chat with him soon, I take it.”

“Yes. It’s important I impress upon him that he needs to change his ways.”

“Let’s hope he listens this time.” Because if there was a next time, the scenario could be far worse.

“I won’t be leaving his side until I’m positive he’s heard me.”

Given what I suspected Thaddeus had coming ... “I almost feel sorry for him.” Almost.

Dax eyed me carefully. “You’re not going to ask me to show him mercy, are you?”

I almost blurted out a *ha*. “No. Do what you feel you need to do. Just be careful. I don’t want you to become a resident of Redwater prison, and orange really isn’t your color. I swear, I’ll be so mad if you get arrested you’ll be lucky if I visit you even once.”

He stared at me a long moment, his gaze intent as that of any jungle cat, emotions working behind his eyes that I couldn't quite distinguish. He very slowly dipped his head and pressed a soft, lingering kiss to my forehead.

I wasn't sure what it was supposed to communicate. Gratitude? Affection? Both? Nothing?

Taking my hand, he breezed his thumb over my rings.

I licked my lips. "Okay, maybe I *would* visit you in prison."

His mouth winged up. "It won't come to that. But I do appreciate the sentiment."

## Chapter Thirty-Six

Standing near the mirrored wall of the ballroom, I carefully scanned the large space. Where possible, I avoided working Christmas Eve. It wasn't always easy, since a lot of people liked to throw parties on this particular day. Unfortunately, this was one of those years.

It also happened to be a fancy dress shindig. Women were required to wear bridal gowns, and men were required to slip on groom attire.

That included the people working the event.

As such, there I stood in my wedding dress. And I had to admit, I liked having an excuse to wear it again. Beside me, Sabrina wore an over-the-top, puffy monstrosity that she'd hired for the evening. She looked ridiculous; knew it; embraced it.

I glanced down at my watch. Another few hours to go. I was looking forward to getting home—and not simply because Dax had expressed an intention to replay our wedding night while I wore my gown. I liked to spend Christmas Eve at home, chilling and watching TV and all that holiday jazz.

I was familiar with several of the party guests, including my ex-boyfriend, Beckett. He'd earlier flashed me a friendly smile, introduced me to his girlfriend, asked me to pass on his regards to Dax, and then swanned away. It was a shame things couldn't be so easy with Grayden, who also happened to be here and was pointedly avoiding making eye-contact with me. We'd only clashed gazes once, and his face had instantly adopted a petulant look.

Sabrina nudged me. "So, what did you get me for Christmas?"

Repositioning my headset, I threw her a quick look. "You'll find out tomorrow."

She pouted. "Why not just tell me now?"



“Why not just accept I’m never going to spoil the surprise that way?” I retorted. She pestered me every damn year to spill the beans before C day arrived.

She tossed me a *hmph*. “What did you get Dax?”

“Stuff he probably won’t be impressed by, but I figure it’s the thought that counts.”

Her mouth curled. “Just think ... it’ll not only be your first Christmas together, it’ll probably be the first Christmas you guys spend alone—you’ll likely be up the duff this time next year. Oh, I do love that smile you’re wearing right now.”

I shrugged a shoulder. “What’s not to smile about?”

Her own smile dimmed as something to our left caught her attention. “Maybe that,” she replied.

Tracking her gaze, I felt my lips part at the sight of Mimi striding into the ballroom. “She cannot be serious coming here. She’s not even supposed to be in Redwater.” Going by her unsteady gait, she wasn’t entirely sober.

“Well, she is. And I’m guessing it’s you she’s looking for.” Sabrina spat a low curse. “Let’s get her out of here as fast as possible.”

We both made a fast beeline for the woman, who was already attracting attention for the mere reason that—wearing jeans and a thin sweater—she wasn’t adhering to the dress code.

Ordinarily, a security detail would have addressed the situation, but our clients hadn’t requested any for their event. Right at that moment, I couldn’t be more annoyed by that.

The moment Mimi spotted me, her mouth set into an ugly smirk that held a pinch of smugness. “Ah, there you are,” she said, a slight slur to her voice.

I would have asked how she’d known where to find me if it wasn’t *far* more important I get her out of this ballroom before the hosts took notice. “How about we go get some fresh air?”

“No,” she snapped with a childlike pout. “I wanna talk *here*.”

I felt my lips tighten. “If you have a single bit of common sense, you’ll leave right now.”

She snickered and gave me a haughty onceover. “Why, whatcha gonna do if I don’t?”

Sabrina shook her head at the woman. “You have to know you made a colossal mistake coming near Addison. Dax is going to freaking *flip*. Don’t make the situation worse. Just leave quietly.”

Mimi notched up her chin, belligerent. “Hmm, nah.”

Right then, Grayden materialized. “Mimi, what the hell are you doing here?”

She frowned at him. “Talking to Addison. What’s it look like I’m doing?”

“It looks like you’re pushing Dax’s buttons again,” he clipped. “I thought you wanted to fix things.”

“I did,” she whined. “I do. I just ... I ... You know what? Fuck him.”

Sighing, Grayden rubbed at his forehead. “If you don’t abandon whatever plan you have in your head right now, you risk losing him for good.”

She snorted. “What? No. Me and Dax ... we’re, like, tied.”

Tied?

“By what?” he asked, bewildered.

“By what we lost, *duh*.”

Static sounded through my headset, and then ... “The sheriff is here with one of his deputies, Addie,” said Megan. “He says they have questions for you. I tried getting him to leave, but he won’t.”

Lowe? *Unbelievable*. Seriously unbelievable.

I wondered if he was here about Thaddeus. Probably. I wasn't sure what exact personal form of justice Dax had visited upon him yesterday, but I felt confident that Thaddeus would be in a bad state. Maybe he'd tattled, or it could be that Lowe merely suspected Dax was responsible.

Whatever the case, I would bet that the sheriff's reason for coming to question me at an event was quite simply that the police presence would shit on my company's reputation—thus avenging his niece.

I felt a serious clusterfuck coming on.

Sabrina leaned into me. "You get rid of her, I'll get rid of Lowe," she said, having obviously overheard Megan through her own headset.

Grayden looked from me to a retreating Sabrina. "Lowe? Lowe is here?"

I sighed. "Yes. Maybe you could help my friend convince him to leave." Because the sheriff turning up would gain *far* more attention than Mimi's antics. "We both know he's sought me out *here* as a high-five to your wife, after all." Ex-wife. Whatever.

Muttering something beneath his breath, Grayden jogged after Sabrina.

"Let's go somewhere private," I urged Mimi.

She shot me a petulantly stubborn look. "Uh, let's not."

*Lord give me strength.* "You have two choices. You can come with me, and then we'll talk. Or you can refuse, and I'll have you thrown out. Makes no difference to me either way." I walked off, leaving her the choice to follow. Thankfully, she followed, not sensing that I was only calling her bluff.

Since the nearest room happened to be the ladies restroom, I slipped inside, conscious of her still trailing behind me. Quickly realizing it was empty, I stopped near the end stall and swerved to face her.

Mimi gave me yet another onceover, sullen. "That the dress you wore for your wedding?"

“Yes,” I replied.

“Little understated, ain’t it?” she sniped. “But then ... I guess there’d be no point in getting all dolled-up for a ceremony that has no real meaning behind it. Right?”

My scalp prickled. Had she somehow heard about the pact? Possibly, though I didn’t see how. “What is it you want?”

Turning to the mirror, she dabbed at the corner of her mouth, as if wiping away smudged lipstick. “I had myself an itty, bitty chat with Felicity.”

And the pieces fell together.

Facing me once more, Mimi folded her arms and grinned. “I know.”

“You know what?”

“Why Dax married you. Why you married him. Why he gave you what he gave no one else.” Her grin went up a notch. “You guys made a pact.”

“That’s why you went through the trouble of tracking me down and gatecrashing this party? Just so you could inform me you learned of the pact?”

“Girl, it was no *trouble* to track ya down. This party is an annual thing—I heard months ago that your company was managing it this year. As for why I came ... no, it wasn’t just to tell you I ain’t in the dark anymore, or even to laugh at how ridiculous you are for marrying a guy who cares *zilch* for you.”

She sure didn’t *sound* as though she found me ridiculous. No, there was a fair amount of spite there.

“I get a little maudlin during the holidays, so I was flicking through some old photos earlier of me and Gracie while I set about getting smashed.” Despair washed over her face, sweeping away every trace of smugness. “I found one of her and Dax looking so fucking happy. In that picture, ’cause of the angle and lighting and stuff ... it actually looked more like me than her.”

And Mimi had seen exactly how she and Dax could have looked together as a loved-up couple if things were different.

“He never gave me the chance to make him that happy, because he doesn’t wanna *be* happy. But someone coulda changed that. Maybe not me, no, but somebody.” Her eyes blazed into mine. “*You* are in the way of that. By tyin’ him to you, you’ve taken away his shot at that future. And fuck, I got mad thinking about it.”

I snorted, all out of patience when it came to this woman. “You’re not mad that I took such a future from him. You’re mad that I took it from you. That’s how you see it, because that’s how you want to see it. Then you can tell yourself *I’m* to blame for why he’ll never commit to you; why there’ll never be a picture of the two of you looking like the besotted couple he and Gracie were. It hurts less that way, doesn’t it?”

“But it doesn’t hurt *you*, does it? You don’t care that the messed up reason he committed to you is that he *doesn’t* care for you. You’re wasting time outa his life.”

“And you’re wasting time out of yours by sniffing around a guy who’ll never want you.” When was that going to get through her head? “You came to the wrong person tonight. It’s Dax you should be talking to, because I’m sure the question on your mind is ... If he was intent on marrying someone he didn’t care for, why didn’t he just marry *you*?”

Her face reddened. “Fuck you!” she shouted. “Fuck! You!”

The door opened a few inches, and several voices filtered into the room. *Lowe. Sabrina. Grayden. Megan. A male voice I didn’t recognize.*

I gritted my teeth. *Oh, for shit’s sake.*

Lowe entered first, talking over his shoulder to Grayden. No, *arguing* with him. Grayden was speaking in what I called his “lawyer voice,” attempting to convince the sheriff to leave.

Lowe didn't.

Instead, he scanned the restroom, his eyes lighting up as they landed on me. "There you are." He glanced from me to Mimi. "I knew I heard someone yelling."

Fuck that bitch for practically leading him to us.

As he and Grayden went back to arguing, Sabrina threw me an apologetic look and mouthed, "I called Dax, he's on his way."

Good. He could end this scene with just a few words—well, threats. Using my headset, I told her, "Go wait for him." Someone would need to tell him where to find us. "Have Megan hold the fort."

Both women disappeared, closing the door behind them so no party guests would overhear anything.

Turning my attention back to the others in the room, I sighed.

This was probably what would be called a soap opera moment. I mean, I was standing in a ladies restroom ... wearing a bridal gown ... being smirked at by a woman who coveted my husband ... while my ex-boyfriend and the local sheriff argued a few feet away.

Not that weirder things hadn't happened in my life. Particularly in the past year. After all, it wasn't every day that you legally bound yourself to an ex-lover as part of a fallback marriage pact.

I looked at Mimi. "We'll talk again soon." I waved my hand at the door.

Still smirking, the brunette folded her arms and gave a little head flick that made her chin-length layers dance around her face. "I'd prefer to stay. This looks like it might be fun."

God, I needed to cut that bitch up at some point.

For now, I switched my attention back to the two men who were deep in an argument. A deputy sheriff looked on, seeming intent on not getting involved—well, most cops

swerved getting on my husband's bad side, and this little scene would sure piss him off.

"I'm only here to ask her some questions, Grayden," the sheriff insisted, his large fists perched on his stout hips. "She doesn't need a lawyer present. And if she *did*, you wouldn't be able to act as one for her—it would be a conflict of interests, given your past history."

"I'm not leaving, Lowe," Grayden asserted, a stubborn upward tilt to his chin as he drew himself up to his full height, placing him a few inches over the sheriff.

Exasperation rippled across Lowe's jowly face. "Has it occurred to you that she might not want you here? I have to say, taking into account the way everything played out between you two, I wouldn't blame her if she didn't."

An emotion flickered in Grayden's hazel eyes too fast for me to process it. "If you're trying to manipulate Addison into demanding I leave, it won't work. She knows better than to talk without legal representation present."

"As I said before, she doesn't need it—I just mean to ask her a few questions."

"Go ahead," Grayden invited, his tone as smooth as the short brown hair he'd slicked back. "But I'll be right here while you do."

Lowe's gaze narrowed. "How do you think my niece will feel when she hears you rallied to the defense of a woman she hates? Do Felicity's feelings matter to you at all?"

"You won't guilt-trip me into walking out of here."

"You turned your back on Addison once before. What's the difference?"

Oh, low blow. Accurate, though. Once, it would have stung to be reminded that Grayden had broken every promise he'd made to me when he'd scuttled back to his ex-wife. But now? Now I could think of him and feel nothing—no regret, no sadness, no anger.

Lowe sniffed. “Who is it you’re really protecting, I wonder? Her, or Dax Mercier? Are you worried she’ll spill something about your old buddy that will put him in prison where he belongs?”

Grayden’s eyes flicked to the manilla file the sheriff held. “You don’t know that Dax has anything to do with that.”

“It has his name written all over it.” Lowe turned back and pulled something out of the file. A photograph, I realized, as he held it up.

*Damn.* The dude in that picture had taken one fuck of a beating.

“Tell me, Mrs. Mercier, how would you feel if someone had done that to one of your loved ones?” asked Lowe. “How do you think his family feels? Do you really believe your husband should be allowed to get away with that?”

What I believed was that the guy had brought this on himself.

“Did the victim finger Dax as the culprit?” Grayden interrupted.

Lowe’s face tightened. “No.” He dropped his arm to his side. “He claims he remembers nothing. But it’s fear keeping him silent.” Lowe tilted his head at me. “Is that what’s keeping *you* silent? Or do you just not care?”

I kept my expression neutral as I stared back at him, honestly wondering if he truly thought I was going to tattle.

“Obstructing justice is a serious crime, you know,” Lowe warned me.

“So is wasting police time,” Grayden chipped in. “That is essentially what you’re—” He cut himself off as the door swung open with a squeak of hinges.

A tall, suited-up, familiar figure loped inside. *Dax.* His mismatched gaze locked on me, glittering with anger, and gave me a quick head-to-toe inspection. Satisfied I was fine, he drank in the rest of the room. His eyes briefly narrowed on



Mimi—whose smirk slipped away—and then lasered in on Lowe with a predatory focus.

Dax coolly hitched up a brow at him. “Want to tell me why you’re harassing my wife?” he asked, a deadly note to that otherwise velvety tone.

The sheriff straightened his broad shoulders. “Questioning her over a crime doesn’t count as harassment.” Again, he held up the photograph.

Dax’s expression didn’t alter in the slightest as he studied it. He then looked at the sheriff blankly.

Lowe’s mouth went tight. “If you didn’t personally do this, you had one of your people do it,” he upheld. “Either way, you’re responsible.”

Grayden cleared his throat. “You said yourself that the victim named no one. You have no proof that Mr. Merc—”

“I don’t need proof,” the sheriff snapped. “This reeks of Dax. He wanted revenge, and he took it. That’s his pattern.”

His expression still inscrutable, Dax looked from him to the deputy. “You can leave now.”

I almost snorted at how readily the deputy headed for the door.

Lowe, on the other hand, jutted out his chin. “You can’t throw me out. I’m not done questioning—”

“If this was about merely investigating a police matter, you wouldn’t have sought Addison out here at an event she’s managing,” said Dax, an edge of agitation to his words. “This is you using your authority to yank her chain and cause issues for her company. Simple. And I won’t tolerate it.”

Lowe’s nostrils flared. “You’re not above the law, Mercier, you are—”

“Rapidly losing my patience with you,” Dax finished, his face hardening. “You really don’t want me to push me further. Not unless you want *certain things* about you to come to light. Your wife might be interested in hearing that your

Saturday poker nights aren't really poker nights at all, though some 'poking' is involved."

Watching Lowe's face flush, I inwardly smiled. He should have expected that Dax, who made a point of sniffing out the secrets of his adversaries, would have something on him.

"You're still here. I'm struggling to understand why." Dax pursed his lips. "Maybe you'd prefer it if I made a call to your wife here and now."

His face morphing into an almighty glower, Lowe jabbed a finger in his direction. "This isn't over."

"Then your marriage soon will be," said Dax matter-of-factly.

Cursing a blue streak, Lowe stormed out.

Grayden cast me a tormented look and then turned to Mimi. "Come on, let's go."

Ignoring him, she nervously licked her lips and zeroed in on Dax. "I know about the pact."

"Do you." Dax didn't phrase it as a question. It was more of a bored statement. He made his way to me, his eyes roaming over my face. "Are you all right?"

Removing my headset, I sighed. "Yeah. Just annoyed."

"I have no idea why you acted all secretive instead of just telling me about the pact," Mimi said to him. "We're friends. Practically family."

I snorted. If circumstances were different, Dax might have one day been her brother-in-law, but she did *not* think of him as family. We all knew it.

"Mimi," Grayden clipped, "it's time to go."

Again, she completely ignored him. "You've done some crazy stuff, Dax," she said with a smirk, shaking her head in incredulity, "but marrying a woman you basically put on reserve? That's wacked."

His eyes darkening to flint, he cast her a glare. “What’s wacked is that you would dare come here. You know you’re supposed to stay away from Addison. Yet, here you are.”

She rolled her eyes. “So she got her boo-boos hurt by what I said last time we talked. It ain’t a huge deal.”

Uh, like what she’d said was *nothing*? Unreal.

His gaze iced over. “Don’t try to trivialize what you did.” The words were quiet. Deep. Dripping with anger. “The things you said might have fucked up my marriage.”

“This isn’t a *marriage*,” she snarked. “You made a pact, you stuck to it. That’s it.” She looked away with a sniff. “I should have guessed it was something like that, really. An emotionless union would of course suit you just fine.”

“Mimi,” Grayden cut in, a plea in his eyes. “Don’t do this. Let’s you and me just walk on out of here.”

“Why?” she demanded, whirling on him. “Why should I have to stay quiet? Why would *you* want to leave when we both know you hate this situation as much as I do? You’d take *her* back in a fucking heartbeat if—”

“Enough,” Dax bit out, pinning her with a somewhat callous look. “Out. Both of you.”

Mimi turned back to him, clenching her fists. “But I—” She stopped speaking when he slashed an arm through the air.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Dax asserted. “I’m not interested in hearing what you have to say about anything. I have officially hit my limit where you’re concerned, and I want you gone from my life.”

Mimi blanched. “You don’t mean that,” she breathed.

“I gave you chances. Too many. It was my mistake, and you’ve been making Addison pay for that. No more. I’m done with you.”

She slowly shuffled back, her expression wounded. “How can you say that to me?”

“Very easily. You made it easy when you started fucking with my wife.”

“Like that ring she wears means anything,” Mimi scoffed, the words coated in pure scorn. “She’s nothing to you but a backup plan.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

“*Bullshit*,” she sneered.

“No bullshit,” he said, his voice grave. “Pure truth.”

Mimi gave him a *Come on* look. “If she left you tomorrow, it wouldn’t even be a ping on your radar.”

“Addison isn’t going anywhere. Ever. I wouldn’t allow it.”

“Oh, *please*. It never bothers you in the slightest when women walk away. You might have married *this* one, but you didn’t do it because you care for her.”

Yeah, ow. Not that she was wrong, unfortunately.

“The only woman you have, and will ever, truly give a crap about is Gracie,” Mimi added, bitterness lacing each syllable. “No one will come close to mattering to you the way she did.”

“Once upon a time,” began Dax, “I would have agreed with you. But not now.”

I tensed. *Whoa, back up*.

For a few beats, Mimi only stared at him. “You ... What’d you just say?”

That was my question.

Dax didn’t repeat himself. He held her gaze, his own sober and unblinking. The resoluteness in the depths of those eyes had my pulse quickening.

A weak, nervous chuckle fluttered out of her. “Right,” she drawled, all skepticism.

Again, he said not one word, letting his unwavering expression speak for him.

The faint amusement began to drain from her face. She forced a mocking smile, but it withered fast. “I won’t buy that she means anything to you.”

“You should,” he told her. “Fact is she’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

I all but gawked at him, my heart slamming so hard against my ribs I was surprised the bones weren’t creaking in protest.

Dismay settling into the lines of her face, Mimi took another step back. “No,” she rasped, emphatic. “I don’t believe it.”

He gave an uncaring shrug. “That won’t make it untrue.”

She gave her head a hard, fast shake. “You’re lying.” She slammed her manic gaze on me. “He’s just saying all this to hurt me, right?”

Uh ... quite possibly, come to think of it. After all, she’d probably disappear for good if he could convince her of his claims. Dax didn’t exactly have an issue with being deceitful if it meant getting what he wanted.

“That’s all it is, isn’t it?” she pushed.

Digging my teeth into my lower lip, I cut my gaze to him. He wasn’t looking at me. Or her. His attention was on the object he was smoothly pulling out of his pocket.

He lifted it up for her to see. “Maybe this will answer your question.”

Her face scrunched up. “What is ...?” She trailed off as she seemed to finally *see* what he held. And what he held made my breath catch.

He looked at me. “It’s one of your Christmas gifts. I’d just taken it out of its presentation box to get a proper look at it when Sabrina called, so I slipped it in my pocket and came straight here.”

A shaky breath left me as I drank it in. It was a compass. A gold compass practically identical to the one from

the sappy movie we'd watched together. Which meant ... which meant ... which meant the fucker loved me.

I swallowed hard, my throat aching. "Shit, Dax, you know how to hit a girl right in the feels."

One corner of his mouth inched up, but his smile froze when Mimi let out a mewl. Maybe she'd seen the movie, or maybe she was just coming to realize she'd been fighting a losing battle all this time—I wasn't sure.

He met her gaze evenly. "My intent isn't to hurt you. I just want you to face reality so you can move on. There never would have been a 'me and you,' even if there was no Addison. But there is an Addison, and she's mine in a way that no one else has ever been."

My heart squeezed painfully but in the best way. It wasn't simply what he said, it was how he spoke with such ease and matter-of-factness; with a complete lack of awkwardness or embarrassment.

"No, Mimi, don't shake your head," he went on, pocketing the compass. "Don't shrug this off and tell yourself I'm lying. Hear what I'm saying: Addison is it for me. I love her. There won't come a day where I don't."

Oh fuck, I might cry.

So might she, by the looks of things. I wasn't a monster so, yeah, I did feel bad for her. But she'd ignored his rejections, overlooked his *I'm not interested* signals, and kept up the pressure ... thereby pushing him into a corner. His only real option now, if he was to *finally* get through to her, was to be cruel to be kind.

"But you loved Gracie," she croaked. "How could you just replace—"

"*Don't* insult her memory by using her to put a negative spin on this," he cautioned, his voice silken danger. "Don't imply I'm replacing her in a blatant attempt to make me feel guilty. It's both shitty and pointless."

Her upper lip quivered. "You don't feel even the slightest bit bad about loving someone else?" She practically

choked on the latter three words.

“Why would I? Gracie wouldn’t begrudge me this.”

Mimi barked a laugh. “Oh, you do like to convince yourself she was some perfect creature.” She shook her head, a cruel curve to the set of her mouth. “She wasn’t. I know something about your precious Gracie.”

He sighed. “If this is regarding her friend Hartman, so do I.”

Mimi froze and stared at him dumbly for long moments. “You know?” she breathed. “But ... you never said anything.”

“Neither did you.”

Ugh, who the hell was Hartman? I glanced at Grayden to find him looking equally baffled.

Apparently taking advantage of her state of shock, Grayden gently caught her arm. “Come on, Mimi.”

Her expression dazed, she didn’t fight him as he led her to the door.

He opened it wide but then stilled. He looked from me to Dax, swallowing hard, his eyes pained. There was something else in his gaze, though: resignation. He gave a quick nod and then escorted her out of the restrooms.

Blowing out a long breath, I turned to Dax. “That was uber intense.” I lightly dug my teeth into my lower lip. “And you got me a sippy compass.”

His mouth bowed up. “I got you a sippy compass.”

“You love me,” I whispered.

“I love you,” he confirmed. Trapping my gaze with his, he caught my face between his hands. “And you love me.”

“Yeah, I do. But you weren’t supposed to know that.”

His lips kicked up a little more. “You gave yourself away.”

I felt my brow dent. “When?”

“When I came to you after Thaddeus crashed into your car. I saw it in your eyes. And I realized I felt the same.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“At first, I was too pissed at Thaddeus. Then I decided I’d tell you Christmas Day. Figured it wouldn’t kill you to sweat a little longer.”

I gaped. “You’re such a dick.”

A low chuckle vibrated his chest. “So I’ve heard.” He dabbed a soft, lingering kiss on my mouth. “Can’t really deny it.” He smoothed his hands from my face to my hair, holding it out of the way as he studied my expression. “You all right after that scene?”

I inhaled deeply. “Yeah. I don’t think any of them will give us any more issues. Not even Lowe, despite his threat. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but who’s Hartman?”

Sighing, Dax ever so slowly released my hair. “Going through a dead person’s belongings can be hard. What’s harder is discovering something they were keeping from you. Gracie had an online friend—one she’d never met in real life. They spoke daily. She confided in him. Flirted with him a little.”

I winced. “Shit.”

“She was using a different identity, which meant she could claim to be single,” he continued, his voice remarkably even, his expression just as neutral. “And that’s what she did. They talked of meeting up, but she always made excuses at the last minute.”

A protective annoyance surged through me, hot and jagged. “Were their messages ...”

“Sexual in nature? No. They didn’t exchange explicit photos or do anything other than mildly flirt. There were no ‘I love yous’ either.”

Well, at least there was that, though it didn’t make the situation much better.



“I think, for her, it was simply a bit of fun. Excitement. And maybe a way to get back at me for insisting on moving at my pace rather than hers.”

That didn't make it acceptable. At least not in my book. “I'm sorry.”

He only shrugged, but I didn't buy that he was over it. How could he be?

“Did you tell anyone?”

“No. What would be the point? It would color their memory and perception of her. I saw no need to do that. And it wasn't as if she had a deep, dark, terrible secret.”

It was terrible in my eyes, because it was betrayal of a sort. Hadn't he suffered enough of that?

God, this had to have exacerbated his trust issues tenfold. “How do you think Mimi knew about it?”

“Maybe Gracie told her about her ‘friend,’ who knows? I'm not surprised that Mimi said nothing of it to me. She loved her sister more than life itself. They were extremely close. She wouldn't throw her under the bus like that. It wasn't until recently that she even began hinting there was something I didn't know.”

I wondered if maybe Mimi had started to resent that she'd held back Gracie's secret, perhaps thinking that if only she'd long ago turned him against her twin then he might be married to *Mimi* now, not me.

“I think she thought if she prodded me with enough ‘maybe you didn't know Gracie as well as you think you did’ comments, I'd pressure her into telling me. Then she wouldn't feel quite as guilty for confessing.”

Possibly. “It must have been a shock for you to find out about Hartman.”

“Not as much as you might think. I'm not a trusting person. And when you walk through life expecting the people you meet to let you down or fuck you over, such things don't hit you as hard.”

Maybe.

Dax cupped my chin and swept his thumb along my jaw. “You haven’t let me down. Haven’t screwed me over. Haven’t once broken my trust.” He dipped his face to mine. “And you love me.”

I curled my hand around his wrist. “Yes, I do.” And I saw now that Brooks had been right. I’d loved Lake and would have been happy with him, but he hadn’t been the love of my life. No, that was Dax. The contentment I felt with him ... it beat anything I’d felt before with anyone else.

“The only thing about this situation that pisses me off is that I stupidly let you go once. I shouldn’t have.”

I understood why he had, though. He’d been even more closed-off back then than he was now. Probably because the hurt from all the betrayals and other shit he’d suffered growing up were still fresh. He hadn’t had the chance to work through them, process the anger, and develop an ability—however weak it had been—to trust.

An intensity blazed in his eyes. “I won’t let you go again.”

I smiled. “Good. Because I won’t let you go either.”

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Reaching back, I planted a hand on the headboard and started to ride Dax's pumping tongue. But then he withdrew it with a slow swirl and went back to licking at my slit. I moaned in exasperation, an edgy need buzzing through my veins like bubbling champagne.

I'd woken to the feel of him lowering his body over mine, settling his rock hard cock against my pussy. There was nothing new about that—he liked to take me off-guard by pushing inside me as I was waking, and I liked to have him do it. But though Dax might be a fan of morning quickies, it turned out that this didn't extend to Christmas morning.

There'd been no fast, hard fuck—unlike last night, when I'd strolled out of the en suite bathroom all decked up in a red, Christmas themed baby-doll.

No, this morning, he was instead set on delivering his signature brand of sensual torture.

While making his way down my body to my pussy, his mouth did a lot of skimming, kissing, grazing, and sucking. More, his hands did lots of molding, stroking, rubbing, and squeezing.

Basically, he'd pressed, pushed, and flicked every sexual button I had.

The arm he'd then thrown over my hips now held me down as he feasted. His gentleness ebbed and flowed, just like the rougher edge to his touches. But ... there was a little *too* much gentleness.

Each flick of his tongue was a featherlight tease. Every nip of his tongue barely even stung. Each dip of his finger in my pussy was too shallow to do more than frustrate the holy hell out of me.

And he knew it.

So now I was the living, breathing manifestation of desperation and every part of me felt over-sensitized—my

brain, my skin, my senses, my core.

I was done. *Done*. I couldn't take anymore.

Weaving my fingers into his hair, I tugged in demand. "In me." With a hiss, I jumped as teeth sank into my inner thigh in a punishing bite.

His gaze slammed on mine, stamped with male possession, as his tongue coasted over the tingling mark. "Not yet."

I stubbornly pulled on the soft strands again. "*Fuck me.*"

Dax pinned me with a hard look. "No, I'm not stopping until you've come in my mouth," he said, his voice coated in raw sexual power—a vocal enthrallment that riveted me every time. "Be good and take it, or this'll go a lot slower."

I eased my hold on his hair. "At least take things up a notch."

"Not until you're about to come."

"Why?" I wasn't proud of how whiny that sounded.

His tongue lashed my clit. "Because the wait will make you blow even harder. So behave like I told you."

He resumed torturing me with soft licks, nips, and shallow pulses of his tongue. Later, I would appreciate the way he gave and gave, expecting nothing in return; the way he was so invested in ensuring I came harder than ever. But right now—while the slow-building, simmering tension in my belly relentlessly slithered and contracted—I just wanted to hit him.

In between swipes and stabs of that glorious tongue, murmured words of praise would fan over my superheated flesh, adding to the sensations. Again and again, I asked him to fuck me already. Again and again, he ignored me.

Instead, he kept on devastating my pussy while it squeezed and spasmed around either thin air or the tip of his tongue. *Ugh*.

God, at this point, my senses were *wired*. More, my skin was far too hot and my mind felt muddled by the chemical assault it had undergone.

I started to float, to drift, to sink into another mental place. But then I felt it happening; felt the tension build a little more, felt my release hover somewhere close.

I chased it, bucking into his mouth and letting out moan after moan. The orgasm crept closer and closer, but it was still too far away. I tightened my grip on his hair and clawed at the bedsheet, my every breath sounding raw and ragged.

“Time to let go,” Dax whispered, assertiveness embedded in each murmured word. “Come on, you can do it.”

My release edged even closer, causing my inner walls to superheat. Every muscle, inside and out, tightened. Slackened. Trembled. Clenched. The first wave began to reach toward its peak—

“That’s it, let go. Now.” He sucked on my clit and jammed two fingers inside me.

I fucking detonated. Blew. Soared. Lost all sense of the world around me.

My eyes closed as I floated on sheer bliss, I was barely aware of him crawling up my body until teeth nipped my chin.

“Give me your eyes, Addison.”

I opened them, my breath catching at the molten intensity in his gaze. A gaze that held mine captive as he hooked a hand under my knee and hiked up my leg. I curled my free leg around him just as he swiped the thick head of his cock between my folds.

Oh, and then he pushed it inside me. Just an inch. The barest inch.

I planted my hands on his broad shoulders, *feeling* the change in the air; the change in him. Feeling as his warm, lazy vibe faded and cooled ... only to be replaced by an electrically charged sexual aggression that burned in his eyes.

I swallowed. “If you keep looking at me that way, I might swoon or something.”

His lips tipped up, but the dark glitter in his gaze remained. “You pass out, I’ll fuck you anyway.” He slammed his hips forward, drilling his cock *so fucking deep*.

Then he was railing me, unleashing the full depth of his need, incinerating every last bit of composure I had.

Letting out soft, moaning pants, I slid my hand down his back and gripped his ass, digging in my nails in feminine demand. Growling into my neck, he took me harder, brutal in his possession.

The air rang with whimpers, groans, grunts, snarls, and the slap of flesh against slick flesh. Already a second orgasm was steadily gathering in force, making me crave more, faster, harder.

With my calf, I pulled him deeper, grabbing at him, scratching at him, trying to drag him closer even though we were as close as two people could be.

He grunted in my ear. “Love walking around, you by my side, knowing this pussy is all mine. *You’re mine, Addie.*”

The possessive words soaked into my bones and sang in my blood. “And you’re mine.”

I gasped as he began to ram into me so violently the headboard slammed against the wall. And the gathering force inside me? It curled my toes, surged up my legs, shot up my core and ruptured like a freaking volcano.

I screamed. Spasmed. Arched. Clawed at him.

“Fuck,” he gritted out. Three pitiless thrusts later he exploded.

He released my leg and collapsed over me, burying his face in my throat. I weakly curled my limbs around him, not giving a single shit that he was squishing me. We lay there for endless moments, trembling and panting.

When my lungs had finally stopped burning, I said, “What a merry fucking Christmas this is so far turning out to

be.” I felt his lips curve against my neck. “On another note, when we get your cock insured, we need to also get your mouth insured.”

“Hmm, if you say so.” Lifting his head, he dragged his gaze—so covetous and proprietary—over my face, absorbing every detail. The pads of his fingers softly traced the curve of my jaw as he said, “Never forget.”

I was reminded, then, of the short conversation we’d had last night as we’d lay in bed on our sides, facing each other ...

*“You know I’m not a person who instinctively shares what they’re feeling, so you’ll know I’m not going to regularly say the sweet shit that people in relationships like to hear,”* he’d said.

“Sweet shit?” I’d echoed, amused.

*“So I’m going to tell you here and now—there is not one thing more important to me than you. You’re everything. All I need in one little package. I love you, Addison Mercier. That will not ever change. Not even for a single second. Never forget it.”*

And yeah, I’d gotten all choked up and so only managed to get out: “*Love you more.*” I had tried to later give him a more lovey-dovey declaration, but he’d stopped me with a growly kiss and then fucked me spectacularly hard, so I’d resolved to do it often.

Looking up at him now, I threaded my fingers through his hair. “I’m so glad I suggested that fallback marriage pact.”

He flicked my nose with his. “I’d have come for you anyway.”

“And I’d have still said yes, pact or no pact.”

“I know.”

I chuckled. “Such arrogance.” I tilted my head, excitement flaming to life in my belly. “Ready to open your presents now?”

“Sure.”

When we settled on the living room sofa, I handed my gifts over to him first—cufflinks, a designer wristwatch, his signature cologne, a bottle of his favorite whiskey, and a new vintage liquor cabinet, since the other was scratched to shit courtesy of Gypsy. The collection of gifts earned me not only some gorgeous smiles but a deep, lingering kiss that made my toes curl.

He then passed over my gifts, which included not only the gold compass but a diamond necklace with matching earrings, a huge box of my favorite luxury chocolates, a new tablet—I'd recently dropped the other, which now had a cracked screen—and a selection of signed, special editions of not-yet-released novels. One of those was written by Nina Bowen, and I might have squealed just a little on unwrapping it.

“The latter is for sure your favorite gift, isn't it?” It wasn't a question from him; it was a knowing comment.

I shrugged, hugging the hardcover to me. “What can I say? I love her.” As a little secret smile plucked at his mouth, I narrowed my eyes. “Every time I mention her, you get a weird look on your face. What gives?”

Humming, he dipped his mouth to my ear. “Want to know a secret?”

“Of course.”

“You have to keep it to yourself.”

“Done.” I placed the book on the table and gave him my full attention. “Tell me.”

“The name Nina Bowen is a pseudonym. The author's real name is in fact Kensey Mercier.”

Shocked as all shit, I gawked. “*Your mom* is Nina Bowen? No way!”

He smiled. “Yes way.”

“You're fucking with me,” I breathed.

“It's true,” he insisted, chuckling.



“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Recalling the look on her face when I’d gushed over her tattoo and made that comment about loving Nina Bowen, I felt my cheeks go hot. *Oh, God.* “You haven’t told her that I’m so *totally* obsessed with her books, have you?”

He grinned. “Of course I have.”

I groaned in mortification, slapping my hands to my burning face.

Another rumbly chuckle vibrated in his chest. “She’s very flattered that she’s one of your favorite authors.”

Struggling to process it, I shook my head and dropped my hands to my lap. “It’s a good thing I hadn’t known she was Nina when I first met her. I would have stumbled my way through our entire conversation like a complete tool.” Feeling a little panicked, I asked, “How am I going to face her at dinner? What do I say to her?”

“Well, this is just an idea, but you could talk to her as normally as you usually do,” he quipped.

“Yeah, that won’t happen. I’ll fangirl all the way.” I poked his chest. “I can’t believe you kept this from me. You should make it up to me.”

“I should? How?”

“By telling me why you like to choose what I wear.” But he’d likely hold back that answer just for the fun—

“It’s a way of marking you, I suppose,” he explained with a faint shrug, shocking me by answering so readily. He dragged his fingertips down my throat, adding, “If I won’t get to see you all day, you’ll at least walk out of the house wearing something I chose—for me, it feels similar to putting a brand on you.”

“So it’s an ownership thing,” I mused.

“Yes.” He nipped at my lower lip. “And I like that you want to please me. It gets to me when few things do.”

Huh. Since he seemed to be in a talkative mood, I pounced, saying, “I have one more question: If I hadn’t agreed to marry you, who would you have asked?” Knots formed in my gut as I awaited his response.

Dax’s eyes followed the path of his hand as he stroked my hair. “I didn’t have anyone else in mind.”

A single knot slipped away. “But you would have had to settle on somebody, so surely there was ... what’s funny?”

Laughter in his gaze, he tapped my chin once. “Sometimes, I wonder if you really know me as well as you think you do.”

I felt my nose scrunch up. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you should know perfectly well that I wouldn’t have ‘settled.’ If you had said no, I would have kept on at you and done whatever it took to change your mind. I’m good at persuading people to my way of thinking. You would have agreed eventually.”

His cocky answer made my brow arch even as it also caused the other knots in my belly to unravel. “I can’t even deny that.”

“You’d be lying if you did.” He planted a quick kiss on my mouth. “Coffee?”

I nodded. “Coffee.”

As he pushed off the sofa and left the room, I felt my gaze fly back to my new Nina Bowen novel, deciding for the sake of my mental equilibrium that I would pretend she wasn’t his mother. The cover was so beautiful with the gold foil and the deep blue—

“For fuck’s sake.”

Frowning, I stood. “What is it?” I headed down the hallway and into the kitchen. “You haven’t broken the—Oh,” I mumbled as I came to a halt beside him. Staring down at the dead animal, I swallowed hard. “Think of it as a Christmas gift.”

Dax blinked at me. “A Christmas gift?”

“Gypsy’s just getting in the holiday spirit.”

“Since when are dead squirrels considered presents?”

“The laws of the wild are different than ours. You know this.”

His lips flattened. “What I know is that her kills are getting bigger. She’s escalating.”

Yeah, kinda. “Well, at least it has its head.”

“A leg is missing. I’m thinking she probably ate it.”

I sighed. “You persist on thinking the worst of her.”

“I persist on facing that there’s something very wrong with that cat.”

I lifted my chin. “I will again note that this never stops you from allowing her to snuggle into you or sit on your lap.”

He gave a dismissive shake of the head. “Finish prepping the coffee machine for me. I’ll get rid of the squirrel. Let’s just hope it isn’t a mother, or there’ll be babies crying out for her, tiny and defenseless and hungry.”

I moaned. “Don’t say stuff like that, it makes my heart—God, you’re a dick,” I grumbled when I saw his lips bowing up.

“That’s not something you haven’t always known. Now let’s get this done. We haven’t got long before we’ll need to leave, and I want to fuck you in the shower before we do.”



Sitting beside me at our parents’ table later on, Alicia nudged me and said, “Dad just smiled.”

“About what?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but it’s one for the books. That he smiled at your hubby is, like, *wow*.”

Wait, he'd smiled at *Dax*? I glanced at the pair, finding them talking quite amiably—just as they had been for the last half hour. Like they were old friends. As if there had never been a point where Dane had threatened to shoot him.

Everyone else at the table was just as chilled, and both families were mixing well. Ollie and Caelan were in a deep discussion about something. Sitting across from each other, Harri and Drey were chatting away. Dax's parents, my mom, Marleigh, and Raven were laughing while reading aloud dirty Christmas cracker jokes to each other.

We'd all finished our dinner at this point and, God, I was *beyond* bloated. I honestly thought I'd burst if someone so much as touched my belly. Apparently, a to-die-for dessert awaited us all, courtesy of Kensey. I sure hoped the Davenports and Merciers banded together for more dinners in the future, because the food was ace and seeing everyone getting along so well warmed my heart.

Dax splayed his hand on my thigh, snapping me out of my thoughts. "Why are you puffing out your cheeks?"

"Because I'm stuffed," I replied. "Hey, I noticed you and my dad were chatting like buds just now. And you said it wasn't possible for him to be nice to you. Such a skeptic you are."

"I didn't say he wouldn't be nice. I said he'd never like me. And he won't."

I flapped a hand. "Whatever. He's not glaring and stuff. I'll take that as a win."

Leaning into me, Dax whispered, "Out of curiosity, are you going to make eye contact with my mom at some point?"

"No," I said just as quietly. "I don't trust myself not to blush and start gushing about her books in a creepy stalkerish way. Stop smiling. It isn't funny."

He didn't bother to shrink his grin. "Where's the closest bathroom?"

I gave him directions and then shamelessly ogled his ass as he walked out of the room. I couldn't help but let out a

somewhat dreamy sigh. Well, it was a positively epic butt.

Alicia softly snickered, watching me. “I’d give you shit for that girly sigh, but I’d probably be just as smug if I’d bagged a dude that hot. I love your necklace, by the way.”

I fingered it gently, feeling my mouth hitch up. “It’s a present from Dax.”

“Hmm, he sure has good taste when it comes to bling. What else did he get you?”

“A few things, including a gold compass like the one from that romcom I love.”

Alicia’s lips parted as realization of its meaning dawned on her. “Oh. Going by the glowing look on your face, I don’t think I need to ask if his feelings are returned.”

I beamed. “No, you don’t.”

Her expression went soft as she studied me. “You’re happy.”

“I am.” I bumped her shoulder with mine. “I want you to be this happy.”

“I don’t know if anyone could be as happy as you are right now.” Her eyes narrowed. “Are you pregnant?”

“No. Not yet, anyway. But we’re going to start trying for a baby in a couple of months. That was the original plan.”

She lifted her champagne flute. “I don’t know if he’ll want to share you so soon. Don’t be surprised if he suggests altering the plan just a little. And here he comes now.”

I watched as he stalked back into the room, all slow and sexy.

Retaking his seat beside me, he gave me a faint, lopsided smile. “You good?”

“Couldn’t be better,” I replied. “You?”

He leaned in. “You love me?”

I smiled. “Yes.”

“Then I’m good.”

# Epilogue

## *Daxton*

*A month later*

Watching Addison sitting on their sofa cradling her nephew, Dax propped his hip against the doorjamb. Marleigh, Alicia, and Harri had turned up half an hour ago with ten-day-old baby Hudson, who every member of Addison's family doted on and treated like a prince.

Seeing her cuddle the infant, her face awash with pure joy, Dax felt warmth flare in his chest. Before marrying her, he'd wanted children. But now it was a different kind of "want." Because now it wasn't merely about having kids, it was about having them *with Addison*. About the journey of the pregnancy, about seeing her belly swollen with his baby, about watching her hold them the way she now did Hudson.

"I don't need to ask what's going through your head right now," said Jag beside him, pulling him out of his ruminations.

Dax spared him a quick glance. "I don't need to ask what's going through yours." He'd caught Jag discreetly eyeing Alicia when her attention was elsewhere—and vice versa.

Jag's jaw firmed. "Leave it."

Dax shrugged. "You want to deprive yourself of what you want, that's your business." But that wasn't Dax's style—hence why he'd set out to convince Addison to marry him in the first place, unwilling to consider that he'd fail.

She wasn't the type he usually went for, but she'd snatched his attention the first time he saw her over a decade ago. It was that indifferent, unattainable vibe she gave off. She didn't enter a room and wonder if anyone was looking at her; didn't make a single move that was designed to snare a man's focus—there was no artifice, no mask, no vanity, no games.

And he'd been determined to have her.

So he'd had her, having no clue that he'd grow so possessive; having no clue that the possessiveness wouldn't fade when their fling ended and she walked away.

And having no clue that they'd one day honor their fallback marriage pact.

Though he'd been serious when agreeing to the pact all those years ago, he hadn't expected to ever consider acting on it; hadn't thought it would come to that. He'd believed they'd both have attained their personal life goals well before she reached the age of thirty. Still, it hadn't been until he'd lost hope of making a deep, true, long-term relationship work that he'd given the pact any real serious consideration.

"You love her," said Jag.

"Yeah," Dax readily admitted.

"Not surprised. You two fit." Jag's gaze cut to Addison. "I like her. Don't like many people. But I like her."

"There's nothing not to like."

His mouth kicking up, Jag gave him a taunting look. "Man, she's dug in deep, hasn't she?"

"Like a tick." As a rule, Dax didn't get close to people—it wasn't purposeful, just instinctual. So he hadn't expected to come to care for her. He'd thought maybe he'd grow to feel a sort of warm regard for her in time, but that was all.

However, when she'd lied for him to Lowe—no hesitation, no uneasiness, no guilt—he'd known he was in trouble. Because in doing that, and in saying the things to Dax she'd said afterwards, she'd made him feel something that few people outside his family had: Accepted.

It was such a simple thing, but it wasn't something he'd encountered much in his life. So many people had disapproved of him, judged him, distrusted him, misunderstood him, attempted to change him, expected the worst of him. The very day she gave him the false alibi, the

realization had hit him hard that none of those things applied to Addison.

No matter what, she'd stuck by him. She'd given him her loyalty even when he hadn't yet earned it. She'd never discounted his version of a story, or trusted the version of another over his. She had so much faith in him—in not only his willingness and ability to keep her safe, but in the extent of his loyalty and solidity of his integrity.

More, she'd never asked that he be anything other than who and what he was.

“Happy for you,” Jag went on. “Wasn't sure you'd let yourself have this. Thought you might fight Addison's pull out of loyalty to Gracie. Glad you didn't. She'd be pleased for you, and I reckon she'd like Addison. Like her for you.”

“She would.” All warmth and softness for the most part, Gracie would want him to have what he had with Addison. It was something he hadn't had with any other, not even Gracie herself, if he was honest.

Falling for Addison made him face that, though Gracie had loved him, she hadn't been so accepting of him. Though she hadn't condemned or tried to change him, she'd often nagged at him to make all his businesses legitimate, telling him he could “be more.”

She'd meant well—he knew that. He'd understood she meant it as a compliment. But, after fucking years of people *expecting* more and different from him, it hadn't felt good.

Nonetheless, he'd loved Gracie. He would have been happy with her, if life hadn't torn them apart. But in truth, he didn't believe he would have found the same level of contentment with her as he had with Addison.

“You heard from Mimi?” asked Jag.

Dax gave his head a slow shake. “And I don't expect to. I finally got through to her last month at that party. She hated what she heard. She might even now hate me.”

“It's a shit situation. But if hating you is the only way she'll let go and move on, maybe it's best.” Jag paused. “I



noticed a 'For Sale' sign up in Felicity and Grayden's front yard."

"I heard about that." Caelan had mentioned it.

Jag's lips curved again. "Bet you're not whatsoever heartbroken to hear they'll be relocating."

Not one bit. "The sooner they're gone, the better. I won't have to worry they'll have a relapse and start giving my wife problems again."

Jag nodded. "Blaise seems to be keeping his head down in general, so whatever you ... said ... had an impact. Speaking of people you've had an impact on, Drey told me that Thaddeus is in rehab. I take it that's your, shall we say, influence."

Dax grunted. "I strongly urged him to seek help."

"He needs it, or he could get someone else hurt—maybe worse."

Dax had thought that Lowe might push Thaddeus into pressing charges, but the sheriff hadn't bothered. In fact, neither Dax nor—more importantly—Addison had heard anything more from Lowe. According to Dax's contacts, the sheriff had chosen to backoff. He was a prick, but Lowe wasn't a prick in the habit of biting off more than he could chew or interested in having his wife divorce him.

Dax straightened as Addison and her relatives stood, each making promises that the other would see them again soon.

"I'm gonna head out as well," Jag told him. "Got some shit to do."

With a nod, Dax walked him to the front door. "Take care of yourself."

"You too," Jag gruffly returned before stalking over to his bike. Moments after he disappeared out of the driveway, Addison began guiding her relatives to the front door. After a round of goodbyes—and the several soft kisses she planted on

her nephew's head—she waved them off, not closing the door until their cars were pulling out onto the road.

Turning to Dax, she smiled at him. “Hudson is just the cutest baby in the world. And I don't just say that as a biased aunt—which, of course, I am—I say it because it's true.”

“Hmm,” was all he said, catching her wrist to pull her closer.

“I volunteered us for babysitting duty, by the way,” she said, sinking her fingers into his hair. “But so did my sisters, parents, Sabrina, *her* parents, and also my grandparents ... so you won't have to worry that we'll be babysitting a lot.” Her brow creased. “Sadly.”

“You hungry?” he asked, tracing the dragonfly tattoo on her inner wrist with this thumb; stroking down the curve of its tail only to smoothy backtrack.

She pursed her lips. “Not yet. Maybe in an hour.”

He hummed deep in his throat. “Good. That gives me time to bend you over the sofa.”

He'd had to wake up early for an urgent business call, so he hadn't been able to fuck her senseless this morning in bed. Then her relatives had arrived, so that had further curtailed his plans. He didn't intend to delay them any further. Almost seven months they'd been married, but the intensity of his need for her still seemed boundless.

“We need to practice making our own baby,” he added, nuzzling her temple.

“We don't get enough practice,” she said with complete seriousness, her pupils dilating, a slight flush staining her cheeks. “That needs rectifying.”

“Couldn't agree more.”

Her eyes stared at—not *into*, but at—his own. “I don't know which one is my favorite. The blue one, or the green one.” She twisted her mouth. “Hmm, yeah, I can't pick. I love them both.”

“And me. You love me.”

A smile tugged at her lips. “And you.”

It meant more to him than she could know. Women had loved him before, but not exactly as he was—flaws, fuckups, illegal shit and all. Only Addison had given him that.

He kissed her, lapping up her taste—a taste that had years ago stamped itself in his memories and rooted itself deep, so there was no way he could forget it.

He’d never before been owned. Never. But yeah, she owned him.

Drawing back from the kiss, she looped her arms around his neck. “You’re quite loveable.”

Uh, not at all. “I don’t think many people would agree with that.”

“The haters don’t count,” she said with a dismissive curl of her upper lip. “If they’re too distracted by the predator in you, that’s on them. As I’ve said before, I’m quite partial to the wolf.”

A pleasant burn settling in his chest, he slid one hand down her wrist to thumb her rings. “Never forget.”

She full-on smiled. “I won’t. Never forget I love you right back.”

# Acknowledgement

Writing a book is really only the first step. So much goes into making the manuscript fit for publication. As such ...

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Take care,

S :)

## About The Author

Suzanne Wright lives in England with her husband and two children. When she's not spending time with her family, she's writing, reading, or doing her version of housework - sweeping the house with a look.

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