

**THE
GUARDIAN**



FOUR FORCES SECURITY

ALEXIS WINTER

THE GUARDIAN

FOUR FOURCES SECURITY

BOOK 3

ALEXIS WINTER



THE LAST TIME A MAN BROKE
MY HEART, IT WAS MY
DAUGHTER'S FATHER WHEN
HE DISAPPEARED FROM OUR
LIVES. SO THE LAST THING I'M
INTERESTED IN, IS AN ALPHA
WITH A CHIP ON HIS
SHOULDER WHO ONLY SEES
ME AS A DAMSEL IN DISTRESS.

**Alex Rockwell isn't just a playboy with a charming smile
and a mouth that will make you blush. He's a trained
assassin that has become my shadow.**

Leaving behind my prestigious job as chief legal counsel to
pursue taking on a massive class action suit against one of the
most powerful companies in New York has put a target on my
back.

One that could not only destroy my career, but also our lives.

So at the insistence of my best friend's husband, I hire his
security firm, The Four Forces.

Just my luck, I'm assigned to the one former Special Forces
agent with a reputation that would put Casanova to shame.

What I thought would just be a quick check of my
surroundings and installing a few cameras has turned into a
full blown assignment.

One that has me questioning everything when my ten year old
daughter finds a kindred spirit in him.

After my experience with men, I promised myself I'd never
trust one again.

But Alex is nothing like the men I've known.

He's rugged and rough around the edges with nothing to prove
and no desire to stick around.

He likes pushing my boundaries in ways I never imagined.

And the truth is...I like it.

But behind the delicious stolen moments we try to keep hidden
from everyone, I can see he's more than his reputation.

He's hurting just like me.

One thing he's made clear...he doesn't do forever.

**I'm merely an assignment for him, a convenience and he's
just a distraction for me.**

**After all, he was hired to protect us, not put my heart back
together.**

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THANK YOU!

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XoXo,

Alexis

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JULIETTE

“This is huge, Brett. Like, class-action-suit huge. Major-insurance-company-and-manufacturing-company-named-in-the-suit huge.”

“I know,” my friend Brett says before taking a sip of his wine. “That’s why I brought it to you.”

“We have to do something. We can’t let these people suffer like this, and we both know that neither of these companies will do anything to make this right unless legal action is involved.”

I place the large stack of paperwork I’ve acquired over the last several weeks on the table and plop my hand on top of it. “I’ve spent the better part of six weeks getting detailed stories and statements from the factory workers. There are countless stories of permanent lung damage, jobs lost—hell, *lives* lost—all because Delmore Manufacturing has no issue with toxic levels of chemicals in the air supply on the factory floor. Have they ever heard of the EPA?”

“I know, Jules, and I agree. The problem is, my firm won’t let me take the case on.”

I let out a sigh of annoyance. “Still? Even after all this evidence, you think they won’t?”

He wipes his mouth after taking a bite of his filet and shakes his head. “Doubtful.”

“Why not? You work for the most powerful firm in the city.”

“I’m tied up with the Steadman fraud case—have been for months. Since they’re one of our biggest clients, there’s no way in hell the partners will let me take on a class-action suit this large, especially since we both know it would have to be on contingency. And even if they did let me, Nathan would kill me. I can’t spend the first year of our marriage at the office, darling.”

“I understand.” I sit back in my chair, feeling defeated. I stare out the window of the restaurant, watching people attempt to dodge raindrops and puddles as they scurry down the sidewalk during a New York spring evening.

Brett and I went to law school at Harvard together and have remained close ever since. I’m actually the one who introduced him to his now-husband, Nathan. Nathan and I met because I hired his interior design firm to help me furnish my new apartment when I moved to New York from Boston a few years ago. They hit it off instantly and have been inseparable ever since.

“What are you thinking?” Brett asks. I turn to look back at him, his eyebrow cocked. “I know that look, Jules.”

“I’m wondering if your firm won’t take the case because they don’t want to spread resources too thin, or if it’s because the insurance company and Delmore are both represented by your firm’s biggest competitor?”

He chuckles. “I’d be lying if I said that isn’t part of it, I’m sure. Granted, I can’t speak for the partners, but going up

against Prince, Dune & Bellows probably isn't on their to-do list. With a reputation like theirs, they know it wouldn't be a fair fight from the jump."

"Well, it's not like they're above the law; we can both play hardball."

"Hardball isn't the issue, and we both know that. If Darth Vader, Satan, and all the bad guys from Gotham were represented by a law firm, it would be them."

I twirl my finger around the rim of my glass, chewing my bottom lip before I speak. "What if—" I hesitate, not wanting to say something purely out of emotion but knowing it's what I need to do. "What if I came on board at Steinburg, Goldman & Thompson with the condition that I would be able to bring this case with me on contingency?"

Brett's eyes grow wide. "Are you serious?" I nod my head. "You know they'd kill to have you at the firm since they've tried poaching you for the last two years from Titan Financial, but you also have to know it wouldn't be as cushy as what you're used to over there."

"I'm aware," I say, taking a large gulp of wine. "And for the record, we both have very cushy jobs."

"Yes, well, being chief legal counsel for a top financial firm has perks you won't get with Steinburg. You'll be back to billable hours, which they'll expect—actually, *demand*—you hit before you even think about working on the contingency stuff."

"You think I can't handle it? Come on, Brett, I was pregnant and had a daughter in college then raised her through law school, so I think I can manage."

“Oh, I don’t doubt that. It’s just that you’ve built a nice life for yourself and Chloe since moving to New York. You’ve worked your ass off to earn the flexibility to have nights with her and spend your weekends not glued to your computer. I’m just saying they’ll expect you to put in some due diligence.”

“You mean bitch work?” I smile and it makes him laugh.

“Pretty much. That being said, inside of two years, I could see you as a junior partner at the firm. And if you make this class-action suit happen and win it?” He whistles and shakes his head. “They’d be begging you to be named partner in no time.”

SIX MONTHS LATER ...

I YAWN and stretch my arms overhead as I glance over at the clock. Quarter to nine. The office is dark, and once again, I’m the only person still here.

“Shit!” I gather my files in my hands and walk them back to my office, shoving them into my file drawer and locking it. I grab my purse and jacket, typing out a quick text to my best friend, Blaire, as I walk toward the elevators.

Me: *So sorry I’m running late! Heading to you now. I hope Chloe isn’t too upset.*

This is the third night this week I’ve had to ask someone to babysit my daughter so I can stay late to work on the class-action suit. When I joined Steinburg, I promised myself and Chloe that this wouldn’t happen, but it looks like I was lying to both of us.

“Come on!” I hit the elevator button rapidly, trying to summon it faster. Finally it dings and the doors glide open. I take it down to the parking garage, which is silent—just the sound of a steady drip somewhere far off in the distance echoing around me. I hate being down here alone. Then again, the fact that I even have a car in New York City is such a privilege, I remind myself to stop complaining and pick up my pace.

The clicking of my heels bounces off the cement floor and walls as I walk to my car, holding my keys out to hit the unlock button just as I hear something in the distance. I spin around, looking over my shoulder to the right and then the left, but there’s nothing.

“Get it together, Jules.” I shake my head, realizing I’d be that cliché woman who gets killed in the first scene of the horror movie because she stops to ask, *Is anyone there?*

I reach for the handle on the car door and yank it open just as the sound of one of the steel stairwell doors opens and closes. I hold my breath, just listening, when I hear the sound of footsteps. I dive into my driver’s side, shutting the door and locking it as my heart feels like it’s about to beat out of my chest.

“It’s just your imagination,” I whisper to myself as I close my eyes and grip my steering wheel tightly. This would be an overreaction if it weren’t for the weird and downright terrifying experiences I’ve had lately: the feeling that someone has been following me, the slashed tire from a week ago, and the mysterious package on my doorstep that was just an empty box neatly tied with a red ribbon.

When I open my eyes again, that’s when I see it. A note beneath my windshield wiper. I tilt my head to the side to read

it, the letters written in bold marker facing toward the window like the person knew I wouldn't see it until I was sitting inside my car.

You've been warned.

I don't get out to grab the note. Instead, I start the car, throwing it in reverse and peeling out of the garage toward Blaire's house. If there's anywhere I know I'll be safe, it's at my best friend's house. She's married to a former Special Forces agent turned private security. Her husband, Jameson, and his three best friends founded the Four Forces Security Agency after they all met in the Special Forces years back.

"I'm so sorry I'm late ... again," I say to Blaire as she ushers me inside.

"Oh, stop apologizing. You know we don't mind. Chloe is currently explaining the entire *Harry Potter* series to Jimmy. Poor man is so confused," she laughs. "You'd think being Special Forces, he'd keep up no problem, but he keeps asking her to repeat stuff and forgetting names, and I think it's driving her crazy."

We walk down the hallway, stopping in the doorway out of Chloe and Jimmy's sight as we listen to her try to help him make sense of what she's telling him.

"No, Lucius is the dad of Draco, the bad kid. Professor Snape is the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, who is also the head of Slytherin, which is the house Draco is in, but Snape is also secretly kind of in this private group with Lucius, where they're Lord Voldemort's minions."

"Okay," Jimmy nods his head slowly, his eye looking like it's almost twitching in confusion, "I think I got it."

Blaire and I can't stop ourselves from bursting into laughter, causing them both to turn around and see us.

"Mom!" Chloe jumps up and runs over to me, wrapping her arms around my waist, "I was just explaining *Harry Potter* to Uncle Jimmy. He said he'd watch the movies with me sometime."

"Did he?" I look over at him in surprise. "You really sure about that, Jameson? We're talking eight long movies of wizards and witches." I grin and he shrugs helplessly.

"I think I can manage, especially if I have Chloe to help me keep everyone straight." He reaches his hand out to high five her.

"You know it," she says, slapping his hand.

It warms my heart to see her engage with a man I know won't break her heart like her father did, but that isn't an obligation Jameson should be saddled with. When Caleb, Chloe's father, didn't even fight me on sole custody—let alone even file a response to the divorce or custody papers—I wasn't surprised. He'd already vanished from our lives in the two years leading up to the separation and then divorce.

When I met Caleb, he seemed like my knight in shining armor, something naive 18-year-old me believed was a real thing. Growing up with an alcoholic, absent father and no mom, I was desperate for normalcy, for security. So the second Caleb showed a little more than interest in me, I was head over heels in love. At first it really was puppy dogs and rainbows. He showered me with love and attention, which slowly morphed into control that I confused for concern. Then the drinking and partying started our sophomore year of college. Then the accusations of infidelity. At the time, I remember

feeling like overnight he turned into someone else, but looking back, the red flags were popping up along the way.

By the time I found out I was pregnant at 19, I was ready to settle down and be a family, but he was just getting started in his going-out phase. But to my surprise, once Chloe arrived, he straightened up and became the man I thought he was. He was a doting father to our baby girl, helping me stay on track with finishing college and preparing for law school. I worked my ass off in undergrad, pulling all-nighters to keep my GPA up and prepare for the LSATs. All my sacrificing paid off, though, when I received my acceptance letter to Harvard Law. It felt like everything was finally falling into place. Caleb didn't even think twice about moving cross-country to Boston for me ... but once again, it was all pretty short-lived.

After Caleb graduated and got his first big job in finance, he started going to happy hours and taking clients out, all while I was left to basically be a single mom and put myself through law school. By the time Chloe was five, I moved us out of the apartment we shared, and by the time she was six, I filed for divorce. He popped in and out of our lives two or three times a year for the next two years until I'd had enough. I told him to either commit or move on; he couldn't keep disappointing Chloe like this. I couldn't bear to watch her heart break time and time again when he wouldn't show up after promising he would. And that was it; we haven't heard from him since.

“Hey, any chance I can talk to you for a few?” I ask Jameson. My expression must show my concern.

“Everything okay?” Blaire gives me a questioning look after checking to make sure Chloe is back to being distracted with something and out of earshot.

“Honestly, I’m not sure, but I don’t want to scare her unnecessarily.”

“Well, you’re scaring me,” Blaire says, reaching out to touch my arm. “What’s going on?”

“Ever since I took the job at Steinburg and started working the Delmore case, I feel like I’m being watched ... or followed maybe?”

“You feel, or know?” Jameson takes a step closer to me, his brows furrowing.

“I thought it was just a feeling, until tonight.” I reach into my pocket and pull out the windshield note. I jumped out of my car at a stop sign several blocks away from the office and grabbed it before the wind could blow it off. “I heard someone following me in the parking garage when I left the office, and then I saw this on my windshield.”

“*You’ve been warned* ... warned about what? What else has happened, Juliette?” Jameson’s serious tone makes me nervous, confirming the fears I had that I wasn’t just imagining things.

“Uh, well, I had a slashed tire a while back, but I thought it was maybe kids in the neighborhood since I have street parking. You know how there will be a rash of stuff like that happen. Then I got a weird package delivered. It was small, like a ring box wrapped in brown paper with a red ribbon.”

“What was in it?” he asks.

“Nothing.” I shrug. “That’s why I didn’t think it was pertinent, I guess. I thought maybe someone had dropped it by my door in passing.”

“Jules, this is serious,” Blaire says, looking at me then at her husband. “How long has this been going on?”

“I think it started a few weeks after I really started digging into the case—interviewing the victims and chasing down leads. If I’m honest, I half expected silly stuff like this considering the firm that represents both Delmore and the insurance company has a reputation for being a bully. My guess is that’s what it is: nothing serious, just intimidation tactics, but I can’t take that risk with her.” I nod toward Chloe, who is curled up on the couch, deep into her dystopian YA novel. “I thought I’d ask your opinion on it to see if I should get a security system at my place.”

“You don’t have one?” I shake my head. “Yes, that’s the first thing you should do. I’ll have my guy come out to your house tomorrow to do an assessment and see what kind of system you need, how many cameras, etc. That being said, I think coming to me was the right thing to do.” He crosses his muscular arms over his chest, reaching his hand up to rub it over his jaw as he thinks. “But truthfully, and I don’t say this to scare you, I think you’re downplaying things more than you should. I think it’s probably best I get one of my guys to follow you for a bit.”

“Seriously? Can’t you guys just sniff around and find out who sent the threats and intimidate them with legal action?” That’s not what I was expecting, and it’s kind of the last thing I want. As much as I appreciate Jameson and the men of Four Forces Security, I really don’t need some macho, alpha man bossing me around at the moment. “My schedule is pretty crazy right now. Don’t you think the security system is good enough?”

“I don’t, and you don’t want to take a risk with Chloe either. I’ve been in this line of work long enough to know that even if these threats are idle, they can cause some serious

trauma for you and her. I'm going to give Alex a call and fill him in, then he'll reach out to you.

"Alex? The playboy one?" I ask, rolling my eyes. I've heard enough stories from Blaire and Harper about Alex to fill a novel. The man's probably had more one-night stands than a frat house.

"He's not *that* bad." Blaire smiles at me. "Besides, he's super professional. He'd never cross a line with a client, and I'm pretty sure he knows not to with you if he values his manhood." She laughs.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask, confused. I mean, I know I'm not exactly one of those easygoing cool girls. I lost that privilege when I became a mother, plus I have a job I take seriously. But I managed to date Josh for almost two years after my marriage fell apart ... then again, he did tell me one of his reasons for leaving was because he felt like I was merely his roommate.

"In the meantime, you guys should stay here tonight," Jameson says, pulling my attention back to our conversation.

"What? *No*," I say a little louder than necessary. I see Chloe peek over her book toward us. "No," I say a little softer. "I don't want to concern her. In fact, I want this to stay between us. We'll be okay tonight. Just let me know when the security guy is coming tomorrow and I'll make sure I'm home. I seriously appreciate this." I give both of them a hug then turn to Chloe to tell her to gather her things so we can head home.

By the time Chloe is in bed and I've showered, it's nearing 11 and I'm exhausted. I contemplate a glass of wine but don't need the headache. Instead, I make some tea, walking around to make sure all of the windows are locked.

When I reach my bedroom windows, I pull back the curtains and look out to see a dark sedan parked across the street from my townhome. My heart thuds, flooding my ears as I panic and reach for my cell phone just as a number I don't recognize flashes across the screen.

"Hello?" I say nervously as I answer it.

"Evening, Miss Pierce. No need to be alarmed. It's just me, Alex." I watch as the tinted car window lowers a few inches and his eyes gaze across the top of the glass toward where I'm standing in the window. His voice is deep and raspy, sending a shiver through me.

I've met Alex before, maybe two or three times very briefly. We don't exactly run in the same circles. Of the four men, his reputation is that of the playboy, which is all I need to know ... not to mention the tattoos, imposing figure, and muscles aren't exactly my type.

My type? Why the hell did that even come into my head?

"Evening, Alex," I say around a dry throat. "I see telling Jameson I didn't need you here didn't make a difference."

His throaty chuckle is deep. "Nah, you know how Jimmy is. I figured we should schedule a time to speak tomorrow if that works for you?"

I rub my forehead in frustration, not loving the idea of trying to squeeze in another unplanned meeting into my already-thinly-stretched schedule. "Okay, let's do 7 a.m. My daughter leaves for school at 6:50, and I don't need her worried about all of this."

"Sounds good. We'll talk tomorrow morning, but in the meantime, sleep well knowing I'll be out here all evening. Good night."

ALEX

“Juliette Morgan Pierce.”

I say her name aloud to myself as I flip through her file. I chew on a bite of my bagel, reading over the dossier Jimmy sent over so I could get up to speed prior to meeting with her.

I know Juliette, or at least I know *of* her. I’ve met her a time or two when she was out with her girlfriends and her best friend Blaire was messing around with Jimmy before they got married. She’s a total knockout, that’s for sure. We’re talking a 10 out of 10 smoke show. Blonde hair and big blue eyes, full hips you want to grip while you pull her back onto you, and lips that would look so damn good wrapped around my dick ... my kryptonite.

I feel my cock twitch just thinking about running my hands over her curves as I bite down on one of her plump lips, but I quickly shake the thoughts from my mind, reminding myself it’s not that kind of meeting.

“Damn,” I whistle reading over her education, “top of her class at Northwestern and Harvard Law. Yeah, she’s definitely not the kind of woman who would give me the time of day unless she’s forced to.” I chuckle at the thought. It’s no wonder she’s a Type-A boss babe; she’s kicked ass to get to where she is in life. Although I know damn well I’ve seen her eyes

lingering on me a time or two. I know I attract attention—a man my size usually does—but I also know the difference between a curious glance and a lingering stare, even if it's filled with regret once our eyes lock. If I had to guess, I'm the kind of guy a woman like her hooks up with when she's going through something or after a breakup. Then they settle back down with a custom-suit-wearing Mr. Wall Street and pop out a few kids in the suburbs.

“Exactly what you don't want,” I mutter to myself as I flip the page and read about her 10-year-old daughter, Chloe. Seems like her dad isn't in the picture and hasn't been for several years—piece of shit. My heart goes out to Juliette even though I don't know the circumstances. Can't be easy raising a child alone. Yet another reason that explains why she's more closed off. Part of me feels bad for assuming she was a man-hating ice queen. Clearly someone has given her reason to be the way she is.

I've always known she's uptight. For being hot as fuck, she's certainly never flaunted it or tried to be sexy in front of me. She's buttoned-up, serious. I can see why Jimmy liked the fact that his younger sister Harper is one of her best friends. Back in her wild days, before she married our coworker Luka and had a baby, Harper was a firecracker and a half. She always had her big brother tied up in knots because she refused to be told what to do.

My phone buzzes. “Hey,” I say, answering it after one ring.

“You get the dossier?” Jimmy asks.

“Yeah, looking it over now.”

“Listen, I know I already told you this last night, but she's not too keen on having a shadow, especially since she has a kid. I think she was hoping I'd just tell her she was

overreacting or not to worry when she explained things to me last night. She clearly regrets mentioning it to me now since I told her it warranted our services. So if she seems standoffish, don't take it personally."

"Never do," I say, flipping through another page. "I'll stay out of her way ... as long as she cooperates. That gonna be a problem?"

Jimmy hesitates. *That's never a good sign.*

"Shouldn't be, nah. I think she'll wise up. Just try to be understanding. She has to think about her daughter's safety as much as her own, so those mama bear instincts might cause her to be a little more bristly than most. Besides, I can imagine she doesn't want to stress Chloe out or scare her, so odds are she'll want to keep your presence between you and her."

"I'm sure I can handle it. How serious do you think this is? We both know the reputation of the law firm she's going up against, and we've seen our share of people being bullied, harassed, and intimidated by big business to the point where they get hurt."

"Yeah, that's why I called you in. As much as I want to think this is simply a scare tactic from a bunch of asshole lawyers, we know better and I won't take that risk. Besides, this isn't just a drop-in-the-bucket kind of case—this is hundreds of millions of dollars in payouts and legal fees. Usually, they stop at a threatening phone call or even a note, but slashing tires and leaving something on her porch is a step too far in the *this is about to be a full-blown fucking shit show* situation."

"That's what I was afraid of. How far are we taking this, Jimmy?" He knows what I'm asking without me having to say it outright.

“All the way, Alex. Whatever it takes to keep them safe.”

“Noted. And how sugar-coated am I keeping things with Miss Pierce? Did you tell her that this is serious enough that she might end up in a safe house should shit really hit the fan?”

“Need-to-know basis. If she isn’t cooperating and you feel you need to scare her into it, then by all means ... but for now, let’s try to handle this a little more gently. I don’t want Chloe getting freaked out.”

“Sounds good.”

“One other thing, Alex,” Jimmy says slowly, “don’t try to pull any of your *charm* on Juliette. I know you wouldn’t cross a line—and shit, I’m one to talk considering my wife was once my client—but of all people, she’s not the one you want to even attempt to give the illusion that you’re flirting with her.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Come on, man, we both know you use your fucking looks to get into women’s good graces—earning their trust and shit. Just keep it above board. We don’t need to give her another reason to hate having you in her life.”

“Well, shit, thanks for that pep talk. And yeah, you *are* one to talk,” I laugh. “Trust me, I’m still confident in my long-term decision to love ‘em and leave ‘em after one, maybe two nights at most. The last thing I want is a woman to dominate, and I’m pretty fucking confident that a woman like Juliette Pierce would get off on eating my balls for breakfast ... and not in a fun way.”

“You’ve got a way with words, my man,” Jimmy laughs on the end of the line.

“Speaking of,” I say as I glance out the window and see her open her front door, waving toward me, “I think she’s ready to talk. I’ll give you a call a little later, let you know how it goes.”

I place the folder beneath my seat and open the door, walking across the street and up the front steps of her small porch.

“Miss Pierce.” I hold my hand out toward her. “Alex Rockwell.”

“Juliette is fine.” She offers a tight-lipped smile. “And yes, Alex,” her head cocks to the side, “we’ve met before.”

Call me crazy, but I can sense a touch of snark in her reply, and it causes a smile to pull at one corner of my lips. “Yes, we have.” I slide my hands into the pockets of my jeans as I stare down at her petite frame. She pulls her cardigan a little closer to her body in a nervous gesture. She’s already dressed for the day, hair and makeup done. Her blonde hair is in long curls cascading over her shoulders, her makeup soft and understated. “Are you going to invite me inside?” I nod toward her.

“Sorry, come in.” She steps to the side, holding the door open as I walk into the beautiful two-story townhome. The sun hits the statement chandelier above us, causing a cascade of rainbow dots to sparkle across the black-and-white-tiled floor. These are the timeless homes of New York, elegant yet understated—the ones you see in those fancy architecture magazines. I can’t even begin to imagine what a place like this costs, but if I had to guess: more than I’d make in two lifetimes.

“Beautiful home.” I don’t hide my gaze as it travels over the heavy hand-carved banister. I reach my finger out to touch

the lacquered wood.

“Thank you. I know it’s early, but I have to be in the office within the next hour, and since this is the only time I can squeeze you in while Chloe’s at school, I want to keep this brief.”

Straight to the point. Shocking for a lawyer, in my experience.

“Sure. Why don’t you run me through the situation?”

“Didn’t Jameson already explain it?” Her exasperation is evident in her tone. Her back is stiff, and her floral silk skirt sits high on her waist, flowing over her hips and hitting mid-calf, a delicate slit running halfway up her thigh revealing black patterned tights. Her cardigan shifts slightly on her shoulder, revealing the skinny strap of her chemise top beneath.

“A little, but it seems like there’s probably more to the situation.” I grab my notepad, pulling my eyes from her collarbone that’s begging me to run my tongue over it. “I want to know why these people are coming after you, what led up to this, and what other threats you might have overlooked or thought were coincidences.”

“You’re using a notepad? Like a detective in a thriller?” She lifts an eyebrow at me, crossing one high-heeled ankle over the other. I will myself not to let my gaze drop back down to her sheer tights again. She’s dressed like one of those classy movie stars from the ’40s—one who would play an uptight librarian with a touch of understated sex appeal that’s begging to be unraveled.

“Something wrong with that, Miss Pierce?” I give her my best smile—the one I usually pull out for the woman at the bar

I'm trying to charm into coming home with me. "I'm old school."

"I took on a massive contingency case." She completely disregards my attempt to break the ice and continues on, not even offering me a cup of coffee or to come further into her home. She really is going to be difficult. "It's a class-action lawsuit against Delmore Manufacturing, the largest manufacturer of fertilizer in the—"

"Yes, I'm familiar with Delmore," I interrupt.

"Great. Well, as you can imagine, they don't take kindly to the largest and most powerful law firm in New York City coming at them with a class-action lawsuit with more than 50 former employees, plus more to come. Not to mention, the insurance company they offer their employees coverage through is denying all the claims, so now they, too, are named in the lawsuit. Both companies are represented by another large, powerful firm in New York: Prince, Dune & Bellows. They're the kind of law firm that represents the bad guys in whistleblower cases. Think of those lawsuits you hear about where people die, or homes or resources are decimated only to have it completely disappear from the news in just a few weeks like it never happened."

"Got it." I nod, making several notes, not telling her I'm already far too familiar with their *work*. "And who do you think sent the goons after you?"

"Goons?"

"Bad guys. Whoever's trying to send you a message—warn you."

"I dunno," she shrugs, "thought that's why Jameson sent you." I stare at her blankly for a second, noting how she only

refers to him by his first name. “If I had to guess, probably their law firm. Their resources are the kind of low-level, back-alley-dwelling informants who aren’t exactly too concerned with upholding the law.”

“You paint a very descriptive picture, Miss Pierce.” I laugh.

“Juliette. It’s Juliette, remember?” she snaps. “And of course I do; I’m a lawyer.” She says it so matter-of-factly that I half-expect her to laugh, but she doesn’t. “Is that what you need? Can I get on with my day?”

“Listen, Juliette.” I flip my notebook closed and slip it into my back pocket. “I don’t know what Jimmy did or didn’t tell you, but this isn’t just a *stop by and see how you’re doing* kind of situation. I know the security team is coming by later today, but I can promise you, until I know for sure that these threats are just idle or some half-ass attempt from a Scooby-Doo villain to get you to drop the case, I’m not going anywhere.” I give her a wink and see a hint of pink rush to her cheeks.

“No, this is exactly what I didn’t want. I won’t have some big macho man traipsing through my home, around my daughter, disrupting our lives. The security measures will be fine, but you can do your research and due diligence outside of my life.”

“You know,” I try to hide my frustration with her snippy attitude, but it’s growing harder by the second, “for being a damsel in distress, you’re pretty demanding and not taking this very seriously.”

“Excuse me?” Her eyes grow wide as she juts her head forward.

Oh, now I've done it. Clearly, I've struck a nerve and she's about to wind up and let me have it.

“Let me make something abundantly clear to you, Alex.” She uncrosses her ankles, squaring her shoulders. “I haven’t gotten to where I am by letting arrogant men boss me around or tell me what to do, and I certainly don’t plan on starting now. I realize there are dangers here, and I came to Jameson for help, but this isn’t a *bloody horse’s head in my bed* type of situation. I’ve worked in this industry long enough to know that these firms will stoop to low-level intimidation tactics, but all I’m looking for is for you or Jameson to find them and make sure they don’t threaten me again. Okay?” She tilts her head to the side like she’s explaining something to a child.

I should remind myself what Jimmy told me: to be gentle and give her grace, all things considered, but I’ve let her snotty little attitude get to me. I need to set the tone for this situation now, otherwise I’m going to end up in a position where she won’t take what I’m saying seriously and get herself into an even bigger predicament.

“In that case, Juliette, let me be abundantly clear: I haven’t gotten to where I am by letting spineless, pencil-dick goons threaten me or anyone I’m hired to protect.” I take a step closer to her. “I also know enough and have seen enough to know that a company as powerful as Delmore and a firm as shady as Prince, Dune & Bellows doesn’t stop at threatening notes and slashed tires. These are the kind of people who will make you and your daughter disappear, and nobody will know where to find your bodies.” I take another step closer and she inches back till she hits the wall behind her. “I also won’t sit idly by and let an arrogant woman who thinks she knows more than I do when it comes to security attempt to tell me how to do my job. So until I find out who is sending these threats and

what their motives are, I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart, whether you like it or not. Consider me your fucking shadow, because everywhere you go, I go. I won't be in your way—and most likely, you won't even know I'm there—but if you so much as attempt to lose me or run, I will move into your house and make sure you never leave my fucking sight. Am I clear?"

She tilts her head up to look me in the eyes, her chin jutting outward, her eyes narrowed. "Don't you *dare* patronize me with that sweetheart bullsh—"

"*Am I clear?*" I say louder and more firmly, cutting her off.

Juliette Pierce might think she's better than a man like me, and in many ways she is—probably all ways, actually—but I'll be damned if she thinks I'm going to risk her or her daughter's life because she doesn't realize the seriousness of a situation like this. I've seen what companies like this do to people who attempt to bring them down, and it's the kind of stuff that will leave you with nightmares.

"Yes," she finally spits the word at me, her jaw clenching. I know it physically pains her to relinquish control to a man—especially a man like me—but it's for her own good, and the faster she learns that, the better.

"Good." I wink at her again, stepping back and turning toward the front door. "I'll be back for a walk-through once the security team has installed everything. Have a good day, Juliette."

Fuck. I did a pretty piss-poor job of keeping her on a need-to-know basis about things.

JULIETTE

I chew on the tip of my pen, my eyes drifting aimlessly toward the blank wall in front of me as I picture Alex in his tight gray T-shirt and black jeans as he towered over me.

I knew he'd try to flirt his way into my good graces, and I was well-prepared for that. Seeing his sly attempt to flash me that charming smile was Playboy 101, but the second he stepped toward me and put his foot down, I felt my facade crack. I wasn't kidding when I told him I have no interest in that macho man bullshit, but clearly, my body thought differently. Something about the way he took control of that conversation had my stomach doing somersaults in a *shit, this isn't good* kind of way.

The truth is, I'm pretty confident my ultimate fantasy is to be manhandled by a guy just like Alex Rockwell. Big, bold, unapologetic and knows his way around a woman's body. I close my eyes, a tingle worming its way through my belly.

"Jules!"

"Huh?" I snap my eyes open, turning my head around to see Brett in the doorway of my office.

"You okay? I only called your name three times." He laughs, stepping into my office and sitting on the edge of my desk.

“Yeah,” I say, shaking my head as if that will clear the thoughts of Alex. “Yeah, just working on preparing some notes for the Norcon settlement. Thompson has a meeting with them on Thursday, so I need to make sure everything is outlined correctly.”

“You know we have paralegals who can help you with that, right?”

“Yeah, I’m going to hand it off to them soon. Just want to make sure I’ve done everything I need to do first.”

“You do realize there’s no point in giving it to a paralegal if you’re going to make sure it’s all done correctly first?”

“I’m still struggling with the idea of a paralegal doing any part of my work, okay?”

“Still a control freak, I see,” he laughs. “You sure you’re okay? You were really out of it just now.”

“Yeah,” I say with a look attempting to convey that his concern is ridiculous. “Just super tired is all. Not sleeping enough with this caseload.”

“How are things going with Delmore?”

“Uhh, good.” I hesitate, considering telling him about the threatening note and slashed tire, but decide against it. “I’m actually meeting with three new former employees today. Two have been diagnosed with mesothelioma and the other has chronic inflammation and an autoimmune disease. All three are now saddled with medical debt in the hundreds of thousands.” I sigh, shaking my head at the thought of something so soul-crushing. “I can’t imagine fighting for your actual life while being buried in debt that’s completely out of your control.”

“That’s why we’re fighting the good fight for them. Speaking of,” he hands me a stack of files, “these reports have been fact-checked and collated, and are ready to be handed over when we file the complaint.”

“Great, thank you,” I say, taking the stack and placing it with the others.

“Any idea when you plan to officially file with a judge?”

I sigh and look over at the stack of files I still need to work through. “Not until I’ve finished these, plus the three new victims I’m interviewing today. I think that will be substantial enough evidence that a judge would have to be insane or very obviously paid off not to grant a class certification.”

“The second we file, we need to make sure the judge who is assigned is kept as quiet and safe as possible. No doubt Delmore will try to pay them off.”

“We both know that’s a very big possibility, as messed up as it is.”

“It’s pushing 6:30 now; you staying late again?” He looks at his watch then back up at me.

“No, I promised Chloe I’d be home to make us dinner tonight.” I glance at the clock, double-checking the time. “Or at least bring home dinner,” I say, feeling like I’m failing her a lot lately.

“Perfect, I’ll walk you out.”

I feel relief wash over me at his suggestion. It’s still somewhat early, so the parking garage will be fuller than it was the other night, but still ... I don’t love the idea of being down there alone.

“Thanks! Let me grab my things and I’ll meet you by the elevator.”

“I assume with your schedule, it’s probably silly to even think about asking you how your dating life is going?” Brett asks as the elevator glides down to the garage.

“Oh God, I haven’t even put those two words together in over a year.” I sigh, shaking my head.

“That bad, huh? Even before taking on this case?” I nod. “What happened to Josh? It seemed like you guys were going pretty strong. Thought he might be *the one* given the way you talked about him.”

“Yeah,” I say, tugging my bag over my shoulder as we exit and walk across the cement floor toward our parked cars. “You and me both. Turns out, I tend to bury myself in my work—resulting in my partner feeling neglected and more like a roommate or an inanimate object in my life, like a couch.”

“Nooo, *you’re* a workaholic?” Brett has a look of fake shock on his face, which makes me laugh as we approach my car.

“Ass,” I mutter, smacking his chest playfully.

“Seriously, though,” he says, reaching out his hand to grab mine, “you need to ensure you’re making time for yourself and your needs too. You’re a kick-ass lawyer—probably the best in the city—and an amazing mom, but you can’t pour from an empty cup.” He drops my hand and reaches his finger up to gently poke my nose.

“I don’t recall asking you to give me sage advice.” I smile. It feels good to have this kind of moment with Brett again. We’ve been so close over the years, but recently we’ve both let life get in the way of seeing each other outside of work. “We

really need to have a wine night at my house, you know that? Tell Nathan to make some of those mini quiche things with the goat cheese, and you guys come over so we can watch trash reality TV and you can make Chloe laugh telling her ridiculous stories about us in college.”

“That sounds amazing. He and I could use some friend time. It’s either been a constant rotation of in-law Sunday brunches or flea market runs to find vintage inventory for his interior design business. I’ll talk to him tonight and we’ll get it on the books.”

“Thank you,” I say, reaching up to wrap my hands around his neck as he kisses my cheek.

“Love you, drive safe, and stop working so hard!” he shouts, his back to me as he walks toward his car.

I turn, reaching for the handle of my car door, when I notice a black Dodge Charger with tinted windows in the far corner of the parking garage. I hesitate, my heart skipping a beat for a second, when I realize it’s the same car that was parked outside my house the other night ... Alex’s car.

I yank my door open, squinting through my windshield at the figure behind the wheel. I know it’s him, but I can’t make out his features. He has a dark baseball cap pulled down over his brow. I start my car, putting it in reverse, and watch as his headlights come on, indicating he too has started his car.

“Seriously?” I mutter, wondering if he sat in his car all day in this hot garage as I pull out of the garage and head toward home. I make a quick pit stop at the market down the street from my house, settling on fresh pasta noodles and a rotisserie chicken. I have enough ingredients at home to make Chloe’s favorite pasta with a side of garlic bread.

“I’m home!” I shout as I close the door behind me and drop my bags.

“Hey, Miss Pierce,” Zara, the babysitter, says in her typical monotone voice.

“Hey, Zara, everything go okay?” I ask that question every time she watches Chloe, and she has the same response without fail.

“Of course, totally chill. Chloe already finished her homework and had a snack. She’s just upstairs reading in her room.”

“That kid’s never met a book she doesn’t like,” I say, kicking off my shoes and grabbing my purse to pay Zara.

“I brought her a few more, so I’m sure she’ll be busy for a couple days.” She smiles, taking the cash from me with her slender fingers and fluorescent-green, mile-long nails. When you picture *that girl*—you know, the cool girl from Brooklyn who knows all the great indie bookstores and vintage resale shops—that’s Zara. She’s an incredible graphic design intern, part-time babysitter, part-time yoga instructor, and I think part-time dog-walker.

“Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Has Chloe said anything to you lately about her dad or anything at school?” Zara squints, looking up toward the ceiling like she’s trying to recall. “The reason I ask is because she’s starting to get to that age where what she tells me isn’t probably the whole truth, and I just get nervous. She does so well in school, seems to have amazing friends, and loves hanging out with me ... maybe I’m overthinking it.” I laugh, pressing the heel of my palm against my forehead.

“No, I get it. But to answer your question, no. She does seem genuinely happy. She’s never talked about her dad with me, other than telling me that he’s not around, but hey, neither is mine.” She shrugs, pushing her hands deep into the back pockets of her baggy jeans. “It’s good you’re concerned. You’re a great mom, Miss Pierce.”

“Thanks, Zara.”

She heads out the door and I place the groceries in the kitchen, getting a pot of water on the stove to boil before heading upstairs to check on Chloe. I tiptoe across the hardwood floor, making sure to avoid where the squeaks are, and peek my head around her cracked bedroom door. Just as Zara said, she’s buried in her book, her body wrapped in her favorite fleece *Star Wars* blanket.

For as much guilt as I’ve been carrying since she was born about her father and especially with how busy I’ve been lately, seeing her safe—so focused on her book that she doesn’t even realize I’m there—makes me want to burst into tears. When I was her age, my body had already been functioning in fight-or-flight mode for most of my life. I was constantly on edge, waiting, listening to hear my dad stumble home, praying he’d actually make it back without killing himself or someone else on the road.

“Knock, knock,” I say softly as I step into her room, a smile instantly taking over her face as she reaches for her bookmark and snaps the book closed. “What’s it this time? Vampires? Aliens? A fight against time to save Earth from a mob of marauders on a desolate planet?”

“Not even close. It’s about a fairies and really cool girls who kick butt.” She tosses off her blanket and walks over to

give me a hug. “You have a good day, Mom?” she asks, her arms around me as she looks up at me.

“I did,” I say, smoothing back her hair, “even better now that I’m home with you.”

“Good. I’m starving.” She smiles as I wrap my arm around her and we walk downstairs to the kitchen.

“Okay, you pick the record, and I’ll start chopping the veggies,” I say as I pull open the refrigerator door.

This is something Chloe and I have done since she was a little girl. We dance around the kitchen while I cook dinner, using wooden spoons and spatulas as pretend microphones.

The telltale piano opening of “It’s All Coming Back to Me Now” by Celine Dion rings throughout the kitchen as Chloe grabs a spoon and takes her stance. Her head is turned to the side, her legs spread slightly apart as she dramatically turns to look at me, mouthing the opening lines. I laugh every time at how seriously she takes this.

She’s an old soul. I tell myself that’s a good thing, but part of me thinks it’s from the fact that she had to grow up earlier than she should have. At 10, she’s already dealt with the biggest heartbreak a girl can experience: her dad leaving her.

We finish dinner and enjoy some time on the couch, watching an episode of *The Mandalorian*, her newest obsession, before heading upstairs to get ready for bed. Chloe is typically in bed by 9 or 9:30, and I allow her an extra 30 minutes of reading before lights out. I, however, tend to stay up until at least midnight or 1 a.m. working, a new development in my life. When I worked as chief counsel for the financial firm, I enjoyed leisurely evenings of wine and bubble baths ... something I only dream about now. I’m really

starting to understand what Brett meant when he said I'd be saying goodbye to my cushy life.

"It's for the greater good and it's only temporary," I remind myself as I pull my box of files from the floor onto my bed.

After an extended shower—the one luxury I still allow myself now and then—I turn on some soft music and get to work highlighting, making notes, and going over statements and testimony. I yawn, stretching my arms overhead to look at the clock. It's just after 11, but I still have at least another hour of work in me before my eyes will be too heavy to stay open.

I shake my head, attempting to refocus, when I hear a scream from Chloe's room. I toss the papers from my lap, almost tripping as I lunge out of bed and tear down the hallway toward her room.

"What is it? Are you okay?" I run smack into her, almost knocking the wind out of both of us. "What happened?"

"There's a man!" she says, pointing toward the window.

"A man? Where?" My entire body goes flush as Alex's words come back to me all at once: "*These are the kind of people who will make you and your daughter disappear, and nobody will know where to find your bodies.*"

"In the backyard." She's whispering, her eyes huge with fear as she points toward a window that overlooks the tiny patch of grass behind our townhome. "I got up to go pee and saw him when I was climbing back into bed."

I grab her face, looking into her eyes. "Stay here," I say before walking slowly toward her window just as the beam of a flashlight washes across the grass. It's raining and drops pelt the window, running into each other and leaving the image of

the person blurry. I squint, standing partly behind her curtain as I peek around it.

You've got to be kidding me.

Relief washes over me when he steps into view of the light pole and I see that it's Alex. It's quickly replaced with anger, though, when I realize what I feared would happen *has* happened. His presence is now not only known to Chloe, but it scared the shit out of her.

"Just stay here, sweetheart. I'm going to go down and get a closer look."

"Mom, no!" She grabs my hand, her eyes pleading.

"I promise I'll be safe, don't worry. I'm just going to see if it's someone looking for a lost dog or keys. I promise I won't put myself in danger."

Her lip quivers as she reluctantly lets go of my hand. Guilt creeps in knowing I should just tell her who he is, but I'm worried it will only make things worse—put her more on edge if she thinks we're in danger. I walk downstairs, sliding on my rain boots from the closet and grabbing a coat. I wrap it around me, pulling the hood over my head before slowly unlocking the back door and stepping outside on the back porch.

"What the hell are you doing?" I say in a half-whispered shout as I pull the coat tighter around my body. Alex freezes in his tracks, whipping the flashlight toward me. My hand darts up to shield my eyes until he lowers it, that big, stupid grin on his face.

"My job, ma'am. What are *you* doing?"

ALEX

“You know, you’re not doing a very good job of being stealthy. My daughter just saw you.” She thumbs over her shoulder, stepping back beneath the overhang.

“Not trying to be stealthy,” I say, taking a few more photos with my phone at the corners of the house. The security guys are coming tomorrow and I want to make sure I give them my full breakdown on where I think the cameras will be best situated. I’ve already done this walk during the day, but I wanted to check it at night and in rainy conditions with my night vision goggles to see if the trees would obstruct any views.

“Well, what if someone other than us saw you?”

“That’s kind of the point, ma’am.” I slide my phone into my back pocket and walk closer to where she’s standing.

“If the bad guys are watching my house, they now know you’re here. Doesn’t that kind of give everything away?”

I scratch the back of my head and step beneath the overhang and out of the rain. “I’m not sure what information you’re basing that on or what movie gave you the idea that I don’t want the bad guys to know I’m here, but again, that’s the point. The plan isn’t to use you as bait and lure them to you; it’s to send a message to them loud and clear that I’m here,

always watching, and if they try anything, it will be the last thing they do because I'll protect you."

I see her face soften a bit, and maybe I'm imagining it, but it almost looks like a hint of pink darkens her cheeks. "Oh," she says, dragging her teeth across her bottom lip, "I guess that makes more sense."

I stare down at her, noticing the soft rhythm of the rain softly hitting the overhang above us ... but the moment doesn't last long.

"Well, like I said, you scared Chloe and now she knows."

"Knows? You didn't tell her?"

"No. I told you I didn't want her to know. I didn't want to stress her out or scare her. So much for that," she mutters.

"Maybe I'm confused, but I swear we had a conversation the other day about you letting me do my job."

"Yeah, and you said you'd be a shadow—that I wouldn't even know you were there—and here you are in my backyard in the middle of the night with a flashlight. Oh, and not to mention, you were very obvious in the parking garage at work tonight."

I can't hold my laugh back. *Damn this woman and her every attempt to pick a fucking fight with me!*

"Again, wasn't trying to be invisible. When I said you wouldn't know I was there, it was more of a figure of speech. I'm not actively going into stealth mode when I'm around, but I'm staying out of your way. Trust me, Juliette, I could hide in your bedroom and you wouldn't have a fucking clue if I didn't want you to." Now her cheeks really darken and it instantly makes me wonder if the blush travels down her slender neck to

her full breasts. “Just tell Chloe I lost my dog and I was out looking for it.”

“Did you bug my house?” She squints one eye at me and I half expect her to say she’s joking, but I think she’s serious.

“Uh, no. Not yet, anyway.”

“No, I draw the line there. There will be no bugging my house.” She points her finger toward me, her mouth set in a firm line.

“You can’t keep it completely from her. She needs to be aware of her surroundings. Look, I’m not trying to tell you how to raise your daughter, but—”

“Then don’t,” she snaps, her tone and countenance changing in an instant. “I need to get back inside to calm Chloe down, and I guess explain who you are.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, reaching out to grab her arm as she turns toward the back door. “I overstepped. And I’m sorry for scaring Chloe. Just tell her the truth—that I’m out here helping the security camera guys so they know where to install everything. You at least told her you were putting in cameras, right? The team will need access to the house to install them, so unless you’re planning on taking a day off to be home when it happens, she’ll probably find out when she sees strangers in the house.”

“Uh, no, not yet, but I did intend to tell her it was happening.”

“Speaking of the cameras, any chance you have a spare house key for the guys?”

“Yes, let me grab it.” Her eyes dart down to where my hand is still wrapped around her arm, and I let it go even though I have the sudden urge to tug it so she falls into my

arms. She steps inside the house for a moment, returning and handing me a single key on a ring. I reach my hand out to grab it, my fingers grazing hers gently. They're cold, but it doesn't stop a spark from running straight through my skin.

Something about Juliette Pierce has me intrigued. Maybe it was the warning from Jimmy not to cross that line with her—the desire for the forbidden—or maybe it's because I like a challenge. Some men want a submissive, sweet woman, but me, I love a woman who gives as good as she takes. I've always been drawn to strong, independent women. Sometimes I think it's because it gives me an out—knowing they don't need me, so if I cut and run, it's not like they can't carry on without me. It's pathetic and it stems from some good old-fashioned heartbreak when I was young that I let leave me jaded instead of dealing with it.

“Again, sorry to scare you both. Have a good night.” I give her a curt nod and she turns and steps back into her house, the sound of the deadbolt clicking giving me a small sense of relief.

I know there's probably more to Juliette's story than I'm imagining, and I can't keep myself from wondering what lies hidden beneath that cold, hard exterior.

I finish my rounds and walk back to my car to warm up with my thermos of coffee and a few sandwiches. I know that my curiosity about Juliette stems from lust, and I'm not the kind of asshole who would mess around with a woman who has a child, because I have no intention of ever sticking around. That kind of shit is unfair and cruel to do. But it doesn't stop my mind from wondering what it would be like to watch her let loose.

I keep my eyes trained on her house, my blood pressure rising when I ask myself: What kind of piece of shit with a beautiful family like Juliette and Chloe would throw that away?

I scarf down the last two bites of my sandwich and let out a shallow breath. I never intended to be single at 35. Hell, I thought I'd be married for almost a decade with three kids by now. I also thought that life would be with Sierra West, the woman I fell head over heels for at 23 and was engaged to with a baby on the way at 25. I drag my hand over my face, trying to scrub the memories from my brain like I have for the last decade, but it's no use. I stifle a yawn and look at my watch. Tonight should be the last time I have to pull these all-nighters, since tomorrow the security system will be in place. I'll still do my patrols, but at least I'll be able to get a few consecutive hours of sleep at night instead of during the day while Juliette's at work.

"AFTERNOON, FELLAS," I groan as I walk into the Four Forces Security office.

"You look like shit," Luka smiles, smacking me on the back with a loud *thwack!*

"Thanks, feel like it too. Getting too old for this shit," I groan, saying the same thing one of us says at least twice a week.

When the four of us met in the Special Forces, it was like an instant brotherhood was formed. You're already close with your enlisted brothers, especially when you're part of an elite group like the Special Forces, but we were different. It was

like we instantly knew this friendship would stay together long after we all retired from the military.

“You look like you’re getting older, too.” Harvey smiles around a bite of donut, his giant hand dwarfing the pastry.

“And you look like the Jolly Green Giant eating a fucking tire,” I laugh, which makes Luka and Jimmy laugh too. “Seriously, man, you get much bigger and you’re going to make the Rock look like your son.”

He shrugs and shoves the other half of the donut in his mouth. “Been hitting the gym a little extra hard lately.”

“Woman troubles?” Jimmy smirks.

Harvey has never had a problem with the ladies, but it’s pretty evident to all of us lately that he’s not only grown tired of a revolving door of models, but apparently his new neighbor has caught his eye—a shy woman I’m sure is more intimidated than anything by his imposing stature.

“Speaking of women,” I say, kicking my feet up onto my desk, “I’m meeting with the home security guys today to install the system at Juliette Pierce’s house. I did quite a bit of my own recon—mapped out the areas where we should put the cameras, and emailed everything over to Paul and his team. I also think they need to put a few inside as well.”

“How’s that going otherwise?” Jimmy asks. “She cooperating?”

I hesitate, considering telling him that it’s going fine, but he knows me better. I’m sure frustration is written all over my face.

“I wouldn’t say cooperating ... more like I had to strong-arm her into it.”

“Meaning?” Jimmy prods, adjusting the cuff of his meticulously pressed button-down. The man is always dressed like he’s going to the bank, when in reality he could kick your ass six ways from Sunday and not even scuff his shoes.

“Meaning she pissed him off and he lost his cool,” Luka interjects.

“No.” I drop my feet onto the floor and sit up in my chair, ready to defend myself. “Well, yeah, actually, that’s pretty much it,” I say in defeat when I realize there really isn’t any other explanation.

“Told ya.” Luka smiles confidently.

“Dammit, Alex, I told you to be gentle with her.” Jimmy shakes his head in exasperation.

“I tried, seriously. The damn woman is so obstinate that if I didn’t put my foot down, she wasn’t going to let me do my job.”

“Aww, is a delicate little lady getting in your way?” Harvey teases me. I ignore him, not wanting to get more frustrated than I already am.

“I get that she doesn’t want her daughter freaked out by all of this, but at the same time, she’s 10, not four. It’s not like the kid isn’t going to see me at some point or wonder why I keep stopping by the house. And if you ask me, it’s pretty fucked up to come crying to you about how she’s scared, then when you offer to help and actually give her your opinion on it, she thinks she knows better.”

“Jesus, Alex, relax,” Jimmy says in a calming voice. “Seriously, it’s not a big deal. She was frightened and I think once she calmed down, she did realize how scary all of this is, which is why she’s pretending to not want help, or rather,

fighting it. Besides, I have a secret weapon we can send in to calm the rough seas.” He smiles and I give him a questioning look. “My wife, Blaire. As her best friend, I know Blaire only wants the best for her, and trust me, she’s worried for Juliette and Chloe. I think if they have a girls’ night and talk about things, you’ll find her much more amicable. Hell, she might even learn to appreciate you.”

“Psh,” I roll my eyes, “I wouldn’t go shooting for the moon. That woman is tough, I’ll give her that. What’s her story, by the way?” I drop my gaze to my foot, bouncing it nervously.

“Uh-oh, does someone have a little crush?” Luka says and Harvey laughs.

“Seriously? Because I asked about a woman I’m being paid to possibly take a bullet for, I have a crush? Grow up.”

“Last time I checked, we never once asked about who we were rescuing or protecting in the Special Forces outside of the information given to us,” Harvey replies.

“Yeah, that was back when we were property of the government. Now I can afford to be nosy about who I’m putting my life on the line for.”

“Truthfully, Alex,” Jimmy says, “I don’t know her full story. I know what Blaire has told me, and it’s that Jules has been through hell and back, and I don’t just mean with the father of her kid. She hasn’t had it easy from the jump. On that note, I have to go meet with the CEO of AmeriBank. He’s in need of some private security for this massive merger he’s working on. Luka, you’re running tactical on the project with me, and Harvey, you’re running that workshop for the Secret Service all next month, right?”

“Roger that,” Harvey says, handing over a massive three-ring binder to Jimmy. “This is the curriculum we’re going over. I’ve already had copies sent over to the recruits to get a head start.”

“Perfect. And Luka?”

“Already have the gear ready to go and in the cargo hangar.”

I glance at my watch. “I have to head over to Miss Pierce’s house. Meeting the security team in 15.”

I make my way over to Juliette’s house just as the team is pulling up. It’s just after 1 p.m., so with my help, the guys should be able to finish everything today.

“Hey, Paul,” I wave at him as I jog across the street, “let’s knock this out.”

I’m crouched down, running a wire beneath the small back porch, when I hear the door open and a small voice.

“Are you the guy I saw in the backyard last night?”

I push off with my hands, rising up from my belly as I see two dirty sneakers staring me in the face. I finish standing up, wiping off my hands as I look down at Chloe.

“I am,” I say, holding out my hand. “Alex. You must be Chloe?”

“I am.” She smiles, giving me a solid handshake.

“Cool shirt.” I nod toward her *Dungeons & Dragons* graphic T-shirt.

“Thanks. Mom said she forgot to tell me that she was having security cameras installed. Can I see how they work?”

She hops down from the porch and crouches to where I was just lying in the dirt.

“Chloe, I made you a snack. Let’s let these dudes work.” A younger woman opens the back door, a gold piercing hanging from her nose and bright-pink stripes running through her hair.

“Just a second, Zara. Alex was just showing me how this security system works.”

I chuckle at how maturely she speaks, her brows furrowed as if she’s the forewoman on a job telling her boss something.

“Okay, well, don’t be too long. I don’t think your mom wants you getting in their way.” She steps out onto the porch with us, probably uneasy about leaving a 10-year-old with a complete stranger.

Smart instincts, I think.

“So, I’m running this wire under here and through this small hole that you can see we drilled through the outside of the house. It will run through the walls and floors and will wire into a mainframe system we’ll set up inside.”

“So you’ll be able to see what the cameras see on a computer?”

“Exactly. Also, you’ll be able to access it on your phone or a tablet or anywhere as long as you have the login.”

“That’s pretty cool,” she says, her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. “What about hackers?” She looks up at me, her face scrunched from squinting at the sun.

“What about them?” I laugh.

“Can they hack into the mainframe?”

What the hell is this little girl watching with these questions? And her mom thinks she can't handle hearing about this stuff?

“Technically, yes, but with the firewalls we have in place and the expertise of our monitoring team, it's very, very unlikely.”

“Good to know.” She nods her head in approval. “I'm gonna head in for a snack.” She points over her shoulder toward the door. “You want a snack?”

Damn, this kid is adorable and hilarious.

“I'm good, but thanks, Chloe. It was nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too, Alex. I'm sure I'll see you around.”

JULIETTE

“I ’m home!” I shout through the entryway after closing the door behind me.

“Hey, Miss Pierce.” Zara leans against the doorway to the front room, her oversized black and white sweater falling almost down to her mid-thigh. “How was work?”

“Busy, per usual.” I smile, shrugging off my jacket and hanging it in the coat closet. I run my hands through my hair, pulling it up into a high ponytail with the band I left on my wrist this morning.

I’ve been making serious headway with this class-action suit and fully expect to file with the courts by the end of the month if I can stay on track.

“Cool dress.” Zara nods toward me, a serious compliment coming from such a young and fashionable 21-year-old. “Is it vintage?”

“It is,” I say, spinning to look at myself in the large gold mirror that sits in the entryway. It’s a ’40s-style dress that hugs my torso and hips, flaring out a touch at the knees. The neckline is a structured sweetheart with cap sleeves, accentuating my neck and collarbones. “You think it looks okay paired with these stockings?” I point my leg out, showing

her how there's a seam up the back. "I wasn't sure if it was a little too ... *ya know* ... for the office?"

"Not at all," she half laughs. "You've got a banging bod, Miss Pierce. Seriously, you should show it off more."

I blush. "Well, thank you, but I feel like the office probably isn't the place for that."

"Seriously, though, you've got great style. Very retro-housewife-meets-secret-vixen-librarian."

I'm not sure what that actually means, but in my head, it sounds pretty damn cool for being a woman in my very early 30s. I often wonder if my image and fashion choices make me look older than I am, but I like the throwback style.

"So, how is everything going? Chloe reading?" I grab the stack of mail and sift through the envelopes.

"Everything's good. She did her homework and had a snack. She was reading but I think she's probably still talking to that guy upstairs."

"What?" My head snaps up and I almost drop the mail. "What guy?"

"Alex, the security guy," she says a little nervously. "Shit, should I not have let him in? He said you knew he was coming and he had a key."

"Oh, no," I say, shaking my head, "that's fine. He's still here?"

"Yeah, upstairs. He said he was finishing up. The rest of the guys went home. Chloe tried asking them about 50,000 questions, so I tried to steer her back to her room to focus on her book so they could work."

“Probably a good idea.” I reach into my purse and grab a wad of cash, handing it to Zara. “Thanks as usual. I better go rescue him from her questions.” I laugh, hiding my nervousness at the thought of a man in my home, talking to my daughter.

It’s not that I don’t trust Alex around my daughter ... it’s that I know how Chloe can be. She’ll get attached at the drop of a hat and think he’s her new friend, then when he’s out of our life in hopefully a few short weeks, she’ll be sad.

I walk up the stairs, listening for the sound of Chloe’s voice probably explaining her current book, but I don’t hear anything. I notice her bedroom light is on, so I push her door open to see her on her belly reading with her headphones on. I step back into the hallway and walk toward my room. Maybe Alex ducked out without Zara noticing since I didn’t see his car parked out front.

I’ll go ask Chloe about her day in a moment, but I need to get out of these heels and take a few deep breaths to calm down after a very long day of interviewing victims. I remove each shoe, tossing them to the side before walking over to the edge of my bed and taking a seat. I close my eyes, resting my hands on the edge of the mattress as I let my head loll forward. I feel guilt that Chloe doesn’t have a father figure in her life ... not even my own father is around to be involved. And the birthday and Christmas cards her paternal grandparents send are no substitute for actual involvement. Sometimes I’m tempted to ask them why they even bother with the bare minimum. I don’t want to “settle” for just any man in Chloe’s life—her father has put her through enough heartbreak that she’s better off with just a mom than any man who plans to half-ass it.

“Ahem.”

I snap my head up so fast, I feel an instant pain shoot through it. I reach my hand up to touch the side of my neck as I fly off the bed and spin around to see Alex standing in my room. “Sorry, did I startle you again?”

“Seriously?” I gasp, my heart racing. “What the hell are you doing in my room? And what is with you always sneaking around? I thought you’d left.”

“Well, I did warn you that if I were in your room, you wouldn’t know it unless I wanted you to.” He shrugs with a sly grin, but I flash him a look that lets him know I am not amused in the slightest. “I had to run a wire in your closet. That’s where I put the hub for the system. If you want to set up a computer specifically for the cameras, you can, or you can just log in on your phone or this tablet.”

“Is a full computer system necessary? I mean, is this going to be the first step toward a panic room?” I wrap one arm around my waist nervously as the other stays against my neck. I’m very much aware that we are standing in my bedroom—a place I consider to be my safe space.

“No, not necessary. Are you okay?” He nods toward my neck.

“Yeah, just tweaked it in my moment of panic. I’ll be fine.”

“Come here, I want to walk you through things.” He crooks his finger toward me while holding up the tablet in his hands.

A warm shiver runs through me at the way he commands me. I know he didn’t mean anything by it, because that’s

probably just the kind of man he is, but damn, my body sure doesn't realize it.

"Yeah, sure." I step toward him, looking down at the screen while he taps through it, showing me live feeds of the entire exterior of my house.

I try to stay focused. I try not to notice the slight hint of aftershave—or maybe cologne?—that's still lingering on his body after several hours. I wouldn't have pictured him as a cologne guy. I'm suddenly very aware of how close I'm standing to him ... the warmth radiating off his bicep as it brushes against me, and the dark hair that's sprinkled over his tan skin.

When was the last time I had sex? Shit! No. Why did that pop into my head?

"You okay?"

"Hmm?" I realize I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head when the intrusive thought popped into it. "Oh, yeah, just this neck," I lie, hoping he buys it. "Doesn't help that I've been glued to my computer or bent over a file more than usual lately."

"Here." He tosses the tablet onto my bed and turns to face me. He grabs my shoulders and spins me so my back is toward him.

"What are you—"

"Just trust me," he says as he runs his thumb slowly up the side of my neck, pressing deeply into my flesh.

"Ohh!" I yelp and try to pull away, but he holds me in place.

“Stop,” he commands, wrapping his other hand around the front of my neck and tugging my head to the side so my neck is stretched. “Just relax and take in a few really deep breaths, exhaling through your mouth. I promise it’ll fix it.” I take in one breath as his thumb repeats the pattern. “Unclench your fists.”

I didn’t even realize my hands were curled into themselves, clenching tightly.

“Speaking of work, any new developments I should know about?”

“No. I’ve been making it a point to not stay late at the office so I don’t have to walk through the garage alone. I noticed you weren’t there after work today when I left?” I was surprised, and I even looked for him in the garage as I walked to my car.

“Oh, I was,” he chuckles, a soft puff of warm air hitting my hair. “Just not in the way you think.”

“Huh?”

“I have a tracker on your car, plus I have—let’s just say *access* to your firm’s security cameras.”

“Is that legal?” I say, attempting to spin around and look at him, but he squeezes my neck, keeping me in place.

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want to be liable for knowing the answers to, Juliette.” The way my name falls from his lips in a low rumble has my belly doing a little flip as my hands nervously ball into fists again. “Unclench your fists and relax,” he commands.

I close my eyes, unfurling my fingers and taking in slow, deep breaths as I try not to focus on the fact that Alex Rockwell has me pressed against his rock-hard chest as he

massages my neck in my bedroom. It's actually working, though. I take in another deep inhale as he pulls my neck a little harder with his left hand, his right thumb rubbing small circles over my skin ... and then it happens.

"Ohhh," I let out a moan. My eyes pop open, and my face grows cherry red as my entire body goes flush with embarrassment. "Oh my God." I panic—I don't know what to do—so I step out of his grasp. "Thanks, um, I think you should go. I need to make dinner."

"No need to be embarrassed." He smiles and it only makes it worse. I wish I could fall into the center of the earth right now. "I hope it helped give you some relief."

I stand there staring at him, his voice heavy with innuendo. I swear his eyes darken, and the tone of his voice drops as he drags his hand over his jaw. In some unhinged state of delusion, I say, "Thanks, but after the last few months I've had, that is not the kind of relief I need."

What the actual fuck did I just say?

I think that maybe he's going to ignore the comment and leave, but his head falls back, a loud roar of laughter erupting from his chest. "Shit," he laughs, stepping toward the bed as he leans down to pick up the tablet, his eyes traveling down my body. "As much as I'd like to offer that kind of relief, I don't think it's a good idea."

My mouth falls open. "That is *not* what I was suggesting. You wish!" I cross my arms over my body, attempting to hide myself.

Oh God, I sound like I'm in junior high right now.

His expression grows serious as he makes no attempt to hide his eyes perusing my body. "Or maybe you wish. But if I

had to guess,” he steps closer, his hand reaching out to finger the end of the ponytail that’s hanging over my shoulder, “with how uptight you are, it would take a lot more than once to get you the kind of relief you need.”

“Mom?” Chloe pops her head into my room, probably saving me from another very embarrassing reply to Alex.

“Hey, sweetie! Ale—Mr. Rockwell was just showing me all of the different camera angles on his tablet. He was just about to leave.” I say the last part a little louder, shifting my eyes toward him.

“I want to see!” she says, stepping inside.

“I’ll show you after dinner, Chlo. Mr. Rockwell was just telling me that he’s already super late for another meeting.”

“You should stay and eat dinner with us.”

“That’s very kind of you, Chloe,” he smiles, “but like your mom said, I’m already running late for something else. Plus, it’ll be good practice for your mom to show you the tablet now that I’ve taught her how to access the cameras.”

“Okay.” Chloe mopes as she walks behind Alex.

“Come on,” I say, placing my hands on her shoulders, “let’s order pizza.”

“AW, NO DAISY?” I say referring to my friend Harper’s daughter as I approach the table. She stands to give me a hug and an air kiss.

“No Daisy. She was being too fussy today, so she stayed home with daddy. She’s been dealing with teething, so her

sleep schedule is screwed up and she's constantly crying. I could use an hour of no crying and a mimosa." She smiles.

"Don't you want to join our club of motherhood?" I smile over at Blaire, who looks like she'd rather sit on a cactus.

"Uhhh, not yet. I'm still enjoying Jimmy just a little too much."

"Eww, he's still my brother, you know." Harper grimaces, making us both laugh.

"Where's Aspen? Is she coming?" I place my purse on the table and smile at the waitress as she places a mimosa down in front of me. "Thank you."

"She said she can't make it. I think she's still settling into her new apartment," Harper replies.

"Speaking of her new apartment, when is she having her housewarming party?" I ask before taking a long sip of my mimosa.

Blaire shrugs. "Probably soon. You know how much of a perfectionist she is. More importantly, how are things going with you and the job situation?" I glance over at Harper. "I filled her in already while we were waiting on you."

"Great, so we all know Alex is babysitting me," I say sarcastically. "But seriously, things seem to have quieted down on the threat front, which is why I still feel like Jameson was overreacting by assigning me one of his attack dogs. Although being a mom in New York, the security system does offer some serious peace of mind."

"I don't know how you went so long without one." Harper shakes her head. "But how's it going dealing with Alex? I know he can be such a flirt, but he's pretty nice to look at." She giggles and I can't deny that she's right.

“He *is* absolutely a flirt.” I roll my eyes but instantly wish I hadn’t said that when both women’s eyes grow wide and they beg for more details. “I just mean his stupid grin he flashes—as if my panties will drop and I’ll be all head over heels like the 22-year-olds he picks up. We started off on the wrong foot, too. He’s very demanding and you know I don’t take kindly to being told what to do by a man, but I think we’ve found common ground ... for now.”

“Hmm, sounds like someone might think he’s cute and is bothered by that.” Blaire gives me a look and I shake my head.

“Not even close. I just like my private space, so having a big hulking man clomping around my home is very unappealing to me.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy his company, if you know what I mean.” Harper’s attempt at subtlety is about as successful as high heels in sand.

“I barely have time to eat and sleep outside of work and being a single mom, so I don’t have time to even think about entertaining a man.”

“Who said you need to entertain him? Just lie back and make him do the work,” Blaire says, causing both women to burst into laughter.

“You’re both bad influences, you know that? I’m pretty sure my vibrator hasn’t even held a charge in the last six months.” I sigh, realizing just how much I’ve neglected myself lately. “Damn, I really am pathetic.” No wonder I moaned like I was getting my rocks off when Alex ran his thumb up my neck. I quickly grab my drink, taking a long sip to try to douse the small fire I feel starting to burn in my belly remembering that moment.

“No, you’re not. You have a lot going on and you are the most amazing mom.” I open my mouth to refute that claim, but Blaire cuts me off. “And before you say some bullshit about how you aren’t, and that you’ve been too busy lately, I cannot tell you how much Chloe praises you. She knows what you’re doing for these people, Jules. She understands that it’s only for a short period and that it will be worth it because you’re going to change lives with your work. That kid admires you so much, and she talks about how she wants to be just like you when she gets older. I know I’m not a mom, but I was her age once, and I don’t know a lot of preteens who can honestly say that their mom is their best friend. So cut yourself some slack.”

I try to choke back the tears, but I’m unsuccessful. A few fall right down my cheeks as I wipe at them furiously. “Thank you.” I manage to choke out the words as both of my friends envelop me in a hug.

After brunch, I swing by the children’s museum where Chloe has been attending a class on women in STEM. Any chance that girl can learn, she jumps at it.

“So,” I say, draping my arm over her as I hand her a croissant I brought from brunch, “what amazing women did you learn about today?”

“Did you know that women were a big reason we made it to the moon?” She launches into telling me all about Katherine Johnson and Margaret Hamilton as we walk the rest of the way back to our house.

“What’s that?” Chloe points to a simple black box with a white ribbon wrapped around it sitting in front of our stairs.

“I don’t know,” I say cautiously, my heart beginning to race when I think about the last time I found a strange box on

my porch.

“Can I open it?”

“Oh, I think it’s probably the vitamins Ms. Garcia down the street said she would bring by.” I know it’s a lie, but it’s the only answer I can think of to make Chloe instantly uninterested in opening the package or asking me about it later ... and it works.

“I’m gonna go research about NASA,” she says, opening the front door and flying up the stairs to her room.

I place the box on the kitchen counter, wondering if I should call Alex before opening it, but my curiosity gets the better of me and I slowly slide the ribbon from the box. I feel my breath catch in my throat as I lift the lid to find a delicate card sitting atop white tissue paper. I grab the card and read it:

For any other tension that might need help finding relief.

“Huh?” I drop the card on the counter and pull back the tissue, revealing a long pink vibrator.

My mouth falls open when I realize it’s from Alex. I go from embarrassed to intrigued to telling myself that this is a *very, very* bad idea to even entertain the thought of flirting with him. My phone rings, startling me, and I pull it out of my purse, not recognizing the number. Realizing it’s probably Alex since I never did program his number into my phone after he texted me, I slide my finger across the screen and answer it. He must have been watching my security cameras and saw me pick it up.

“This gift is absolutely inappropriate, Alex, and if you think for one second that this is how you’re go—”

“Oh, this isn’t Alex,” says an unfamiliar voice on the other end of the line.

“Oh, sorry,” I say, half-embarrassed. “Who is this?”

“That’s not important, but what *is* important is that I’m watching you, Miss Pierce. It would be a really terrible shame if something were to happen to you and Chloe, wouldn’t it?”

My body freezes, my blood running cold at the eerie voice mentioning my daughter’s name. I’m about to tell him to go to hell when he continues before I get the chance.

“And before you think that Alex Rockwell and the men of Four Forces will keep you safe, just remember what you’re up against: a multi-billion-dollar empire that will stop at nothing to make you disappear ... and nobody will remember you, Juliette Pierce.”

A second later, the line goes dead and I’m left standing in pure terror at my kitchen island.

ALEX

“You’re always too busy for me these days,” Denise, my current *situation*, whines on the other end of the phone.

“I am?” I say, distracted by the computer I’m staring at. I’ve spent the better part of my morning and early afternoon doing recon on Delmore, PrimeStar Insurance, and their goon squad law firm. With my knowledge of the dark web and the kinds of contacts I have—the less-than-law-abiding citizens of the world—it’s not hard to find the information I’m looking for. One thing I’ve learned in this business is that everyone knows something, and they’re always willing to talk for a price.

“Yes.” I don’t have to see Denise to know she’s pouting. “I’m starting to think I’m not your #1 girl anymore.”

“Did I say you were?” I laugh.

“You didn’t have to,” she purrs.

“Now, Denise, we both know this isn’t an exclusive thing. Come on, I thought we both agreed it was fun and convenient. We see each other when we can.”

“It is,” she replies quickly. “Trust me, I’ve got too many other men paying my bills and taking me out to throw it away

on love.” She laughs. “But I’d be lying if I said they’re half as good in bed as you are.”

I lean back in my chair, staring up at the ceiling. It has been far too long since I’ve been laid. I think the last time I had contact with anyone was when Denise gave me road head over a month ago. I don’t like to try to fit women in when I’m on a job; it complicates things.

“I’m working a job right now, baby, I told you.” I have to practically force the words out so I don’t give in and tell her to come over right now. I’ve been wound pretty fucking tight since that night in Juliette’s bedroom. And then I had to go and make it a million times worse on myself by buying her a hot pink vibrator. I reach down and adjust my cock, straining against my jeans as I picture her lying back, burying the toy inside her as she moans.

“Ohhh, don’t you miss me, though? Don’t you miss my tight, wet pu—”

A beep on my phone alerts me to another incoming call and I pull back to see Juliette’s number. I can’t hide the stupid grin that spreads across my lips when I see her name. She must have received my gift.

“Hey, Denise, sorry, but I have a work call I can’t miss. I’ll call you later.” I hit the END then ACCEPT button, fully ready to have my head ripped off by the oh-so-proper Juliette, but instead, her voice is quivering with fear.

“I—I just got a call, a threat. They threatened Chloe, Alex! *Chloe!*” I can hear the panic in her voice as she coughs through her tears.

“I’m coming right over. Are you both okay? Alone in the house?” I shoot out of my chair, grabbing my keys, closing my

apartment door, and running to my car.

“Y—yes,” she sniffs. “Chloe is in her room, and she doesn’t know anything. I just double-checked the locks on the doors and windows and looked through the security footage. Nobody is or was here.”

“Good girl,” I say, not trying to be condescending, just completely impressed with how she handled the situation. “I’m on my way.” I hang up the phone, tossing it into my passenger seat and flying across town to her house.

“Okay, start from the beginning,” I say as I lean against the kitchen island. Juliette’s thin arms are crossed over her white summery dress that’s dotted with big pink flowers. Her feet are bare, a simple gold chain around her ankle. She looks so delicate, so vulnerable—a stark contrast from the always-in-control powerhouse she normally presents.

“After brunch, I picked up Chloe, then I saw a box on my porch when we got home.” Her eyes dart to mine, pink staining her cheeks when we both realize it was the box from me. “I thought it was another empty box from whoever left the last one there, but we both know,” she smiles for a brief second, “what was in it. Anyway, I received a call and thought it was you. I thought maybe you had been watching the cameras and saw me open the box. I hadn’t saved your number in my phone with your name yet.”

“But you have now, right?” I interrupt and she nods her head.

“So I answered thinking it was you, and it was a voice—a man’s voice—that I didn’t recognize.”

“And he threatened you? And Chloe?”

She hugs her body tightly, nodding her head again. “He said that it would be a shame if something were to happen to Chloe or me, and that if I thought you could keep us safe, I was mistaken.”

“Me? Did he mention me by name?”

“Yes. He said, ‘Alex Rockwell and the men of Four Forces.’ Then he said he represented a multi-billion-dollar empire that would make me dis—disappear.” She breaks, a tear falling down her cheek as her lip begins to quiver.

“Come here,” I say, stepping toward her with my arms out, but she brushes me off.

“I’m okay.” She wipes away the tear, turning to grab a glass from a shelf and filling it with water.

“Where’s your phone? I want to search the number and see what I can find out.” She hands me her phone and I send the details to myself. I pull up Luka’s number and hit CALL.

“Hey,” I say when he answers the phone. “Need you to look up a number for me in all of the databases. See what you can find.” I read off the number to him and hang up. “Luka is at the office, so he’ll do some research on the number. In the meantime, I’ll double-check the cameras—make sure there were no suspicious people or activity in the last 24 hours.”

“The tablet is in the living room,” she says as I nod and start to make my way across the kitchen to the doorway. “Do you want some coffee or tea?” she asks softly.

“Yeah,” I smile. “Coffee would be great.”

A few moments later, Juliette appears beside me in the living room with a tray. “I wasn’t sure how you took your coffee, so I brought cream and sugar.” She places it down on

the coffee table, taking a seat beside me as I swipe through the security footage. “Find anything?”

“Thank you,” I say, reaching for the mug of coffee. “No, everything looks good so far.” I take a sip. “And I’m a black coffee kind of man.” I don’t know why, but I wink at her.

“Yeah, I figured.” She gives me a coy smile.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. You just seem like a black coffee kind of guy. And if I had to guess what your drink of choice is, I’d put all my money on whiskey.”

“You think you’ve got me all figured out, huh?” I laugh.

“You’re not as *mysterious* as you think you are, Mr. Rockwell.”

I could be wrong, but it almost feels like Juliette Pierce is flirting with me. Though maybe it’s just the relief of me being here—the adrenaline dump probably has her nerves on edge.

“Well, in that case, you’re wrong. My drink of choice is not whiskey ... because I don’t drink.”

“At all?”

“Nope.” I shake my head, taking another sip of coffee.

“Any particular reason why?”

I take another sip, letting the cup linger at my mouth to buy myself a few seconds. I never talk about my older brother Zane—not to anyone. He was my entire world when I was growing up. At seven years older than me, it felt like he was experiencing an entire lifetime before me. He’d let me hang around, teach me how to work on trucks and cars, show me how to fish. Since our dad ran off when I was barely two, my

brother was the man of our house. It was his dream—not mine—to be in the Special Forces. But after joining the military at 18 and barely making it past his 20th birthday before being killed by a drunk driver, he never got to live out that dream. So I lived it for him.

“Just a personal choice. Besides, never could get used to the taste of beer or liquor.”

The truth is, I did drink at one time. I started at 13, when Zane was killed, and by the time I was 16, I was a functioning alcoholic with a juvenile record and well on my way to prison ... until I had a judge talk to me like I needed to be talked to. He told me I had two choices: either end up in prison or dead, or join the military and make something of my life. The day I heard that speech, I never touched alcohol again, and the second I turned 18, I enlisted.

“I don’t like the taste of those either,” she says, looking down into her cream-colored coffee. “I enjoy wine and a good martini.” We sit in silence for a few seconds, both of us staring into our mugs. Finally, my phone rings and breaks the silence. I stand up, answering it.

“Hey,” I say to Luka when I pick up. “Anything?”

“No. Looks like a burner.”

“Shit, that’s what I figured. Okay, thanks.” I hang up and turn to Juliette. “Seems like it’s just a burner phone. That’s what I figured, but I wanted to make sure just in case they were stupid enough to use a phone actually registered to someone.”

“So what does that mean?” She places her mug on the coffee table and stands up. “Should I get a gun for the house?”

“Do you know how to use it?”

“No, but I can learn. They threatened our lives, Alex.” I’m glad she’s finally realizing the seriousness of this situation, but at the same time, I don’t want her panicked out of her mind.

“Yes, they did. But while I do believe they wouldn’t think twice when it comes to delivering on it, they’d have to get through me first.” I step closer to her, my hands wrapping gently around her upper arms. “And I won’t let that happen.”

She looks up at me. “You can’t protect us 24/7, Alex, and they know you’re involved. What if there’s 10 of them?”

“Then I’ll handle all 10 of them.” I reach my hand beneath her chin and tip it upward so her gaze is back on me. “I know it’s hard to believe, but trust me, my training in the Special Forces prepared me for far worse than a couple of for-hire morons. I promise that nothing will happen to you or Chloe. You understand me?”

Her eyes study mine as she chews nervously on her bottom lip. “Yes.”

“Good. I’ll be right outside tonight, okay? If you need anything between now and then, just call me.”

“Okay.” I release her arms and take a step back to finish my coffee.

“Did you have plans tonight, or are you staying in?” I ask, making sure I don’t need to follow her anywhere.

“Just staying in. Chloe and I are going to watch *Hidden Figures*. She went to a science camp today and learned about the women of NASA, so I thought I’d surprise her with that movie.”

“Very cool. She’s lucky to have you as a mom.” I’m not often sentimental, especially with clients, but I know what it’s like to see a single mom struggling to raise her kids. My mom

did everything within her power to raise us right, and life rewarded her by taking her oldest son from her and ripping her dignity from her at 51 when she died of cancer.

“Thanks, I still struggle with all of it. Trying to make sure I get it right.”

“I’m sure you’re doing far better than you give yourself credit for.” I take a drink of my coffee. “Just don’t neglect your own needs in the process.” I don’t have to clarify what I mean by *needs*. The innuendo hangs heavy between us.

“Speaking of ...” she says, clearing her throat before getting up and disappearing. She returns a moment later with the black box, thrusting it toward me. “Although I did find the humor in it, this was still wildly inappropriate.”

Her stoic, uptight persona is back in place. I look down at the box then back up at her, refusing to take it back. “I didn’t realize satisfying our adult urges was inappropriate, Miss Pierce.”

“You know what I mean. This is a professional relationship, Mr. Rockwell.”

“Mr. Rockwell?” I laugh, putting my mug down and reaching to take the box from her hands. She watches as I place it next to us. “A minute ago, I was Alex.”

“I just mean that since you work for me, it w—”

“Work for you?” I laugh. “I didn’t realize you were signing my paychecks.”

Her smirk morphs into a frown. “I’m paying your company for your services, aren’t I?”

“Tell me, Juliette, when a company hires your law firm, do you work for them or do you work for your firm and you are

merely providing them a service?”

“You’re splitting hairs.”

“No, I’m making it very clear that I,” I inch closer, “don’t work for you. You hired my company and we are providing you a service. My other services don’t fall under that same umbrella.”

She scoffs. “I don’t need it, and I certainly won’t be using it. It will simply end up in the trash.”

“We both know that isn’t true.” I can see it written all over her face. She likes this. She wouldn’t continue to engage with me if she really wanted me to take it back and leave. “How long has it been?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I’ll go first. It’s been about six weeks, and I don’t know about you, but I sure as shit can’t handle going much longer ... but at least you have a little help from a friend that makes a pretty decent stand-in.”

Her face grows red and she pulls the box back into her lap. “I’m not having this conversation with you; that’s personal information.” I continue to stare at her, her eyes shifting away from mine nervously for a second before squaring her shoulders. “And it’s not a pretty decent stand-in. It’s the only reliable option out there, with a far superior success rate. You men *wish* you were this little guy.”

I nod my head slowly, smiling at her snarky attitude. “You’re right, I do wish I could be that little guy.” I reach for the box, taking the lid off and pulling out the bright pink toy. “Actually, he’s way too small.” I watch her eyes grow wide, her lips parting as she sucks in a breath. Her eyes oh-so-subtly drop down to my lap then quickly dart back up. “The only

problem is, they lack a tongue. You can get a lot done with a tongue.”

Her throat constricts as she swallows. I don't know why I'm doing this. It's not only stupid, it's fucking torture. I can feel myself growing firmer by the second, my balls probably bright fucking blue right now. Not only did I tell Jimmy there was no chance in hell this would happen, but he also gave me specific instructions not to let it happen, yet here I am, practically begging to have my ass handed to me. I place the toy back into the box, a sudden wave of reality washing over me when I remember Chloe is upstairs.

“I should get going. Thanks again for the coffee, and like I said, if you hear or see anything, or you need anything, I'll be right outside tonight. I'm going to head to the office right now then stop at home before I come back over here.”

She follows me to the front door, and just as I go to reach for the handle, she finally responds to my earlier question.

“I won't use it and my sex life is absolutely none of your business, so don't ask me about it again.”

I release the handle and turn back to face her. Her hands are on her hips, her chin jutting slightly outward just like the first time I stepped into this house. I decide to throw the common sense I just talked myself into a second ago right out the window and push her, tease her. I take three steps, closing the distance between us before reaching my hands out to grab her wrists. I pin them behind her back, tugging her against my body so she's staring straight up at me.

“I don't give a fuck if you use it or not, Juliette. But if you want to use it, then use it. Nobody is judging you, and nobody gives a fuck if you want to relax and make yourself feel good.

You deserve it. I won't think less of you. Trust me, it's written all over your face right now how turned on you are."

She opens her mouth to speak, but I lean in, my lips at her ear.

"And before you even think about denying it, I bet if I stuck my fingers inside your panties right now, they'd be wet." Her breath grows more rapid as I tighten my grip on her, tugging her wrists so her breasts push forward against me. "You can hate that you're attracted to me, and you can hate that you want me, but you can't hide it from me. So go ahead, fuck yourself with that toy thinking about all the ways I could make you feel so much better. We both know what you secretly like about me is that I'm nothing like those selfish, uptight Wall Street types you've been with. I might be a playboy, but I can confidently say I've learned a thing or two about pleasing a woman. And *nothing*," I pause, running my nose against her skin, "gets me off harder than seeing a woman claw at my chest in pure ecstasy while she comes on my cock."

I release her hands and she stumbles backward, but just as she regains her composure, she lifts her hand and lands it squarely across my cheek. Now *that* I was not expecting, but it makes me laugh. I reach my hand up to rub where it stings.

"I'm not like other women in your life, Alex. I won't fall at your feet and beg you to have your way with me just because you smiled a few times and made me blush. It doesn't take a lot to be crass, but it takes far more than whatever the hell you're offering to be a gentleman."

And with that, she spins on one of her bare feet and walks out of the foyer, leaving me completely stunned and even more intrigued. Clearly, she doesn't realize that I'm a glutton

for punishment and a sick fuck, because knowing she's feisty—knowing she's a challenge—makes her all the more tempting to me.

JULIETTE

THREE WEEKS LATER ...

“Cheers to us!” I lift my glass, clinking it against Brett’s.

“Cheers to you,” he says as we both take a sip, savoring a very overpriced bottle of champagne. “You are the one who’s done most of the heavy lifting on this case.”

The class-action complaint we submitted to the courts was officially accepted by a judge and is now a class-action lawsuit. We had planned to have a celebratory dinner with Nathan as well, but he was called to a client meeting in Atlanta. With Chloe spending the night at her Aunt Harper’s place, it was perfect for the two of us to hang out at my house.

“How soon before we start hearing about plaintiff intimidation?” I pick up an almond from the charcuterie board on my kitchen island and pop it into my mouth.

“With Prince, Dune & Bellows at the helm, I’d say, like ... yesterday?” Brett smiles. “But seriously, let’s not immediately jump to the negatives. We know their first step will be coming in with an offensively lowball settlement because they’ll want to keep this out of litigation.”

“Yeah, I’m fully expecting that. I also warned all of the plaintiffs that that’s most likely what will happen, but not to stress, since we won’t accept their first offer.”

“Okay, okay, enough work talk,” he waves his hands, “tell me some fun gossip. Any hot new men in your life?” He wriggles his eyebrows at me.

“Uh, not really.” I stare down at the flute in my hand, twirling it between my fingers before taking another drink. The look on his face tells me he’s not letting that vague answer slide. I glance at my delivery app then motion for him to follow me to the living room. “Okay, fine, we have 20 minutes until our food gets here anyway, so I should probably fill you in on some things.” We take a seat on my sofa and I launch into the latest events of my life.

“Oh my God!” he gasps, his hand shooting up to cover his mouth after I fill him in on the threats I’ve received and the role Alex is playing in my life. “Sweetie, that is ... I am ... speechless. This is serious, Jules. Why didn’t you tell me?” He places his glass on the coffee table and scoots to the edge of the couch before turning to face me.

“Well, for starters, I was afraid you’d talk me out of the case.”

“Because I would have,” he confirms. “I know these people deserve compensation and Delmore has to be held accountable, but not at the risk of you and Chloe losing your lives.”

“Well, that’s why I went to Jameson. I knew he would know what to do, and at first, I thought he was overreacting, but I’m actually really glad he insisted on Alex being my bodyguard.”

“So are we safe here?” He glances over his shoulder.

“Yes, don’t worry. He installed a ridiculous state-of-the-art security system, and he’s most likely parked right outside my

door.”

“He is?”

“Yeah. I haven’t received any other threats to my house—no more slit tires or random packages.” I catch myself, remembering I did in fact receive a random package from Alex.

“What was that?”

“What was what?” I ask, knowing full well my face is probably red right now.

“That blush.”

“It’s the champagne.” I shrug.

“So, is he cute?”

Shit. I feel the blush deepen.

“Yeah,” I say with a smile. Brett’s one of my closest friends and has been for over a decade. He was there for me when I found out I was pregnant, and when shit hit the fan with Caleb, and he’s never once been judgmental.

“Ohhh, so any potential for something fun?” He leans forward and grabs his glass, finishing it before popping up to grab the bottle and come back to the couch.

“No.”

“Oh, boo, why not?” He tops off our glasses.

“Because the last time I had *something fun*, I ended up pregnant and a single mom. I can’t just let random guys into my life with a child to consider. She gets attached. The last guy broke both our hearts.”

“The last guy was an ass. Maybe you need to go for something totally different.”

“I don’t *need* to go for anything. Chloe and I are perfectly happy with how things are.” I try to sound confident, but I’m not sure if I’m convincing either one of us. The truth is, I do get lonely. I long for the connection and intimacy that I see others have. In reality, I don’t think I’ve ever actually experienced it.

“Well, what if it’s just something casual? A *one and done, get it out of your system* type of thing? And before you say something about ending up pregnant, you are far wiser at 30 than you were at 19.”

Am I, though? is what I want to say. I let his comment marinate for a moment. For the past three weeks, I’ve had countless dreams about Alex Rockwell, all of them preceded by fantasies of him pleasuring me instead of the vibrator he gave me—the same one I swore I’d never use and would promptly throw away. It sat on my nightstand, taunting me for days until I finally gave in to the urge.

He’s right that I hate that I’m attracted to him, but what I hate even more is the fact that he was right about the reasons why I want him. He is completely different from the men I’ve gone for in the past. Even Caleb was an uptight finance bro. That’s why it was so hard for people around us to believe me when I said he was a degenerate drunk who gambled away our savings, and a deadbeat dad with zero interest in his daughter. He wore \$3,000 suits and had a high-power job. Men like him get away with it.

But Alex, he’s approachable. He’s a *normal* guy in the sense that he doesn’t seem to be driven by power and money. I have no doubt that he’s successful. From what Blaire and Harper have told me about marrying Four Forces men, they’re very well off, but you’d never know it from looking at Alex or

the way he presents himself. He's rough around the edges, tattooed with a constant five o'clock shadow and calloused, scarred hands. Hands that I've imagined cupping my breasts and gripping my thighs.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Hmm?" I look up from my glass just as the doorbell rings. "Food's here!" I exclaim as we both jump up.

"I'm starving," Brett says as he opens the front door and takes the food. "Oh, thank you."

"Is Juliette here?" I hear Alex's deep voice.

"Yeah, she's right in here. Wait, who are you?"

"Alex."

"Ohhh, Alex ..."

I rush to the front door before Brett makes it any more obvious that we were just talking about him.

"Hey, you get a job delivering food?" I smile, but the look on Alex's face tells me he doesn't think it's very funny.

"Can I speak to you?" He looks over at Brett. "Alone." I lead him into the hallway away from the kitchen while Brett plates our dinner. "Who is that?"

"My friend Brett. Why? You jealous?" I don't know what has gotten into me. Must be the two glasses of champagne with only four almonds swimming in my stomach.

"Next time you decide to order food or have someone over, I need to know beforehand so I can run a background check."

"A background check? He's a lawyer at my firm and I've known him for over a decade. I think he's safe." I roll my

eyes. “And I have to run my eating habits by you now?”

“If you’re having a stranger deliver food to your house, yes. I intercepted this delivery, but you have no idea who’s monitoring your activity and what they could do.”

I want to tell him to chill out—that he’s sounding paranoid—but I guess he’s probably right. “Okay, sorry, won’t happen again.”

“Is he staying for dinner?” Brett appears behind us, a smirk on his face.

“No, he’s most certainly not,” I say, spinning Alex around and shoving him toward the front door.

“Pleasure to meet you, Alex,” Brett says casually as I close the door.

“Don’t say it,” I warn Brett as I walk over to grab my plate. I can already tell by the mischievous grin on his face that he’s got something brewing.

“I mean, you are seriously going to pass on that? Whew, that man looks exactly like the kind of man who could realign your back and get that third eye open in one go.”

“Well, I’ll let you keep that fantasy. Besides, even if I wanted to, who says he would be into me? I can guarantee you I’m not his type. His reputation among the guys is the *playboy*.” I use air quotes.

“Oh, please, not into you? Look at you! You’re the type of woman that men like George Clooney marry ... and men who aren’t George Clooney *wish* they could marry. Just because you’re classy and have taste doesn’t mean you’re not someone’s type. It just usually means they know they can’t get you because you’re completely out of their league.”

“Well, thanks for that vote of confidence.” I smile, biting into my lobster pasta.

“And for the record, he’s very into you. I might be a gay man, but I saw the look he gave me when I opened the door. Seeing another man in your home was the last thing he was expecting.”

We enjoy our dinner and a few more healthy glasses of champagne. By the time Brett calls a car to head home, I’m feeling tipsy. I place our dirty dishes in the dishwasher and toss the empty champagne bottle in the recycling when I hear a soft knock at my front door. I pull the curtain back to see Alex standing on my porch.

“Here to yell at me again?” I smile, the warmth of the alcohol making me feel relaxed.

“Actually came to apologize.”

“Come in.” I step back, leaving the door open. He gives me a questioning look then steps over the threshold, closing the door behind him.

“Your date didn’t stay?”

“My date?” I turn around, realizing he’s referring to Brett. I’m about to laugh when I remember Brett saying he recognized the look on Alex’s face when he opened the door.

Was the look jealousy? Why do I care? Do I want him to be jealous? Ooh, I DO want him to be jealous.

“Oh, no, he went home.”

“Did you two meet through work?”

“No, college, actually.” I walk around the kitchen island, opening the fridge to grab a bottle of water. “You want something to drink?”

“I’m good. So you met back up through work?”

I shake my head as I take a long sip of cool water, hoping it tamps down my buzz. “No. We’ve always been in contact, close friends. When I moved to New York from Boston, we started hanging out again. He’s the one who brought the class-action lawsuit to me and put in a good word for me at his firm.” I take another sip as Alex runs his hand over his jaw.

“I guess I was wrong about you needing the vibrator then.” He smirks, leaning against the counter, and I can’t hold back my laugh any longer.

“We’re just friends.”

“Didn’t look like it that night in the parking garage.” I give him a questioning look. “The night you saw me, you two were pretty cozy as he walked you to your car.”

“He’s married, Alex.”

“Hasn’t stopped some people I know from fucking around when they’re in a committed relationship.”

“You’re joking, right?” Clearly he’s not. “Okay, well, I don’t know what personal situation you’re referring to that has clearly left you jaded, but he’s gay. How did you not notice him checking you out earlier?”

“Oh, he did?” He shrugs. “Guess I didn’t realize it.”

“But why would you care if he and I were together? Or if he did stay the night?”

“I don’t.” He looks down at his shoe as he runs it against the floor. This is the first time I think I’ve seen Alex uneasy, and it makes me want to tease him.

“Right,” I say as I walk by him, leaving just enough room that my arm brushes against his chest.

“Where’s Chloe?”

“Harper and Luka’s. Why?”

He does that thing where he doesn’t answer me, but instead, he drags his eyes down my body as he steps closer. I wish I could say I was immune to the way his eyes are devouring me right now, but I’m not. A ribbon of desire uncurls in my stomach and I get the unsettling feeling that I’m about to do something really stupid.

“Did you use it?” He walks closer until he’s right in front of me, my kitchen island counter hitting me in the back.

“I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

“Really?” He reaches out his hand to touch one of the buttons on my dress. “Because I think you want it to be my business.”

My breath catches in my chest as he steps closer, the warmth of his body pressing against me as he gently wraps his hand around my neck, his thumb coming to rest at the base of my throat.

“I think you’re pushing me, wanting me to break the rules so you can have a taste of what it’s like to be with a man like me.”

“A man like you?” My hands grip the edge of the countertop behind me as I try to stay calm.

“Mm-hmm.” In a flash, his hands are wrapping around my waist and he’s lifting me onto the countertop, stepping between my thighs as my dress rides up. “A man who will take *exactly*,” one of his hands tangles in my hair, grabbing a handful, “what he wants.” He tugs my face forward, his lips against mine as my hands dart up to grip his shirt.

He isn't rough, but he also isn't easing his way in. He grips my waist tightly, pulling my warm center against him as he slides his tongue deep into my mouth. The kiss feels erotic and needy, like he's been dying to taste me. Or maybe that's what I want, because that's how I feel.

I clutch at his gray shirt, pulling him closer as he continues to kiss me. I don't know where this is going. Part of me wants to reach down and palm him through his jeans—to beg him to take me so I can finally get some relief—but I know it's a bad idea.

Before I can decide, he breaks the kiss, trailing his tongue down my neck as he begins to unbutton my dress. His breath is hot against my skin as he nips and sucks at me, his hands pushing my breasts together as he buries his face in them. He bites me through my bra before tugging it down to suck my nipple into his mouth, eliciting a long moan from me.

“Ohhhh ...” I arch my back, so lost in lust that this time, I don't care that I sound like I'm starring in a porno. I run my fingers through his hair as his hand glides up my thigh and beneath my dress. My eyes pop open the second he pushes my panties to the side and slides his finger right up my slit.

“Soaked,” he growls against my skin as he slides his finger inside me, “just like I knew you'd be for me.”

I want to tell him to fuck off, but I don't want him to stop. I grip his hair as he slowly pumps his finger in and out of me. I can feel my orgasm building already, and I try to close my thighs to keep from it happening.

“Open your legs,” he commands as he pulls back, sliding his finger out of me and bringing it to his lips. He stares at me as he licks my wetness from his finger. A low growl erupts

from his chest as he reaches beneath my dress and tears my panties from my body.

“Oh!” I yelp as he pushes me back onto my elbows on the counter.

“Don’t fucking move until you’ve come on my tongue.”

I watch as he leans in, holding my thighs apart as his tongue laps at me, swirling around my sensitive nub over and over again. My thighs are quivering, and my body has a thin sheen of sweat as he slides two fingers inside me, pumping them slowly as he devours me.

“Oh yes, oh please!” I repeat the chant over and over as I grasp at the cool countertop. My words from weeks ago when I told him I wouldn’t beg are coming back to haunt me, but in the moment, I don’t care. My fingers grab at nothing while my back arches and stars explode behind my eyelids as I find my release. I stare up at the ceiling for several minutes, the sound of our labored breathing echoing around us as he continues to hold me, his hands now at my waist as he rests his forehead against my stomach.

Suddenly, it feels awkward. I expected him to continue—to pull me off the counter and bend me over, or carry me upstairs—but he doesn’t. Instead, he stands up without a word, pulling me to a sitting position before reaching to button my dress again.

I feel silly, embarrassed. “I’ve got it,” I say a little forcefully as I swipe his hand away and button the dress myself. I tug it down, now very aware of how exposed I am.

“Juliette, I’m sorry,” he says as he steps back, running his hands through his hair.

“You’re sorry? Now that you got what you wanted? That’s convenient.” I step down from the counter and brush past him.

“I didn’t get what I wanted, but that isn’t the point. I let myself get caught up in the moment and I shouldn’t have. We both know that. I don’t regret it, I ju—”

“Great,” I say coldly. “Look, it is what it is. We’re both adults. I have an early morning, so I need to shower and get to bed. You can see yourself out.”

I don’t wait for a response. I round the corner and run up the stairs two at a time till I reach my room and close the door behind me.

ALEX

F*uck.*

Not only did I screw up by crossing a very clear boundary I have no business crossing, but now I know exactly how she tastes, how she responds to me, how she feels pressed against me. I stare down at her torn, crumpled panties on the floor. I glance over my shoulder before reaching down to grab them, and stuffing them in my pocket.

I walk to the front door, locking it behind me as I walk back to my car to grab my flashlight and do a lap around the house. I triple-check the cameras, doors, and windows outside, looking up to see her bedroom light on. I pause, half-tempted to march back into her house and up to her room to finish what I started.

It's not that I didn't want to take things further ... it's that I could taste the champagne on her lips and I could see it in her eyes. I went against my judgment and took it further than I'd planned to in the first place. But once my lips were on hers, I couldn't talk myself out of tasting her. The way her fingers curled into to my shirt, clawing at me for more as she moaned into my mouth, had me ready to tear her in half.

"Shit," I mutter, reaching down to adjust my cock that's begging for release. I walk back to my car, hoping I can

distract myself enough to refocus on my surveillance efforts.

It's no use. Images of her back arching off the counter as her body quivered beneath my tongue play over and over in my brain. I'll never be able to unsee the way her full breasts looked—framed perfectly by her black lace bra. I know enough about lingerie to know that hers was expensive. I reach into my pocket, pull out the panties I ripped from her body, and bring them to my nose to inhale. My eyes flutter closed as my head lolls back, her scent filling my nostrils. I know it's risky and stupid as shit, but my windows are blacked out enough that nobody's seeing in. I undo my buckle, unzipping my jeans in a frenzy as I free my cock. I'm already at full mast, a bead of precum on the tip as I fist my shaft, stroking myself as I clutch her panties to my nose.

Within minutes, I'm groaning loudly, spilling my release onto the floor of my car like a fucking sicko. Shame fills me as I grab a pile of napkins from the console and attempt to clean up. I stuff myself back into my jeans, wondering if Juliette is upstairs doing the same thing with the toy I gave her. I'd wanted to demand she go get it earlier, making her use it on herself so I could watch, but I was too overtaken by lust to let her out of my grip.

I still plan to talk to her—to finish what I wanted to tell her—which is if things are going to go further with us, I want us to be on the same page. I want her to know that this is all it ever could be with me: physical. It's all I ever want it to be, and I don't want her confused when this assignment is over and things between us go back to how they were before.

I may be a playboy, but I make damn sure my partners and I are on the same page from day one. I have zero interest in

leading a woman on or giving her false hope that there's even a chance at a future with me.

"I FUCKED UP." I stare at the TV across from the bar we're sitting at. I can see Harvey turn slightly in his seat toward me.

"How bad?" He crooks an eyebrow at me in curiosity.

"Decently." I bring my glass of cranberry juice to my lips and savor the tartness.

"Are you wanting to elaborate, or just wanted to get that off your chest?" He takes a sip of his beer, still staring at me.

"I kissed her." I let my head hang forward before I finally meet his gaze.

"Juliette?" he says after a few seconds, realizing whom I'm talking about. I nod my head yes. "Yeah, I'd say that's a decent screw-up. I mean, nothing too bad—not like you got her pregnant like Luka did with Harper, our best friend's little sister. That's the kind of screw-up that almost made him dickless."

I laugh, remembering the insane drama that went down when Jimmy not only found out that Luka had been sleeping with his sister when he was hired to protect her from her ex, but also got her pregnant. For a minute, I think we all thought that was going to be the end of Four Forces, but they ended up in love.

"Yeah, I guess so, but still, I feel bad. She's vulnerable right now and we both know my track record with women. Plus, as you know, she has a kid."

“Am I missing something? Did you also propose to her when you kissed her?”

“No, but still, I promised Jimmy I wouldn’t cross any boundaries. I actually laughed when he told me not to, because I thought it was so ridiculous. She’s not exactly the type of woman I go for, and I’m far from the finance powerhouses she goes for.”

“Oh, you mean a sophisticated knock-you-on-your-ass smoke show of a woman with multiple degrees and an extremely sought-after job? That’s not *your* type?” Harvey laughs, slapping me on the back. He’s clearly making fun of me. “Look, we both know you’ve got looks, height, muscles, and that Special Forces title like the rest of us, which opens a lot of legs, but come on, she’s out of even your league, buddy.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely she is. That’s my point. I tend to go for low-hanging fruit—the kind that only wants to ride my dick and then move on to the next. I think the only reason Juliette is in any way attracted to me is because I’m exactly what she’s not supposed to want, and she knows it.”

“So then why do you care? If it’s just a kiss or whatever so she can get her rocks off with a commitment-phobe like you, then that’s perfect.” He shrugs, putting his beer on the bar top.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. I guess I feel guilty because I’m worried I’m taking advantage of her trust in me because of her situation. She’s known who I am for the last two years and hasn’t even asked about me, so it’s not like she’s always had a thing for me and now has an opportunity.”

“Maybe it’s just a matter of actual opportunity, though.”

“True.” I rub my beard, realizing I haven’t shaved in days. “I guess the real issue is I wanted to tell her all of that, but she didn’t give me the chance after I fi—” I stop myself, taking a drink of my juice instead.

“Finished? As in more than a kiss?” Harvey laughs.

“Yeah, more than a kiss.” I nod my head, my teeth clenching at the thought of tasting her again. “Anyway, she got pissed and thought I was telling her it was a mistake or something, then she threw me out right after.”

“You know, for being a guy who gets a lot of pussy, you have zero game.”

“We both know I’ve got twice as much game as you. Don’t make me take someone home just to prove it.”

“I’m down for that bet.” He gives me a look then turns around to scan the crowd in the bar.

Shit. I don’t actually want to take anyone home. I drink the rest of my juice, a small knot in my stomach forming at the thought of anyone else in my arms besides Juliette. I pull out a few bills and toss them on the bar.

“I’m gonna head back to her house and post up for the night, but you enjoy finding someone.” I slap Harvey on the back and quickly make my way toward the entrance, dodging the Friday night partygoers.

My chest feels tight. I take in a deep breath once I’m outside, the crisp air giving me little relief. I know the real reason I feel like kissing her was a mistake ... it’s not because I didn’t want to or because I’m worried she’ll think I’m just using her. It’s because I know I’m curious about her; it’s because for the first time in a decade, a woman has made me want more.

The first few years—hell, the first *several* years of jumping from woman to woman was fun. Most men would tell me I was living their fantasy: a different woman in my bed every night, an endless supply of pussy at my door whenever I wanted, but the truth is ... it really does get old. I'd heard other men talk about that—about how someday I'd be lonely and regret wasting so much time being jaded—and I'd laugh it off. I'd tell them they were delusional or jealous, but now, I tell them they were right. But the truth is, I'm not sure I have the strength to risk losing what I've lost before.

I park my car outside Juliette's house. The sun is just setting, so I take the opportunity to do a quick scan of the area and patrol her backyard. I double-check the windows and scan the alley when I hear the back door open.

“Hey, Alex.” I look over my shoulder to see Chloe waving at me.

“Hey, Chloe,” I say, walking over to the porch. “Where's your mom?”

“She's upstairs taking a shower.”

“You sure you should be going outside when she's doing that?”

She shrugs. “I wouldn't if it were a random stranger in my backyard, but I thought it was fine since it was you.”

“I guess that makes sense. How are you doing?” I ask, taking a seat on the edge of the porch. She closes the door behind her, taking a seat next to me.

“I'm doing okay. School starts next week, so I'm pretty excited about that.”

“Excited? For school?” I give her a funny look and it makes her laugh.

“Yeah, I love school. You didn’t?”

“No, I didn’t.” I laugh, thinking about how often I got in trouble at school for talking, taking things apart, attempting to bring fireworks and other contraband. “But it’s good that you do. School is great, and with how smart you are, you’ll probably be one of those top-of-the-class girls who goes on to get a big degree like your mom.”

“I don’t want to be a lawyer,” she says, scrunching up her nose. “I want to be a scientist, most likely an astronaut.” She says it so matter-of-factly that I completely believe her. She’s the wisest, most well-spoken 10-year-old I’ve ever met.

“Think you’ll be the first to Mars?”

“I wish,” she says, “that would be so amazing. My mom got me a telescope for my birthday this year. It’s set up in my room so I can see Mars. You want to come see it?”

I look over my shoulder, debating on if I should, when I shake my head no. “Probably shouldn’t. I don’t think your mom would appreciate me coming inside uninvited.” And just like clockwork, the back door flies open.

“Chloe!” Juliette rests her hand against her chest, her shoulders dropping in relief when she sees her sitting on the porch. Her relief is short-lived, though, when her eyes meet mine and narrow. “Don’t go outside without telling me, please.”

“I was just talking to Alex. Hey, can I show him my telescope?” She jumps up.

“No, not tonight,” Juliette says curtly. “Go inside and take a shower, please. You need to get ready for bed soon.”

“*Mooooom*, come on.” Chloe pooches out her lower lip, but her mom isn’t having it.

“*Chloe*,” she says sternly.

“Fine,” Chloe mutters, then turns to me. “Maybe another time, Alex. See ya.” She waves, her head falling forward as she walks back into the house.

Juliette’s hair is wet, her body wrapped in a giant oversized sweater that falls down to her bare knees.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I was just doing my rounds before I settle into my car for a bit.” I stand up from the porch.

“That’s not what I meant. Why were you talking to my daughter?” She crosses her arms over her chest.

“She came out here and I asked her if she should be doing that without you. She said she wouldn’t have if it had been anyone else, and I told her that was smart. She was just telling me about school.”

“I don’t want you talking to her.”

“And why’s that?”

“We’ve had enough of men like you in our lives.”

“Men like me?” I don’t attempt to hide my offense.

“Yes, men who charm their way into our world, pretending to be something they’re not, knowing full well they’ll just throw us away at the earliest inconvenience.”

“Jesus Christ, Juliette.” I shake my head. “I don’t know what man-hating podcast you listened to today, but that’s not my intention at all, and in fact, the other night I’d planned on saying just that before you got pissed and tossed me out.” I can hear my voice rise and I attempt to calm myself down, but it’s too late. “I was trying to be responsible and tell you that while

I didn't regret what happened between us, if it happened again or went further, that's all it could be: something physical. I'm not looking to confuse you or your daughter. I was hired to do a job and I'll do it. I will keep both of you safe, and if things get physical with us, then so be it, but we're both adults. We both know we aren't each other's happily ever after, and we want different things. If you don't want me talking to Chloe because you're afraid she'll get attached, then fine, I get that. But don't lump me in with the deadbeat pieces of shit who have hurt you or abandoned you, because I'm nothing like them."

Her shoulders drop and her face softens. "I'm sorry," she says, bringing her hand to rub her forehead. "You're right, I'm just projecting."

"I'm sorry," I say, stepping up onto the porch. "I shouldn't have raised my voice, but I want you to know that I meant what I said. I know I probably sound like a complete asshole saying that I have no intentions of pursuing anything outside of a physical connection with you, but I'd rather be perceived as an asshole for being too honest than hurt you or lead you on."

"I understand and I feel the same way. Chloe is my first priority in life, and I want to protect her from the type of hurt she's felt in the past. She likes you—I can see that—and she trusts you. I do think it's important for her to see that she can have trusting relationships with men. But with that being said, I won't confuse her by making her think there's anything other than a completely professional relationship between the two of us."

"I understand." I watch as she fidgets with the edge of her sweater. "I know it's for the best. I don't want her confused

either.” I can’t stop myself from moving closer toward Juliette. My hand reaches up to clutch the door frame above her.

“Yeah, for the best,” she repeats in a hushed tone as she looks up at me.

I’m trying my best, but her sweater falls open, revealing her breasts in a silky white tank top with no bra. The cool air causes her nipples to harden beneath the shirt.

“You’re killing me,” I murmur as I brush the sweater open a little further, my hand coming to her waist. I rub my thumb against the material, her skin burning through it against the pad of my thumb. “You make me want to fall to my knees and beg.” I drag my hand up her body, brushing against her breast as I wrap my fingers around the back of her neck to pull her mouth to mine.

I fully expect her to push me away, but her body melts against mine as I back her against the door, my tongue finding hers. I know I need to stop, but I physically can’t. I press my firm cock against her as my other hand falls to her breast.

“Tell me you’ve thought about it since the last time. Tell me you’ve imagined my cock making you come while you used that toy inside your sweet pussy.”

“Stop,” she murmurs, finally pressing against my chest, “we have to stop. It’s not a good idea.” I finally step back, putting some space between us as we catch our breath.

“Right,” I agree, nodding my head. Her eyelids are heavy, her lips parted and swollen as she stares at me.

“Yes,” she finally says, barely loud enough for me to hear. “I have.”

I smile. “Do me a favor. Since we both agree that nothing can come of this and we aren’t willing to take the risk, every

time you have an urge, just use that toy. Can you do that for me?”

I can tell she wants to be defiant. She wants to tell me to go fuck myself and be snarky about it, but to my surprise, she doesn't. “I can do that.”

“Good girl.”

“Oh, by the way, did you take my panties?” She lowers her voice as if someone might hear us.

I laugh, nodding my head. “I did.”

“Can I have them back?”

“No. Besides, they're torn, so they're no good to you.”

She cocks her head to the side. “And what good are they to you?”

“They smell like you,” I say as I reach out and touch her chin softly before turning to walk down the steps of the porch. “Oh, and Juliette?”

“Hmm?” She turns around to look at me after opening the door.

“Make sure you fuck yourself thoroughly, because if it were me in your bed, you'd be completely and utterly wrecked before I was done with you.”

JULIETTE

“**Y**ou’re in a suspiciously good mood.” Brett smiles at me as I hum to myself while sorting through a stack of reports.

“I am?” *You know you are after last night.* “Oh, right, I am.” I smile. “I just found out that Delmore wants to talk settlement, and we have a meeting with them today.”

“Ha ha,” Brett says sarcastically. “We both know this meeting is going to be a slap in the face. How bad do you think they’re planning to lowball?”

“If I had to guess?” I squint one eye like I’m thinking hard about the question. “I’d say they’re offering less than 100.”

“I’d be surprised if it were even that high. What’s the number we want to target?”

“Well,” I say, placing the files into a box, “in order for each lead plaintiff to get enough to cover not only medical expenses but ongoing treatment, plus the loss of wages after the plaintiffs were fired, and our contingency fee, we’re looking at \$350 million.”

Brett whistles. “That’s a lot of cheddar.”

“If they won’t pay, we’ll go to court and cost them even more.” I smile, loading the final box onto the dolly for the paralegal to take to the conference room for our meeting.

“Anything else you want to talk about?” I know he wants to know if anything happened between Alex and me after he left my house the other night, and while I’d love to tell someone the panty-melting comment he left me with last night, I’ve decided to keep that information to myself. I’m also way too embarrassed to ever admit how many times I’ve used the vibrator he gave me.

“Not at all.” I smile before checking the time. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a lunch date with my friend Aspen before this meeting.”

“You’re no fun, you know that?” he scoffs before walking out of my office.

I grab my purse and hurry to the elevator to meet Aspen at one of our favorite little bistros down the block.

“SORRY I’M A LITTLE LATE,” she says, flipping her strawberry blonde hair over her shoulder. “I feel like I’ve been in a tornado of stress since I moved.”

“When do we finally get to see this dream apartment?”

“Uh, once I’m finally settled. I still have boxes everywhere.” She almost seems a little dismissive about it, like she doesn’t want us to come by. “Eventually, I promise. Anyway, what’s new with you?”

Aspen is the soft-spoken, shy one of our group. She’s delicate and sweet, like she belongs in a cottage in the countryside feeding mice and singing with birds—not in Manhattan.

“Well, since you couldn’t make it to brunch the other day, you missed out on me spilling all the tea about how Alex is now my built-in babysitter.”

“Oh, that’s right!” she says as she smiles at the waiter who appears at our table. “I’ll take a strawberry lemonade, please.”

“Diet Coke, please.”

“Blaire filled me in when I saw her a few days later, but how are you doing? Have there been any more developments?”

I tell her about the threatening phone call and she gasps, her hand shooting up to cover her mouth. “Oh my goodness, how is Chloe doing with everything?”

“Well, I haven’t really told her much. She knows we had a security system put in, but she hasn’t asked why she’s still seeing Alex around. I’m sure she will soon, and honestly, I’m not sure what to say.”

“Do you think she can’t handle knowing you’ve hired some extra protection since you’re dealing with a high-profile case?”

I shrug. “I’m sure she can, since she’s such a mature 10-year-old, but I don’t want her to *have* to handle it. I want her to just be a normal kid, not worried or overthinking about why we’d possibly need protection. She’s been through so much in life already.” I sigh, feeling my chest tighten again at the thought.

“I can understand that. Whatever you decide to do, I know you’ll handle it perfectly.” She smiles at me, her pink cheeks scrunching up. “You always do.”

The waiter comes back around and we place our orders.

“Thanks. What about you? How have you been? You mentioned you got a promotion a while back, and then I feel like you kind of fell off the face of the earth.”

“I know. Work is good, busy.” Once again, she seems a little off in her answer, her eyes shifting away from me when she answers. “Just overwhelming. You know how it is with a new job: you have to find a rhythm.”

“I certainly understand that. I feel like I’ve finally found somewhat of a balance, or at least as much of a balance as I can have right now being a mom and a lawyer. This case I’m working is intense, but it’ll be worth it. I actually have a meeting with them in a few hours.”

“Speaking of Chloe, how’s she doing?”

“Good, smart as ever. She starts school on Monday, and she’s so excited.”

“She’s going to be just like you when she grows up, you know that? Super driven and successful.” Aspen smiles, and while I appreciate the compliment, all I want is for Chloe to be happy and loved. Every day, I feel more and more guilt about her not having a father in her life. Even though I know that it’s not my fault, it’s still hard to convince myself of that as a mother.

Our waiter brings our food and we spend the next 20 minutes talking about how we need a girls’ night and how we’re both petrified at the idea of dating at the moment.

“The last date I went on,” Aspen says, shaking her head, “the guy asked if he could crash on my couch before we even finished the appetizer.”

“What? How old was he, 19?” I laugh.

“He was my age, 26!” she says with big eyes. “When I met him at the Tattered Cover, I thought it was so romantic, ya know? Meeting a guy at your favorite bookstore with coffee in hand. We talked about Yeats and Byron and we both longed to lounge in the English countryside while reading and seeing the spots that inspired some of the greats. But alas,” she laughs, “it was merely a pickup routine he’d used before.”

“Seriously?” I laugh.

“Yeah. I found out three days after the date when I stopped back into the store and the clerk told me to stay away from that guy. Needless to say, I bought our dinner that night and learned a lesson about not romanticizing meet-cutes with strangers in bookstores.”

“Excuse me, Juliette Pierce?” A young woman taps me on the shoulder.

“Yes?”

“Hi, I’m Amber, the manager. I have a call for you.”

“A call? From whom?”

“A man named Alex Rockwell?”

“Oh, okay.” I reach into my bag to see if my phone is dead or if I have any missed calls, but there’s nothing.

“If you could follow me.” She gestures toward the front of the restaurant and I follow behind her, giving Aspen a questioning look. She points me toward the phone in the manager’s office and closes the door behind me.

“Hello?” I say, a little confused as to why he’s calling me here, and also, how he knew I was here. Then I remember that he was hired to follow me. “Any particular reason you’re not calling my cell?”

“Hi, Juliette.” A shiver runs down my spine when I hear the voice. It’s not Alex. It’s the same voice I heard on my cell a few weeks ago. “I just wanted to remind you that I’m watching. I’m *always* watching.” Before I can respond, there’s a click and the line goes dead.

I feel frozen. I slowly lower the receiver back onto the cradle and exit the office, thanking Amber and heading to my table.

“What was that about?” Aspen asks.

“Nothing.” I smile. “Alex just wanting to make a point that he can reach me anywhere. He likes to make sure I know he’s always around.”

“That’s a little weird. Have you tried to ditch him or something?”

“Hmm?” I place my silverware on my plate, no longer hungry. “Oh, no, he’s just making sure I don’t try to.” I smile, knowing full well I’m not sounding convincing at all. My stomach is in a knot, and the last thing I want to do is draw more attention to this situation and worry more people. I feel a tinge of panic grip my chest when I think about the walk back to my office.

Should I send Alex a text? Let him know I received another threatening call and that I want him to walk me to my office? Then it hits me: He’s probably already nearby.

“I should get back to the office—make sure I have enough time to prepare for my meeting,” I say to Aspen. “I’ll get lunch. I’m going to hit up the ladies’ room before I head out.” I hand my credit card to the waiter before he even brings the check.

“You sure? I got a promotion, you know.” She smiles and I wave away her offer to pay. “Well, thank you, Jules. And hey,” she reaches across the table, grabbing my hand, “don’t be too hard on yourself. You’ve got this.”

“Thanks.” I smile back at her then tell her bye before pulling out my phone to text Alex. Everyone around me keeps telling me the same thing: *You’ve got this, you’re an amazing mom, you’ll know exactly how to handle this or what to say.* But the truth is, I don’t feel like I have any of it under control.

Me: *Hey, where are you?*

He responds almost immediately.

Alex: *Right outside.*

I practically fly out of the restaurant, looking down the street to see Alex’s black Dodge Charger. I clutch my purse, walking quickly until I reach it, pulling open the passenger door.

“Hey, everything okay?” I must be white as a ghost, because the look on his face is shocked.

“I got another call. In the restaurant, on their phone. The person said he was you.”

“He told you that?”

I shake my head. “The manager. She came to get me and said there was a call from an Alex Rockwell. When I picked up the receiver, he said in that same dull, cold voice he previously threatened me in that he was watching me, then he hung up before I could say anything.” My body begins to shake. “Chloe ... I don’t want her home with just Zara.”

“Hey, hey.” Alex grabs me and pulls me toward him, wrapping his arms around me. “It’s going be okay. I told you

before, I'm here." He rubs my back. "I'll text Luka and have him sit outside your house until you're off work."

"What am I going to do?" I feel the tears start to build and I swallow, clenching my jaw, trying to hold them back.

"I'm going to go into your office with you."

"No, no way," I say, pulling back. "I have a meeting today with Prince, Dune & Bellows to discuss negotiations, so I can't have you in there. Can't you just stay outside in your car?"

"I could, but that's not what I'm going to do. We both know these fuckers are the ones threatening you or know who's threatening you, so we're going to send a message loud and clear. You can draft an NDA that I'll sign in their presence, but I'm not leaving you in a conference room with them."

"And how do you expect me to explain this to my boss?"

"I'll explain it to them."

"No, not a chance. I can't have them finding out about any threats toward me, or they'll pull me off the case."

"Maybe that's what needs to happen."

I rub my temples. "That is *not* what needs to happen, and I've worked too damn hard for that to happen." I think for a second. "Okay, fine, you can come into my office but you cannot come into the meeting or tell my bosses who you are. Just pretend like you're there because we have a meeting or something, okay?"

"Fine," he agrees, "but this isn't a long-term solution, and while we're talking about me being closer, I think we need to

discuss moving you and Chloe to a safe house,” he says, pulling into traffic.

“A what? You’ve got to be kidding me. No, absolutely not. This is going too far.” I reach for the handle of the door when he slows in front of my office, but he grabs my arm and pulls me back toward him.

“This isn’t a negotiation, Juliette, and the sooner you accept that, the better. I won’t keep having this argument with you about letting me do my job.” His eyes drop from mine down to my lips for a brief second before letting go of my arm.

I don’t respond. I step out of the car and head upstairs to my office to get ready for my meeting.

“YOU HAD to know we wouldn’t accept this offer,” I say, sliding it back across the table. “In fact, it would be laughable if it wasn’t such an insult to your victims.”

“Victims,” Terry Dune laughs as he shakes his head. “They’re leeches and we both know it. They’re perfectly capable of working, and this settlement would more than cover their medical expenses.”

“I’m not going to dignify that statement with a response, because we both know it wouldn’t. Now, if you don’t plan on actually bringing us a respectable offer, I’m going to excuse myself from this meeting and you gentlemen are free to leave.” I stand up, my boss, Joseph Steinberg, giving me a nod of approval at putting my foot down.

“Really, Joe?” Terry says as he stands, buttoning his suit coat. “You’re going to let her throw this deal down the toilet and do this the hard way?”

“The hard way meaning going to trial?” I ask. “Because for you, it will absolutely be the hard way. I can’t imagine any jury not having a sympathetic response to hearing the extreme physical pain and anguish your client has caused them, along with the emotional turmoil of losing their homes and belongings.”

“Oh, please, you think a jury will listen to you once they learn you turned down a \$50 million deal? Come on now, we both know they’ll just think you’re being greedy.”

“Maybe,” I shrug, “but that’s a risk we’re willing to take. And from my personal experience and dozens and dozens of other cases throughout history, most juries don’t ever feel sympathy for multi-billion-dollar companies. We’ve outlined our terms,” I say, nodding toward the file on the table. “If you want to take it to your client and renegotiate, then great. Otherwise, we’ll see you in court.”

I keep my head held high as I exit the conference room. I turn to walk down the hall toward my office when I see Alex, dressed in a slim black suit. He looks like 6’3” of temptation.

Holy shit. My mouth goes completely dry.

“Why are you in a suit?” I whisper as I approach him.

“Juliette,” my boss’ voice is right behind me, and I turn to see him approaching. “That was impressive in there.”

“Thank you, sir. I have no interest in letting them bully us into a lowball deal. Thanks for trusting me to take the lead.”

“Never doubted you,” he says, looking over my shoulder toward Alex.

“Oh, this is—”

“Her husband, Alex,” he says, jutting his hand out toward my boss before I can come up with an answer.

“Alex,” Mr. Steinberg smiles broadly, “pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Alex smiles, his hand coming to rest on my hip, and I can feel the warmth instantly traveling through my body. “Apologies for dropping by unexpectedly. My wife forgot her cell phone in my car after lunch, and I was dropping it off.”

“Not a problem, Alex. I’ve got a wife myself who’d forget her head if it wasn’t attached.” Mr. Steinberg smiles and walks away, leaving me standing with Alex.

“My husband?” I turn around to face him, but he’s looking past me at the men leaving the conference room.

“Follow me,” he says, grabbing my hand and marching us down the hallway toward the bank of elevators they’re approaching. Several of the women in my office stare at Alex, his long legs almost double my stride. We stop at the elevators behind the men from Prince, Dune & Bellows, who turn around to look at us.

“I’ll pick you up after work, baby,” he says loudly enough for them to hear, then before I can respond, he grabs the back of my neck, pulling me in for a scorching kiss. I’m not sure if I’m too stunned or too lost in it to be mad at him for making such an overt display in front of everyone. I don’t get a chance to protest before he’s breaking the kiss and stepping into the elevator, tossing me a sexy wink right before the doors close.

ALEX

I didn't need to lay it on that thick, but I wasn't going to pass up the chance to taste her lips again.

"Can you believe that bitch?" The short man in front of me turns to one of the others, who rolls his eyes.

"She'll get what's coming to her," he responds.

I take the opportunity to reach through the three men, hitting the red STOP button and bringing the elevator to an immediate halt.

"Hey—what the fuck?" The tallest guy goes to turn around, but I grab his tie, wrapping it around my fist and tugging it until he's on his toes.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," I say to the short one as he lunges toward me. I open my jacket to show my holster, and he freezes.

"Who the fuck are you?" he chokes out as the two other men cower in the corner.

"Who I am isn't important, but what is important is that you three understand exactly what I'm capable of.

"What is this? Some kind of low-level intimidation tactic? I'll call the New York State Bar right now and have this entire

law firm ruined.” The short one’s cherub cheeks are almost purple as he spits his words at me, making me laugh.

“Not quite, boys.” I release the tall one’s tie and he stumbles backward into the other two in the corner. “I don’t work for this law firm. In fact, I have zero association with them whatsoever, unlike the goons you’ve sent after Miss Pierce. If you think sending her some threatening messages or slashing her tires is going to do a single thing besides piss me off and make your life hell, you’re seriously mistaken.”

“We have no idea what you’re referring to, but I can guarantee you’ll pay for this.”

The alarm rings out and I hit the button, jolting the elevator back to life.

“That’s where you’re mistaken.” I readjust my suit coat, buttoning it as the doors open to the lobby. “If anyone is going to pay, gentlemen, it’s you ... and I can promise you, I’ll make sure your debt is paid in full, with your lives.”

“Is that a threat?”

I smile. “I don’t make threats; it’s a promise.”

I STAND in the lobby of Juliette’s office building, waiting for her to exit the elevator. When I see her, I feel my breath catch in my chest. It’s almost like every time I’m away from her, I forget how stunningly beautiful she is.

Her eyes meet mine and she walks straight toward me, her hips swiveling slightly with each step. It takes everything within me not to grab her and pull her toward me, kissing her so everyone in this building knows not to look twice at her.

But the second that thought enters my head, I remind myself that that's is not what this is about. I'm caught up in lust—in desire—nothing more. There's no room for exclusive relationships and emotions in my life or my heart.

“Still in the suit?” She gives me a coy grin.

“You like it?” I step toward her, my hand instinctively coming out to rest on her hip as she stops in front of me. I might have kept it on for this exact reason. I saw the way she looked at me in her office earlier today.

“It's okay.” She shrugs. “You clean up nice. How's Chloe?”

“Thanks. She's fine; Luka's been checking in with me.” I look down at her for a second, her eyes staring at me like she trusts me—like she's fighting something. I reach up and stroke her cheek. “It's going to be okay. Let's head out.” I keep my hand on her lower back as I usher her out of the building toward my car. I open the passenger-side door, guiding her into the car before climbing in the driver's side. “I know you already said no, but the safe house discussion isn't over.” I pull the car into traffic.

“What do you mean not over? I can't go into hiding, Alex. I have to do my job, and I can't do everything remotely. I told you if my bosses find out I'm being threatened, they'll pull me from the case. I need to do this. I need to *prove* that I can do this.”

I can see the stress in her eyes and hear the strain in her voice. I know she wants to prove herself to this new firm. I get it. But the risk is too great if we don't do something more.

“Juliette, I understand. I know how important this case is to you and I don't want you to be removed from it. I know

these people need you, but we have to come to a compromise. Clearly, whoever is threatening you is following you. We already know they know where you live, and while they understand I'm protecting you, I might not be able to get there fast enough if they somehow get inside your home and I'm parked across the street."

"What are you suggesting?" She turns slightly toward me in her seat as I pull onto her street. I give Luka a wave and he starts his car, pulling away.

"I move in," I say, putting the car in park.

"Yeah, okay," she laughs, but just as quickly, she realizes I'm not joking. "No, no way."

"Then what, Juliette? I'm getting really fucking tired of you making my job so goddamn hard!" She jumps when I raise my voice, but I'm done fighting with her on this issue. "Chloe can handle the truth, or at least a watered-down version of it. Hell, even if she can't, she needs to know, for her own safety. You can't choose this life—this job—and then bury your head in the fucking sand."

Her eyes fill with tears as she flings the car door open. She steps out and slams the door. I jump out after her, reaching forward and grabbing her arm before she can cross the street.

"Let go of me!" She jerks her arm, but I tug her backward till she's up against my car.

"Stop it!" I shout, placing my hands on either side of her body. "You don't get to call the shots in this situation. I've been far too accommodating, Juliette, but that ends right now. Do you understand me?"

"You think I don't know or understand the concerns with Chloe? I'm her mother, so I have to live with that fear every

single day!”

“Then let me do something about it. Stop acting like this is all just going to go away when you know damn well it won’t. You saw how those men reacted in your meeting today, and while I wasn’t in there, I can tell you for damn sure that after being in an elevator with them, they won’t hesitate to annihilate any problems they think are standing in their way. I’m done asking, because clearly you’re never going to make the right decision for you and your daughter.”

She scowls. “I am not a child, Alex.”

“Then stop acting like one.” Her eyes grow wide then quickly narrow to slits.

“You’re a bastard, you know that? Try having empathy for one damn second.” I look down at her hand as she uncurls her fingers.

“Are you going to slap me again?” I cock my head to the side, goading her. It’s fucked up, but she’s pushing my buttons.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“I can promise that if you slap me again, I’ll make sure you never do it again. I don’t care if we’re in the middle of the fucking street, I will have you bent over my knee learning a very painful lesson.” Her pupils dilate; she likes this. I step forward again, pressing my body against hers. “Do we have an understanding, Juliette?”

“Yes.” She says the word through clenched teeth.

“Good. Now,” I place my hand against her neck, my thumb perched beneath her chin, “I’ll give you until tonight to talk to Chloe about it. If I have to, I’ll sleep on your porch, although I’d rather sleep inside.”

“There’s a guest bedroom. I’ll have it ready,” she responds coldly, her eyes staring right past me.

“Thank you.” I pause, waiting for her gaze to soften, but it doesn’t. I run my thumb against her jaw, up and over her lips. I lean in a few inches, so tempted to fully close the distance and kiss her. I know she’s angry at me, and I know she’s hurting, but I want to make her feel better. I want to take it all away. I pause, our lips so close before pulling back. “I’ll see you tonight.” I step aside, letting her go.

I LET OUT a long exhale before ringing the doorbell at Juliette’s townhome.

“What? You suddenly decided to develop some manners?” Her scowl from earlier today hasn’t dissipated.

“I didn’t think it would be appropriate or welcome to just barge in. Should I have?” I smile at her, knowing it’s probably only going to make things worse.

“Come in. I’ll show you to the spare room.” She steps aside and I follow her through the entryway, to the stairs.

“Smells good in here.”

“We already had dinner. There are leftovers in the fridge if you want them.”

I follow her up to the second level, her heels softly clicking on the wooden stairs. As we walk, I notice the way her dress sways beautifully across her hips and ass when she moves. I grip the handle of my duffel bag tighter, averting my gaze.

“This is Chloe’s room,” she says, pointing to a closed door. “She’s currently working on homework.” We walk the opposite direction of where I know her bedroom is, toward the end of the hallway. “And this is the guest bedroom.” She reaches into the room and flicks on the light. “There’s an en suite bathroom as well.”

I step into the room. It’s large for a guest bedroom, but then again, I shouldn’t be surprised considering the home it’s in. It looks like a high-end hotel room, with shades of beige, white, and black coordinating with the black and gold accents of the furniture.

“Thank you,” I say, putting my bag on the floor and turning to where she’s standing at the edge of the room.

“Did I really have a choice?”

“No.” I don’t lie. “I’m sorry I raised my voice with you today. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s fine,” she says quickly, her arms crossing over her chest as if she’s guarding herself. “I’m going to get Chloe to bed. There are extra towels and sheets in the linen closet,” she says, pointing toward a narrow door next to the bathroom.

“Don’t be angry with me, Juliette.”

She stops halfway, still turned away from me. “I’m not angry at *you*, Alex. I’m angry at this—at the situation.”

I want to stop her—to tell her I understand and to hold her—but I let her go. I can’t always try to fix everything for her or make her feel better. That’s not my job. My job is to protect her and Chloe and keep them safe.

I take my time putting my things away, but it still only takes me 10 minutes. I contemplate turning on the TV that’s mounted on the wall, but decide against it, opting instead to set

my laptop up on the desk and get some work done. By the time I take a shower and crawl into bed, my mind is completely overrun with thoughts of Juliette lying in bed just a few steps from my door. I went through hell during my time in the military, but this ... this is torture.

I don't set an alarm, instead waking to the sun peeking through my blinds at 5:30 a.m. I toss off the covers, stretching and pulling on a shirt and pants before heading downstairs to make coffee.

"Where the hell ... ?" I mutter to myself and open and close at least half a dozen cabinets, looking not only for coffee, but also for the coffee maker.

"It's over here." I turn around to see Chloe opening the front of a wooden cabinet to the left of the fridge. "It's a Nespresso, so there are pods." She opens the drawer beneath the counter to reveal dozens of pods in different colors.

"Fancy," I say, walking over.

"Pick a pod," she says, looking up at me.

"Uh ..." I pick up a few, attempting to read the Italian names, but it doesn't help. "This one looks good," I say, holding it out toward Chloe, who takes it, opens the machine, and places the pod inside.

"Then you just hit this button."

"Thank you. Are you a coffee drinker too?" I smile at her and she returns the gesture.

"Only on the weekends. Mom says I can't during the week, but she lets me have one cup on Saturday mornings. She also usually makes me breakfast." She stares at me.

“Oh,” I say, glancing around the kitchen, “what time does she normally get up?”

She shrugs. “I dunno. I’m not usually up too much before her, but I couldn’t sleep. I was excited you were here. Mom told me you were staying with us for a while to help out with her job.”

“Well, I’m excited to be here too, Chloe. How about I find us something to eat? Do you like pancakes?”

She gives me a questioning look. “You can make pancakes but you can’t make coffee?”

It makes me laugh. “I can, in fact, make the fluffiest, most delicious pancakes you’ve ever had. After I’ve had a few sips of my coffee.” I wink before grabbing my mug and taking a drink.

“Eww, you drink it black?” She makes a gagging noise. “We have a milk frother and flavored syrups, you know.”

“Nah, I’m not one for the fancy stuff. Just black.” I step over to the fridge and pull out some milk, eggs, and butter, then find the dry ingredients for the pancakes.

“I’ll show you where the pans are if you let me help,” she says.

“Of course. Who else is going to mix the ingredients?”

She grabs a small stool from the pantry and brings it over to the counter next to me. It’s only now that I’m realizing how small she really is. I don’t know much about 10-year-olds, but if I had to guess, she’s probably on the shorter side. It probably comes from her petite mother. She helps me crack the eggs and mix the batter until the pan is hot.

“Okay, just a quarter cup of batter per pancake. And do you know the rule about when to flip?”

“Not until little bubbles form on the top.”

“Exactly,” I say, holding up my hand for a high five.

We chat while we cook the pancakes, and she tells me about how excited she is for her first day of fifth grade on Monday, and how she’s beyond ready to be out of elementary school and into middle school.

“Mom says the first pancake is the tester,” she says, taking a bite of it before holding it out toward me. I take a bite and we both agree that I was right: These are by far the best pancakes.

“Lately, I’ve really been sad about being an only child,” Chloe says completely unprompted as I take a big bite of my pancakes.

“Oh?” I nod, chewing slowly before choking down the bite. I am completely out of my element here. I don’t know how to answer that. I don’t know if she’s had this conversation with her mother ... not to mention, if her mother *wants* more kids, if she can *have* more kids. “I had a brother.” I had no intention of bringing Zane up, but in the moment, it seemed like the only safe bet.

“Had? What happened to him?” She’s a bright kid—doesn’t let anything slip by.

I’m about to answer when Juliette’s voice startles me.

“Chloe? What are you doing?” She rushes over to where we’re seated at the island eating our breakfast.

“We made pancakes,” she says happily. “Try them; they’re so good,” she continues, holding out a forkful toward her

mother, who scowls.

“No, thank you, sweetie. Are you finished? Why don’t you run upstairs and take a shower? You have your class at the library later this morning.”

I don’t have to be a genius to see that Juliette is not happy. I had hoped that things would be better this morning, but maybe I overstepped my welcome by making pancakes.

“Sorry,” I say, standing up. “I’ll clean things up and let you two get on with your day.” I grab my plate and walk over to the sink as Chloe finishes up her last few bites.

“Please don’t just leave everything in the sink.”

“Mom, don’t be mean to him.”

I have to physically bite the inside of my cheek as I wash off my plate.

“I wasn’t being mean, sweetie, I just want him to be clear on how we do things around here. After meals, dishes are put into the dishwasher and run.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say with a nod before putting the dishes in the dishwasher. I take Chloe’s plate when she’s done and repeat the process as she runs out of the kitchen and upstairs.

“I don’t know what you think this is, but it’s not *this*.” I turn around and the scowl is back on Juliette’s face. “We aren’t playing house. I don’t want my daughter thinking you’re her new normal, because when you leave—hopefully soon—it will just be confusing to her.”

I lean against the counter, crossing one ankle over the other. “And how should I go about this, Juliette? I turned around this morning and Chloe was standing there. I’m sorry if I overstepped a boundary by making her breakfast. I can avoid

doing that again, but how am I supposed to handle a little 10-year-old girl talking to me? Should I just ignore her? Tell her to go away?" She might think I'm being an ass, but it's a legitimate question.

She opens her mouth to respond then snaps it shut. "I don't know," she finally says, pulling her robe tighter against her body. "I just don't want her getting hurt in all this."

"And she won't," I say, stepping toward her. "I meant it when I said I'm not like the other men in your life. I'm not here to trick her or you. I'm not pretending I'll be around forever. She's a kid who has a lot of questions, and I don't mind answering them for her if I have an answer. Just be honest with her. After all, she knows Luka and Jimmy. Just tell her I'll be around for a little while. She's old enough to understand we aren't a couple."

She nods her head. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Why do I always feel like you're not saying what you actually want to say? Whenever we have these conversations, you shut down. Tell me what you really think."

"I don't know what to think, Alex. This situation isn't exactly normal, so I apparently have no idea how to handle it. I feel like a bad mom—like I can't protect my own daughter—and at the same time, I'm clearly completely unaware of what's best for her." Her chin starts to quiver and I close the distance between us, pulling her into my chest as I wrap my arms around her.

"You're the furthest thing from a bad mother. You are in a situation most mothers will never be in, and you're doing the best you can, so don't sell yourself short." I pull back, cupping her face with my hands. "I'm sorry if I contributed to that

feeling. I know I was harsh the other day and said some things I probably shouldn't have."

"Thank you. I'm okay, I promise. I'm not mad about that."

We stand there for a moment, neither of us talking as my hands glide down from her face to her waist. I can feel the tension building again. This woman does things to me ... it's like she's unknowingly cast a spell on me, and no matter how much I try to talk sense and reason into myself, I'm ready to risk it all just to hold her.

"*Don't*," she says softly, her hands coming to rest against my chest as I lean forward.

"Don't what?" My lips hover over hers, my fingers curling into her waist. "Don't make you feel good like I did the last time you were on this counter?" I move my lips to her neck, dragging them slowly upward till I reach her ear. "Do you ever think about that, Juliette? The way your body quivered beneath my touch? The way you soaked my fingers when they were inside you? The way you came on my tongue?"

Her fingers curl against my chest, her breath growing more rapid. I bring my hand up her silk robe, pulling gently on the belt until it falls slightly open. I look down at her body, which is clad in a sheer lavender bra with small flowers and matching panties.

"Mmm, you've got pretty nipples." I run my thumb over one and it responds immediately.

"We can't," she says a little breathlessly before grabbing her robe and tying it again.

"Can't ... or shouldn't?" I ask, stopping her from moving past me.

"Both."

I tip her chin upward. “Is that why you look at me the way you do?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Her eyes shift away from mine.

“Yes, you do. Look at me, Juliette.” I stare into her eyes then lean in closer. “There’s no shame in wanting something. I know I’m not your typical type, but I can promise I would fuck you like no man ever has before.”

I leave her standing breathless in the kitchen as I head upstairs, ready to lose my fucking mind.

JULIETTE

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, for sure.” I look over at Harper. “Why?”

“You look a little ... distracted,” she says as we finish setting up snacks to go with our wine.

“Just work.” I shrug, but for once, it’s actually not work.

“Oh my God.” We both look at each other when we hear Blaire’s voice echo throughout the entryway, followed by the slamming of the front door. “I am so sorry I’m late. Traffic was such a bitch and work has been a nightmare, but I’m here and I came prepared!” She holds up two bottles of wine as she rounds the corner into the kitchen. “There’s also chocolate in this bag on my wrist.”

“Don’t worry,” I say, lifting my glass of rosé, “we already started without you.”

“Bitches,” she laughs then glances around my kitchen. “Wait, where’s Aspen? Don’t tell me she’s bailing again?”

Harper shakes her head. “She’s picking up dinner; she’ll be here soon.”

“Yay, finally a girls’ night and we’re all together!” Blaire squeals before grabbing a glass of wine. “Fill me in on all the gossip.”

“Nothing to spill.” I smile.

“So she says.” Harper rolls her eyes. “I was just asking her what’s up because she seems so distracted.”

“And like I said, nothing.”

“You mean nothing apart from Alex Rockwell living with you?” Blaire asks before popping a grape into her mouth. “How’s that going, by the way?”

I told the girls the day after Alex moved in about how things had escalated. While they all agreed it was for the best, they immediately jumped into teasing me about him.

“It’s been a long week.” I offer up a halfhearted smile. “But we’re all adjusting fine. Chloe tries to corner him any chance she gets to talk about his job, but honestly, we barely see him any more than we did before.”

While it has been a long week of adjusting to someone living in my home, it hasn’t been as awkward as I thought it would be. In fact, I barely see him. He’s out of the house before I’m up and doesn’t come back inside until late. Really not much has changed: He still stays camped in his car, walks the block, and is generally a ghost. The only real struggle for me is knowing he’s sleeping just down the hall after telling me he would fuck me better than any man ever has.

“And how’s the case going?” Harper asks.

“Good. They came to us with a bullshit offer, which we obviously turned down. We countered with one that they laughed off, and now we’re still trying to work through negotiations. I’ve recently come into contact with a witness who is finally ready to come forward. We’ve been trying to get them to do that from the jump, but they’ve been hesitant considering who their employer is. Anyway, they have some

pretty rock-solid proof: recorded conversations and meetings between the victims and HR that apparently the company denied ever happened. It's the kind of information that could completely sink their defense."

"Oh, damn. Wow. I'm guessing this will change the direction of the case?"

I nod at Blaire. "Yes, 100 percent, as long as we can get their sworn testimony recorded. My biggest fear is if Delmore finds out they're going to testify and gets to them first." I can feel the tension in my neck and jaw growing again. "Sorry, I don't want to talk work tonight. I want to hear what's going on with you guys."

"Just lots of toddler stuff." Harper smiles. "It's so fun, but my God, it's exhausting."

"Oh yes, I remember those days." I laugh.

"Any thoughts about doing it again?" Blaire crooks an eyebrow at me.

"Me? What about you? You haven't even had one yet." I take a sip of my wine. "I have thought about it. I don't want Chloe to be an only child, but I also don't want to do it just for the sake of having another child. I learned a hard lesson with Caleb about choosing wisely."

"True," Blaire says. "And Jimmy and I are still too infatuated with each other to think about babies." She looks over at Harper. "Close your ears if you don't want to be scared, but also, that man wears me out. I don't think I'd have the energy to care for a child. Like last night, he had me up till almost 1 a.m., and then this morning he was ready for more."

Harper's face is scrunched tight as she guzzles her wine. "I'm about to drop out of this friend group entirely if I have to

hear one more comment about my brother's sex life." She gives a dramatic shudder. "But I can tell you from personal experience with a very *energetic* husband and a toddler, it's beyond exhausting. I'm on the pill, but I swear this man is trying to get me pregnant again already."

While I'm beyond happy my friends not only have loving husbands, but also extremely fulfilling sex lives, I'm also wildly jealous. It's been more than two years now since I've felt a man's body on mine, and I'm about a month away from full-on losing it. I've told myself a thousand times to give in to Alex—to let it just be a fun experience that ends when this is all over—but I've never been intimate with someone I wasn't in a relationship with. I've always been that committed-relationship kind of girl, and the thought of just hooking up for fun scares me. Am I too old for that now?

"Hey, before Aspen gets here," I say, changing the subject, "have you guys talked to her lately? We had lunch a while back, and she seems quieter than normal. I know she's the more reserved one in our friend group, but she seems off."

"I agree." Blair nods. "I talked to her just a few days ago and it felt like she was somewhere else the entire time. I know she's super busy with her new job, and that's what she chalked it up to, but it still has me a little worried."

"She always was the one with the potential to become more of a hermit out of all of us, but it does concern me that she seems to be less inclined to hang out or even go to a Pilates class or grab coffee," Harper says. "I've invited her out probably three or four times over the last month, and she's always too tired or too busy."

"Maybe she has a secret boyfriend who's taking up all of her time and energy?" I wriggle my eyebrows and Harper and

Blaire's faces light up just as we hear Aspen come through the front door.

We spend the next few hours eating dinner and catching up. Chloe eats with us and fills us all in on her first week of school. After dinner, she heads upstairs to read and we end up putting on some music and sipping on wine as we enjoy the assorted chocolates that Blaire brought over.

"Oh, oh, I have one!" Harper says, waving her hand for us to quiet down. "Never have I ever had a one-night stand." She glances around the room as everyone drinks except me. "Seriously? Even Aspen has." She laughs and Aspen shrugs.

"That is kind of crazy and out of character for me, I know." Aspen smiles. "But I was once a little wild in college." She giggles.

"Pardon the interruption, ladies." Alex's deep voice startles us and we all turn to see him standing in the doorway of the living room. "Can I borrow you for a moment?" he says, looking over at me.

"Yeah, sure," I say, placing my glass down and getting off the couch to walk over to him. He ushers me into the kitchen, away from the ladies.

"Sorry, I'll be upstairs for the rest of the night. Just wanted to let you know in case you needed anything. One other thing: When they leave for the night, can you let me know so I can do one more check of the property?"

"Yeah, you sure you don't want to join us for a game of *Never Have I Ever*?" For some weird reason, it felt right to invite him to join us. I can feel myself smiling broadly ... must be the wine.

“As tempting as that is,” he says in that low, deep voice, “I’ll let you ladies carry on.” He turns to walk toward the stairs. “You never having a one-night stand does explain a lot.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that maybe if you relaxed—lived a little—you might be a little less uptight.” He winks at me then bounds up the stairs before I can form a comeback.

“Anyway, ladies, where were we?” I ask as I refill my glass.

By the time everyone leaves, it’s almost 10:30, and I can’t stifle my yawns any longer. We say our goodbyes and I knock softly on Chloe’s door.

“Hey, Mom,” she smiles, closing her book. “You have fun tonight?”

“I did, sweetie. You could have come downstairs; you didn’t have to hide out up here reading all night.” I brush her hair away from her face and plant a kiss on her forehead.

“Please, Mom, you know that I’d hide up here and read all day if you’d let me.”

“I know, baby.” I take a few seconds to look at her, my heart so full every time I see her smiling back at me. I have to stop myself from going down the path of *how the hell could anyone walk away from her?* before I start crying and make her upset. “Okay, you’ve stayed up late enough, even for the weekend.” I reach over and turn off her bedside lamp, her small wall nightlight illuminating the room just enough. “Good night, Chloe. I love you.”

“Love you too, Mom,” she says, grabbing her favorite stuffed bear and rolling away from me as I close her bedroom door.

I see that Alex's door is open an inch, and I walk over and knock on it, which pushes it open a little wider. I can see a light is on, but he doesn't answer.

"Alex?" I knock again, pushing the door open as I step inside. "Oh, sorry!" I quickly avert my gaze for a second when he rounds the corner out of his bathroom, draped in nothing but a low-slung towel.

"No need to apologize." He smiles.

"I, um, I was just going to tell you that everyone has left." I lift my eyes up to glance at him ... only, I can't look away. His body is ridiculous. His abs have more lines than I thought possible, and his pecs are firm and defined. I could feel them beneath his shirt, but *holy shit*, this is next-level sexy.

"See something you like?"

He runs his hands through his dark, wet hair, a few beads of water running down his neck and over his chest. I wish I could say *no*, but the way the towel is barely clinging to his hips, accentuating that deep V right down to his ...

"Juliette?"

"Huh?" I snap my gaze upward, my mouth probably hanging open with drool running down my chin. "I'm wet—you're wet!" I say in embarrassment, my face instantly on fire. "I need to take a shower," I say quickly before darting out of the room and walking to my bedroom, shutting the door behind me. "Oh God." I hang my head in my hands.

I spend twice as long in the shower, trying to scrub what just happened from my memory, but the image of Alex in a towel refuses to be washed away. I've always been attracted to preppy types—the guys who played tennis in college and were on the debate team. The ones who wore pastel polos and

talked about who would be running Fortune 500 companies someday.

But I didn't come from that world. I came from a single father who was an alcoholic and could barely feed himself, let alone me, most days. Maybe it was my desire to fit in—this idea that I had to prove myself and fit into that world. That's what Caleb was: rich. He came from a wealthy family, but still ended up an alcoholic asshole just like my dad.

When I met Josh after Caleb and I split, I thought he was different. But he ended up being the same as all those guys from college: obsessed with his image and money. Then when he decided I didn't fit into that mold, he was done with me. I can't tell if that was my fault, or if my obsession with work and trying to fit in completely destroyed my ability to actually enjoy the life I'd built. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to stop fixating on everything that's gone wrong in my life—all the ways I've failed—and just allow myself to be happy that I'm finally doing something to help others.

I shut off the shower, stepping out and wrapping the towel around my body. I take my time, indulging in my skincare routine and lathering my body with oil and lotion before brushing my hair. I slip on a pair of panties and a silk camisole, wanting to feel the cool sheets against my body. I exit my bathroom, and sitting on the end of my bed in nothing but pajama bottoms is Alex.

“What are you doing?” I ask as I walk toward him. He doesn't respond. He just reaches for my hand, pulling me toward him until I'm standing between his legs. He looks up at me, his hands gliding up my thighs to my waist.

“Tell me you don't want this,” he says.

I'm frozen in front of him. He slowly stands up, towering over me as he moves one hand from my waist to my neck. His fingers wrap around it, sliding halfway up into my hair as he tilts my head and brings his lips to mine. The kiss is soft and deep, and his tongue sweeps into my mouth once, twice, then he sucks on it. My toes curl into the carpet as goosebumps break out across my skin.

"Wait," I say, pushing against him, "what about the rules?"

"Fuck the rules, baby." He pulls me to him again, and this time his tongue slides deep into my mouth.

"You just want me because you can't have me." I step back. Yes, I want this, but even though I know there's no future here, I don't like feeling as if I'm just something to conquer. "I know you're used to getting what you want. I imagine most women don't say *no* to you, but I am."

"Sweetheart, I enjoy the chase as much as the next guy, but I don't want you because I can't have you. I want you because I can't think of anything else besides fucking you, tasting you, kissing you, making you come." He brushes my wet hair back off of my shoulder. "If all I wanted was to have you once, I would have taken you that day on your counter. You're the one who's too scared to go after what you want. You always do what you think people expect of you—what you think is the right thing to do—and where has that gotten you?"

I stare at him. He's right: I do want him. I want to lose myself in him, even if it's only for one night, and forget about all the things I should be doing. I want to know what it's like to let a man take control of my body and please me without thoughts of tomorrow. A sense of freedom settles over me when I realize I have that power in this situation. I can let go

—let myself enjoy tonight for exactly what it is, and nothing more.

“Or maybe,” I smirk, “this is all part of your game because you *do* like the chase. You like the feeling of conquering a woman after she’s said *no*.”

He smiles, only it’s not charming or cute, it’s devilish. “So then tell me, Juliette,” he says as he tightens his grip on my neck, his fingers wrapping around to almost touch the front of my throat, “are you telling me *no*, or are you telling me no?”

I see the game he’s playing. I feel my buttoned-up, uptight exterior start to melt away, and suddenly, all those desires I’ve had over the years to be bad—to be whatever I want to be—won’t be pushed down any further.

“I’m telling you that I think: that if given the chance, you want to ruin me for any other man in my life.”

His smile broadens, and his eyes grow darker as he leans in, his grip tightening a centimeter more. “You have no idea just how right you are, Juliette. I’m going to spend the next several hours showing you exactly all the ways I’ve fantasized about defiling you, and when I’m done, you’re going to beg me to do it all over again.”

“Is that right? And what about protection?”

He reaches into his pocket, pulling out a handful of condoms and tossing them onto the bed, making me laugh.

“On your knees, Miss Pierce. I think it’s time you learn exactly who’s in charge.” He presses against my shoulders, guiding me down to my knees. His pants are starting to tent, right at my mouth level.

“Let me guess, you want me to call you ‘Mr. Rockwell’?”

He smiles, reaching inside his pants to free himself. I can't hide the way my eyes bug out when I see his size—not just the length but the girth. He's thick, veins running down his shaft to his perfectly-shaped tip. He places himself right at my lips.

“It's going to be hard to call me anything with my cock down your throat.”

ALEX

This sight would be worth losing a year off my life. I run the tip of my cock over Juliette's plump bottom lip, a shiver running through my body at the way it teases the underside of my head.

"Look at me." I pause my movements, reaching out to hold her chin. "You can be whoever you want with everyone else. You can stay uptight and rigid, being whoever they think you should be, but with me, in here, let your guard down. Just let yourself feel and enjoy it, baby. There's no judgment."

Her eyes move back and forth slightly. "And what makes you think I want to be on my knees before you?"

I smile. "Because if you didn't, there's no way you'd let me put you there. You're a take-charge kind of woman, always calling the shots. I think you want a man like me to take over, to push your boundaries. Don't you?" She doesn't respond, so I tighten my grip on her chin. "*Don't you?*"

"Maybe." She wants to let go, but I can tell it's hard for her.

"Open your mouth." I command, and her lips part. "Ohhh yesss," I hiss the words as I slide my cock past her lips, into her mouth where the warmth and wetness of her tongue slide

over me. “Just like that, baby.” I can barely contain myself as I slowly ease myself back out and slide in deeper.

My head falls back, my hands tangling in her hair as I start to pump my hips in time with her head bobbing up and down my length. I push deeper this time, making her gag for a second before she lightly touches my shaft with her teeth.

“Shit.” I snap my head up then look down at her, a devious look in her eyes. “Hey,” I tighten my grip on her hair, “be a good girl.” I narrow my gaze at her before picking up my pace again. I’m seconds away from coming. My balls tighten, my chest feels like it’s on fire, and right before I come, she sits back on her feet, my cock falling from her lips. “The fuck?” I groan, my chest heaving as I stare down at her.

“Maybe I don’t want to completely give up control.” She shrugs.

“Or maybe,” I say, reaching down to grab her and pull her to her feet, “you just want me to force you into submission.”

I pull my pants back up before sliding my hand back into her hair as my other hand finds her panties, pulling them to the side so my finger can slip between her folds.

“Ahh.” Her little moan tells me everything I need to know, along with how wet she is.

“You do like being told what to do, don’t you? Is that your little kink, sweetheart? You want a man to handle you a little roughly?”

Her eyes are heavy-lidded, her mouth hanging open as I start to slide my fingers in and out of her dripping pussy. “Please don’t stop,” she pants. I have no intention of stopping. I grip her hair tightly, watching as she falls apart in my arms.

“You look absolutely breathtaking when you come.” I lean in, kissing her pillowy-soft lips as she rides out her orgasm. “I want to taste your sweet cunt again.” I pull my fingers from her, licking them clean. “But first, I want you naked.” I pull her tank top from her body, tossing it to the floor before sliding her panties down her thighs and pushing her back onto the bed.

Her still-half-damp hair is fanned out around her, and the outline of her perfect hourglass body against her sheets looks erotic and artistic at the same time.

“Not to sound cliché,” I say, placing my knee on the bed as I run my hands up her legs to her knees, where I press them apart, “but your body looks like it was made to be touched and pleased. Like you were built to be fucked, baby.” I drag my hands down her inner thighs, spreading her wide—her pink pussy glistening in the moonlight, begging me to taste it. I don’t hesitate. I lean in, dragging my tongue over her as she lets out a long, low moan. My tongue dances over her clit, then I slide it deep inside her, the taste of her soaking my tongue. I could stay trapped in her for hours, devouring her.

“Right there,” she pants, her hands tangling in my hair, pushing my face harder against her as she begins to tremble, her thighs squeezing against my shoulders as she comes. Pleasure rolls through her like waves, her body convulsing with each one.

“You are so responsive to my touch.” I drag my fingers over her, toying with her a few more seconds. “Have you always been that way?”

“I—” she hesitates, “I don’t think so.”

“In that case,” I say, pulling off my pants, my cock springing free, “let’s see how you respond to my cock inside

you.” I reach for one of the condoms, tearing it open with my teeth and sliding it down my length.

She props herself up on her elbows as I align myself with her entrance, sliding my head up and down her slit. “Oh fuck,” I groan, not even a centimeter inside her, “I might not last too long the first time, baby. You’ve got me so worked up.”

“The fi—first ti—time?” She stumbles through her words as I inch further into her. Her question makes me chuckle.

“Oh, yes. You think with the sounds you make,” I grip her waist as my eyes roll back into my head when I slide in further, “and the way you look and respond, I won’t be rock hard for hours?” I pull out a little. “You’re going to take me several times.” I slide back in, this time over halfway inside her. “Fuuuuuuck.” My head falls forward and my hips start to move, taking over.

“Oh God,” she groans, her fingernails digging into my arms, “it hu—it hurts.”

“I’m sorry. Relax, baby, I’m not stopping. You’re gonna have to take it.” I slide all the way inside her, an animalistic moan coming from her chest as she arches off the bed. “Oh, yes, just like that. Open up for me.” I clench my jaw, my hips moving in long, deep strokes as my balls press against her ass when I’m fully inside her.

Her hands claw at my back, my hair, my chest. Her legs wrap around my waist as I slide in and out of her, looking down at the way her breasts sway with the movements.

“Your tits are perfect.” I lean down, sucking a nipple into my mouth and biting down on it until she hisses in pain. I turn to the other and repeat the process. “Has any man ever fucked

them? Marked you with his cum?” I squeeze one, leaning in to run my tongue up her neck.

“No.” She barely gets the word out, her hips coming off the bed to meet my thrusts.

“Good, I want to be the first.” I wrap my hand around the base of her neck, my pace quickening as I feel her walls begin to tighten around me. I’m trying so hard to hold off, but I’m seconds away from exploding. “Oh, fuck, I’m gonna come if you keep squeezing me like that. Goddamn, your pussy is so fucking tight.” I’m clenching my jaw, and I can’t hold back any longer. I shout a string of expletives as my entire body convulses with the most intense orgasm I think I’ve ever experienced. I continue pumping, reaching my thumb down to rub her clit, and a few seconds, later she’s right behind me.

When I finally come down and my eyes refocus, I stare down at her, both of us trying to catch our breath. Normally, this is when I roll off, toss the condom in the trash, and jump in the shower, but this ... this feels different. Her hands are in my hair, her eyes are heavy, her lips parted. I lean forward, kissing her softly. Her tongue dances with mine, her mouth devouring me like she can’t get close enough.

I feel confused. This was just missionary, yet so intense. Feeling her beneath me, watching her body move, seeing the way she looked at me, has my heart suddenly beating faster, my head swimming.

“I should ...” I don’t finish the sentence as I slowly remove myself from her body, pulling off the condom and taking it in the bathroom to throw away. I look at myself in the mirror for a second and see the red marks that run down my chest and arms from her nails. I trace them with my fingers, hoping they don’t fade so they’re a constant reminder of her. I

grab a washcloth and run it under warm water, trying to pretend like I didn't just have that thought.

When I come back to bed, she's propped up against the headboard, hugging a pillow, her hair still mussed.

"Allow me." I place the washcloth between her thighs.

"Oh."

"You okay?" I brush her hair away from her shoulder, leaning down to kiss it softly.

"Just a little sore."

"Mmm, is it fucked that I like that?" I bite her shoulder softly and she giggles. It sends a little dart straight to my heart.

"I wouldn't expect anything less." She smiles, looking over at me. I toss the washcloth onto her nightstand, pulling her toward me.

Within seconds, the kiss goes from soft to passionate. She climbs into my lap, our hands all over each other like we can't get enough. "You are absolutely perfect. The way you taste and smell, the curve of your hip," I trace my fingers over her thighs and hips, "to the dip of your waist. Mmm."

"Is this the line you say to all the women you bed?" She gives me that snarky look, but part of me wonders if there's more behind the question. Like even though she'll never admit it, she wants to be different from the rest, even if she acts like this is nothing more than a hookup.

"No," I say honestly, not breaking eye contact. "You are by far the most beautiful woman I've ever been with and the hottest fuck."

"Seems a little premature considering this was the first time."

“Sometimes,” I say, flipping her onto her back as I pin her hands above her head, “all it takes is one time, honey.”

“I’d take it as a compliment, but it certainly didn’t keep the last guy around.”

I furrow my brow. “Well, he was clearly a fucking idiot.” I hold both of her hands with one of mine, the other coming down to run over her body as I kiss her. “And who was this last guy?” I ask, although I really don’t love the idea of hearing about the last man she slept with while she’s in my arms.

“He was just a guy. We were together for a while and it didn’t work out. End of story.”

“Did you love him?”

She shrugs. “I think so.”

“Doesn’t sound very convincing. How long ago was this guy?”

She bites her bottom lip, rolling her eyes. “Two years ago, okay? It was two years ago.”

“Okay,” I laugh, not understanding her reaction ... then it hits me. “Wait, you—he was the last guy you ... ?” She nods, looking away from me. “It’s been two years since you’ve been laid?” I can’t hide the shock in my voice or on my face. “Oh, sweetheart,” I hang my head forward, resting it on her breasts, “that’s a crime, especially with this body—this pussy—fuck!”

“It’s not that dramatic,” she laughs. I let go of her hands, climbing off of her.

“In that case, I think we need to seriously make up for lost time.” I grab her, flipping her onto her belly and smacking her ass.

“Ow!” she yelps, looking back over her shoulder at me.

“On your hands and knees,” I command, grabbing her waist and helping her up. “I think we need to hit as many positions as possible tonight.” I reach for a condom, sliding it down my already-rigid cock as I slap it against her ass. “You ready for more?”

“I—” I don’t let her finish before I’m pushing myself deep inside her.

“Doesn’t matter, baby. You’re going to take this cock so deep, you’re going to be feeling me inside you for a week.” I grip her hips, pulling her back onto me hard. “This time, it’s about me.” I grunt. “Knowing I’m the man to make you come after this long ... oh, fuck yes.” I pump into her hard and fast, her headboard starting to knock against the wall as her fingers curl into the comforter.

I’m completely lost in her, the way her slender back muscles move as she struggles to stay upright with my movements. The way she looks back at me over her shoulder. I lean forward, gently grabbing a fistful of her hair so I can turn her face to kiss her. Instantly my movements slow. I stay inside her as I roll to my back, lifting her on top of me.

“Oh, God, yes.” Her head falls back, her hands cupping her breasts as she moves her hips back and forth. My fingers dig into the soft skin of her waist as I watch her abdomen muscles flex with her movements. Watching her is intoxicating, like I could be slowly poisoned by her beauty and not give a damn as I drew my last breath.

“Look at me.” My words are a plea. “I want to watch you come.”

Her head falls forward, her hands resting on my chest as she continues to ride me. Her movements are rhythmic, her breathing deep, her eyes half-closed with lust. I don't know what to think in this moment. I'm terrified. I'm lost. So I just feel instead.

"Alex." She says my name in a breath that sounds so heavenly. "I'm—I'm ..." She can't finish the sentence. Her nails dig into my chest so hard that I'm certain the marks won't fade this time.

"That's right, baby, let me feel you." Her body shakes as she rides out her orgasm, both of our bodies covered in a thin sheen of sweat.

I pull her down on me, my lips tasting hers again as I begin to thrust my hips upward. I've never connected with someone physically so well. It feels like our bodies are saying things—our lips are desperate for more of each other. When I finally come, she collapses on my chest.

I run my fingers softly over her back, feeling lost about what to say. I don't want to break the spell. I don't want her to move or get up. So instead, I do something even worse.

"Can I ask you something personal?"

"Considering you're still inside me," she smirks, "I'd say that question is a little redundant."

Her response makes me laugh. This right here proves that something is different. I can't remember the last time I held a woman after sex and laughed and talked to her with zero rush to end the night. Actually, that's not true. I can remember the last time ... it was with Sierra, back when I thought she was it: the love of my life and the mother of my future children.

"Sure, what's the question?"

“Is Chloe’s dad in the picture at all?” I can tell by her expression that she wasn’t expecting that question. I almost regret it when she slowly rolls off of me and grabs one of the oversized pillows to somewhat cover herself. “Sorry, none of my business.”

“No, it’s fine. He’s not in the picture, no. He was at first, but then he couldn’t be consistent and I didn’t want Chloe continuing to get hurt. So we moved to New York and now he’s not involved at all ... his own decision, by the way.”

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugs. “Nothing you did. It’s for the best, unfortunately.” We both sit in silence for a moment, then she looks over at me with a smile. “What about you? Who did this to you?”

“Who did this?” I laugh.

“Oh, please. Don’t act as if a man who looks like you with your background just chooses to be a jaded playboy.” She says the last part cynically.

“A man who looks like me?” I crook my eyebrow at her seductively and she rolls her eyes. “You really can’t stand that you find me attractive, can you?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. It’s written all over your face, your reactions, comments.”

“Well, clearly I’m not hiding it. I mean, with what’s transpired over the last two hours, I think it’s pretty obvious I find you attractive.” She fiddles with the edge of the pillowcase, refusing to look at me. “And don’t fish for compliments. You know most women find you attractive.”

“Mmm, maybe I don’t care about most women.” I mean the words, but I didn’t mean to say them out loud. Her fingers stop playing with the material and she slowly looks up at me.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

I reach out and cup her cheek, hoping I’ve dodged the question, but I guess not. “Just your typical boy-meets-girl-and-falls-in-love story with a girl-falls-out-of-love-and-breaks-boy’s-heart ending. Nothing special.” I smile.

“And now you’re just a brokenhearted Casanova, huh?” She pokes at my ribs, laughing, and I grab her hand.

“I think this rumor about my playboy ways is greatly exaggerated.”

“Oh, please. A month ago, you said it had been six weeks since the last time you had sex, and we both know between then and now, you were with someone.”

I can’t tell where this conversation is going—if once again, she’s trying to find out if there’s someone else I’m sleeping with or if she’s genuinely just teasing me. Maybe it’s that I want her to be jealous. I want her to want me to only be with her.

“For the record, I haven’t been with anyone else since that comment, and the woman I had been with wasn’t just a random person; she was more of a standing arrangement. Just because I have regular sex doesn’t mean it’s with a bunch of random women. It just means there are arrangements in place—an agreement between me and the person that it’s nothing more than what it is: sex.”

“Well, for the record, I’m not an arrangement.”

“I’m not asking you to be.” Before the conversation derails or she tells me she regrets this already, I pull her toward me,

pressing my lips to hers and losing myself in our kiss.

By the time we've finished another two rounds of intense orgasms, she's practically crawling into my arms and falling asleep. Her back is to me, her breathing deep and rhythmic as I wrap my body around hers.

I know this is dangerous territory. I don't do this. I close my eyes briefly, contemplating giving in and allowing myself to fall asleep with her in my arms, but at the last second, I decide against it. I slowly slide my arm out from under her without disturbing her, pulling the blankets up over her shoulders and kissing her forehead softly before putting on my pants and tiptoeing out of her bedroom.

For as much as I tell myself it's because I don't want to confuse her, it's because I don't want to confuse myself.

JULIETTE

“M om?”

My eyes fly open in a panic and I grip the sheet that’s covering my body. I slowly roll to the side, relief washing over me when I see the empty half of the bed.

“Good morning, sweetie.” I smile at Chloe, who’s standing in my doorway and already dressed in her favorite jeans and an *Empire Strikes Back* T-shirt. “I guess I forgot to set my alarm.”

“It’s still early. I just wanted to see if you wanted French toast?”

“Oh,” I rub my eyes, glancing around the room to make sure there’s nothing incriminating lying around. “Sure, sweetie. I’ll get dressed and be down in a minute to make it.”

“Actually, Alex already made it.” She smiles. “Well, I helped too. Anyway, he’s not done making it, so it’s still warm.”

“Okay, I’ll be right there.” She leaves my room and I pull back the sheets, immediately feeling the results of last night. My hand shoots between my thighs as I gingerly walk to my bathroom and flip on the shower. I don’t wash my hair, keeping the shower short. I’m still not sure how I feel about

him making my daughter breakfast. I certainly don't want him thinking that just because we slept together, it means we're going to start acting differently with Chloe.

I slip on a pair of linen pants and a blouse, throwing my hair up into a ponytail and brushing my teeth before tiptoeing downstairs. I'm met with Chloe's high-pitched laughter. It makes my heart hurt—not with pain, but with happiness—hearing her so relaxed and carefree, just being a kid. I pause outside the kitchen, poking my head around the door frame to see Alex singing into the spatula as he swivels his hips in a funny way, like he's impersonating Elvis. When he finishes the song, he grabs the spatula with both hands, whipping it back and forth and making lightsaber sounds.

“Luke,” Alex says in a deep voice between dramatic gasps, like Darth Vader, “I am your father.”

“That's not the line,” Chloe says with her hands on her hips, making me giggle quietly. Of course my kid would be combative about a *Star Wars* line. “It's ‘*No, I am your father.*’ Everyone just gets it wrong.”

“Well, shoot,” Alex says, dropping his hands down. “I guess I'll have to rewatch the movie just to make sure you aren't wrong.”

“Trust me, I'm not wrong. But if you're going to rewatch it, you have to watch all of them in order.” I step into the kitchen, and Chloe spins around. “Mom, can we have a *Star Wars* movie marathon tonight with Alex?”

Shit, exactly what I was afraid would happen.

“Uh, I've got some work to do tonight, actually,” Alex says, his eyes catching mine.

“Maybe another time, Chlo. How’s the French toast?” I walk over and kiss the top of her head before walking to the coffee maker to brew myself a much-needed espresso. Last night was beyond amazing and satisfying, but I haven’t spent hours getting physical with a man like that in close to a decade.

“Good,” she says around a mouthful.

“Is that a brioche?” I ask, surprised as he plates up a fluffy slice and slides the plate toward me.

“It is. Fresh from that bakery down the block.”

“Pierre’s?” I eye him suspiciously. “Fancy. What’s the occasion?”

He looks over his shoulder at me, a sly grin pulling at his lips as he shrugs. “Guess you could say I woke up in a really good mood. Slept like a baby.”

I feel a blush start to creep up my neck and I avert my gaze down to my plate as I reach for my fork. I don’t know if he slept in my bed last night. I remember falling asleep while he was still wrapped around me, but I didn’t wake up until Chloe came into my room. I push the thought from my mind, taking a big bite of the fluffy French toast and savoring the sweetness of the syrup and the saltiness of the butter.

“You got the fancy French butter too?”

“Of course. I never do anything halfway.” He winks at me, quickly glancing over to make sure Chloe didn’t notice, but she’s buried in her comic book as she finishes eating.

“Well, thank you for breakfast. I need to run some errands today and get some work done for the case. I have a pretty intense week coming up: witness testimony and a lot of paperwork.” I’m casually trying to tell Alex that while I

appreciate his kindness this morning, I don't expect for us to be hanging out today. "Chloe, did you still want to go over to Aunt Blaire's house today?"

"Yeah! She said we can go to the farmers' market by her house. There's this guy there who sells old comic books and figurines. Remember when we went there before, Mom?"

"I do. That was your favorite booth."

"Hey, could I—" Alex motions with his head toward the living room. I nod, following him away from Chloe.

"Jimmy will be with them, right?" he asks.

"Of course. Blaire knows what's going on, and that's the only reason I feel comfortable allowing her to go over there, because Jameson will be with them."

"And what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Either I can chauffeur you around to your errands or ride shotgun in your car." He says it with a completely straight face.

"What? No, I'll be fine. I'm fine when I go to work by myself every day."

"You're fine because I'm following you, Juliette. Come on, don't do this again. After that situation at lunch the other day when you were clearly followed, you were pretty shaken up. I promise I'll sit quietly and won't disturb you."

I think about it for a second, and I know he's right. "Fine, but you're driving," I say before walking back into the kitchen.

“Are you done?” I ask Chloe, who is still fully engrossed in her comic book.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, go wash up and get ready to leave here in 20 minutes, okay?” I take our plates and walk over to the kitchen sink.

“I’ll clean up,” Alex says, coming up behind me.

“No, you made breakfast, so I’ll clean up.”

There’s no use arguing with him. He grabs the pans and spatula and throws them in the dishwasher before wiping down the counter.

I scrape off the plates in the sink, flicking on the water, and reaching to turn on the garbage disposal, which immediately emits a high-pitched sound. “Oh, that’s not good.” I flip it off, running the water a little longer before trying again. This time, it sounds like it gets stuck, and I hear a low, dull hum. “Shit, must be clogged,” I say, turning it off.

“Let me take a look.” Alex crouches down, opening the cabinets below the sink. “No leaks.” He hits the restart button. “Try again.” I do, but we hear the same pathetic sound.

“I’ll call the plumber,” I say, placing the plates in the dishwasher.

“I’m sure I can fix it. Let me give it a shot later.”

“No, it’s okay, really. I’ve called him half a dozen times in the last few years since buying this older home. He can be trusted and he’s super quick and reliable.” Before he can protest, I make my way toward the stairs. “I’m going to get ready.”

It's not that I don't appreciate Alex's offer to help, it's that once again, it all feels a little too comfortable. I grab my phone and dial Terry.

"Hey Terry, it's Juliette. My garbage disposal is making a weird sound and doesn't seem to be working. Any chance you can stop by and see what's going on with it?"

"Hey, beautiful." His smoky voice echoes through the receiver, followed by his signature raspy laugh. Terry has been taking care of this neighborhood's plumbing for the last 30 years. He came highly recommended from Ms. Parsons across the street when I first moved, and has since been to my home a few times to fix things. "For you? Of course." He laughs again. "I'll swing by later today, doll."

"Thanks so much, Terry. Just leave the bill on the counter as usual, and thank you so much. You still have the key, right?" I've never thought twice about him having a key—everyone on the street has given him one. It's not uncommon for him to come by when you're not home to fix something, and he always locks up after he leaves. For a second, though, I wonder if he should have a key with everything going on. If Alex knew, he'd probably throw a fit, and the last thing I want to do is make Terry feel weird or unwelcome after all his years serving this neighborhood.

"Still got the key, Miss Pierce. I'll be sure to leave Chloe another comic book. Found a few more going through my oldest son's belongings he never took out of my attic. Says he don't want them anymore."

"You're so sweet, Terry. Chloe will love that. Thanks so much."

I end the call and quickly apply some makeup, pulling on a pair of slim jeans, a button-up silk blouse, and my favorite

loafers. I grab my bag and head downstairs, where Alex and Chloe are arguing over a quote from some movie I haven't seen. This time I think it's a superhero movie.

“Okay, let's go.”

I FEEL my stomach do a flip as we pull away from Blaire's house. I haven't been fully alone with Alex since last night.

“How are you feeling?” I can feel him looking over at me at the red light, but I keep my eyes forward.

“Fine, good,” I say.

“Yeah?” His hand slides across the console and up to my neck, where he rests it in my hair. “Are you sore?”

“A little,” I say, clearing my throat. Technically, I'm hurting a lot, in the most delicious way, though. *Why am I suddenly so embarrassed? Maybe because you had a giant meat stick rammed into you over and over for hours.* I feel my face flush and I reach to point the air vent directly at my face, which makes Alex chuckle.

“Only a little?” His hand drops down to rest on my thigh. “Guess I'll have to try harder next time.”

“And who says there's going to be a next time?” I brush his hand off of my thigh as he pulls into the parking garage of my office building. Before I can undo my seatbelt, he's grabbing me behind the back of my neck, pulling me halfway into his lap and burying his tongue in my throat.

“We both know there's going to be a next time, baby. Don't even pretend like your pussy isn't throbbing just sitting next to me in this car.”

My mouth hangs open; the crassness of this man never ceases to amaze me. He wonders why I struggle to admit my attraction to him, and it's this right here. I've never been with a man who spoke to me like this ... I never knew I *wanted* a man to speak to me like this.

"Tell me I'm wrong." He traces my bottom lip with his thumb, sliding it just inside my mouth—enough that I can bite down on it. "Mmm, you should try that on my chest tonight." His eyes grow dark, his voice low and gravelly.

"I have to go inside." His eyes don't move, and neither do his fingers on my chin. Then he lets go, leaning over me to undo my seatbelt. I climb out just as he does. "What are you doing?"

"Going inside with you."

"Why? There's security in this building and it's the weekend. Nobody is even here."

"Exactly." He straightens out his holster, sliding a jacket over his body to hide his weapon. "And I don't want to hear another word about it, or I'll take it out on you tonight," he says as he falls in step with me as we enter the elevator. I lean forward to scan my key fob and press the button for my floor when I feel his hand grab my ass. "And it won't be gentle either."

"Hey, there are cameras!" I swat at his hand, but he doesn't care.

"And? As far as everyone here knows, I'm your husband."

"Oh, please. As if." I roll my eyes. "We both know you're more like *ex-husband* material."

"Damn," he laughs, "shots fired."

We exit the elevator and walk toward my office. I grab my bag and rummage through my purse. “Shit, I think I left my cell phone at home.” I look further, but I can’t find it. “Maybe I left it in your car.”

“You want to go check?”

I shake my head. “I don’t need it. Can you just do me a favor and let Blaire know I don’t have it on me, so if there’s an emergency, she can contact you?”

He pulls out his phone and sends Blaire a text while I get to work. He sits patiently in the corner of my office, on his phone most of the time, but every once in a while I glance up to see him staring at me.

“What?” I finally say, making him laugh as he shrugs.

“Nothing. Didn’t say a word.”

“Don’t give me that look.”

“What look?” He leans forward in the chair, resting his elbows on his knees.

“Not in here,” I say seriously as I finish highlighting the section of the brief I’m working on.

“But that desk,” he smiles, “you’d look so fucking good spread out on it.”

“I know,” I say confidently. “But you’re never going to see it.”

“Is that a challenge, Miss Pierce?”

“It’s a boundary, Mr. Rockwell. I know you don’t like being told *no*, but even you have to live with disappointment sometimes.”

By the time I finish my work and we head back down to his car to leave, it's been three hours.

"I need to grab a few things from the market for dinner," I say as he pulls out into traffic.

"What time are we picking Chloe up?"

I glance at my watch. "I told Blaire we'd be there before 5. Why?"

"Just trying to figure out if I have time to take you back to your place beforehand."

"Take me back home why?" I don't know how I completely missed what he was trying to say, but the moment I see the look on his face and feel his hand inching up my inner thigh, it hits me. I'm a second away from telling him to forget the market and take me home now when I remember that Terry is supposed to be coming by today. "Subtle," I say with a flirty laugh.

"You're fucking killing me, woman," he mutters as he pulls down the street of the market.

"WE SHOULD HEAD over to get Chloe now," I say as he loads the grocery bag into the trunk.

He's silent on the drive over to their house, parking the car almost a block down the street from where they live. He reaches into the back seat, grabbing a windshield visor and placing it on the inside of the car before getting out and marching over to my side. He yanks the door open, helping me out and ushering me toward the back door.

"Get in," he says, pushing me slightly.

“What?”

“Get in the fucking back seat,” he says through gritted teeth, his hand wrapped around the back of my head. The second I’m in the seat, he’s slamming the door and walking around to get in next to me.

“What are we doing?” I ask as he climbs in. He doesn’t answer and instead just pulls me into his lap.

“I need to fuck you,” he groans into my mouth as he reaches for his belt.

“In here? Broad daylight?” I push back against his chest. He smiles briefly, but it’s almost sinister.

“Why not? You want to let loose, right? Give in to those desires instead of always doing what you know you should do.” He rubs the seam of my jeans. “The windows are tinted; nobody can see in here,” he finally says.

I look down at him beneath me: his T-shirt stretched tightly across his broad chest, his long fingers wrapped halfway around one of my thighs. This man is a fantasy, ready to please me, and at the age of 30, I’m letting him do it—in the back seat of a car! He’s right, though. I want this.

Just do it, Jules. Be bad, give in. Take what you want unapologetically since every other man in this world is willing to take from you.

I reach out and grab a fistful of his shirt, pulling him toward me.

He’s almost frantic, tugging at my pants, practically ripping them down my thighs along with my panties as his tongue massages mine.

Even when I was a teenager or in my 20s, I never had sex in a car. The furthest it ever went was giving Nick Simmons a hand job when I was 16. But this is hot. It feels wrong and dirty, and even though I'm a grown woman who can do what she wants, something about it feeling seedy makes it all that much more appealing.

"Ahhh." I grip the seat behind him as his fingers slide inside me. I reach between us and finish undoing his belt and pulling down his zipper. He lifts his hips so I can free him from his jeans.

"That's right, baby. Sit right on my cock." He grips my hips, guiding me over him and pushing himself inside me. "Oh, fuck yes, that's what I need, baby. Your tight little pussy milking me." He grabs my throat, using it as leverage as he pushes me down his length.

"Pr—protection?" I say as I try to accommodate his girth.

"I won't come inside you," he says, not stopping his movements.

This is stupid. I know that. I'm far too mature to be having unprotected sex with a man I barely know who has made it clear he wants nothing to do with long-term commitment, but I can't stop myself.

"I'm on birth control," I moan as he hits my G-spot, my thighs already shaking.

"Oh, goddamn, you're like silk, so fucking good." His neck is thick, his veins pronounced, as he leans his head back, his hands on my hips lifting me and sliding me back down his length. "I didn't know it could feel this good."

I grab his hair, pulling him toward me and kissing him to shut him up. I don't want to hear what he's saying. I don't

want to confuse myself by hearing him say all the things I *want* to hear. Because it's never felt like this for me either. It's never felt so good, so right. He's the first man I've had multiple orgasms with, and the thought that I'll never find this again is constantly running through my head.

He pulls back, looking down between us where he's sliding inside me. He watches himself disappear as he lowers me down.

"Fuck, that is so hot. You're so tiny that I don't know how I fit in you, but look at you, letting me stuff your cunt." He's completely focused on watching, I don't think he realizes he's talking. "Like you were made for me, so perfect. God, I never want this to end."

I want to ask him if he means it, or if this is just part of the act. I push the thought from my head, my eyes rolling back as they flutter closed.

"Look at me." He grabs my face. "You like it quick and dirty like this, don't you?" He presses his thumb against my lips until it's in my mouth. I wrap my lips around the tip, my tongue dancing across it before I bite down. "Mmm, you do, you filthy girl. I should punish you." He grabs the back of my neck, pulling me closer to him. "You have no idea how fucking hot it is that nobody has any idea that you like getting fucked like a slut in the back of a car." My breath is loud, almost panting into his mouth as I ride him harder, taking him deeper as his words ignite something in my body. It's degrading, and I should be offended, but I'm so confused by the excitement it's eliciting instead. "You're *my* little slut, Juliette. Mine."

"I'm close," I say as I reach down and rub my clit, my other hand clutching at his shirt as I feel myself start to climax.

“Oh shit,” he grunts, “you have to get off me, baby. I’m gonna co—” Before I can remove myself, he’s coming inside me. Instinctively he pulls me down onto himself hard, causing me to finish at the same time.

My forehead rests against his as we both pant, his cock still throbbing inside me.

“Shit, I’m sorry. I promise you I’m clean.”

“Like I said, I’m on birth control, so it’s okay.”

“Fuck me, that was ...” His head falls back again. “I haven’t gone without protection in I don’t know how long. I forgot how fucking good it feels.” He grips my waist. “Fuck, I could go again right now.”

“We should probably clean up,” I say, easing myself off of him.

“Here, let me.” He grabs a few napkins from the center console and wipes between my legs. “I like knowing my cum is going to be dripping out of you all night.”

Just the casual way he once again says things makes me blush and want more at the same time. I like that he’s unapologetically sexual and isn’t afraid to tell me how much he wants me. In past relationships, I experienced the typical, short-lived honeymoon phase, and even then, it wasn’t anything out of the ordinary ... certainly no gifted vibrators or car sex.

“Do I, um, do I look okay?” I tuck my shirt back in and double-check that my mascara isn’t smeared in the mirror.

“You look beautiful.” He leans forward, kissing me gently. “But you also look satisfied and freshly fucked.” He winks. “But don’t worry, anyone who knows you won’t think for one second that you just rode my cock in the back of my car.”

WE SPEND some time hanging out with Blaire and Jameson, the men probably off talking about business. When we get back home, Alex grabs the groceries and I walk ahead with Chloe. I notice the bill from Terry on the counter along with a new comic book. I grab the bill, sliding it into my pocket, and taking the comic book upstairs after Chloe.

“Hey, Terry gave this to me for you,” I say, holding it out toward her.

“Oh, cool! *He-Man and the Power Sword!*” She grabs the comic and flops onto her bed, flipping it open immediately.

“Do I get to hear about your day with Blaire?” I ask, leaning against her door frame.

“Oh, can we talk about it during dinner?” she says, not looking up from the pages she’s already engrossed in.

“Of course, baby. I’m going to get started on dinner in a few minutes.” I push off from the door and walk to my bedroom to take a quick shower. I take a look at myself in the mirror as I slowly strip out of my clothes while I wait for the water to warm up. I look down at one of my breasts, seeing the perfect outline of Alex’s teeth around my nipple. I trace it slowly, the purplish-red mark exciting me. I get lost in thoughts of last night—how he handled my body—when I notice my phone sitting on the counter.

“That’s weird. Don’t remember leaving it there.” I shrug, remembering I didn’t even realize I left it behind in my rush to get out of the house this morning.

ALEX

“Can I help?” My hands instinctively settle on Juliette’s waist as she pulls the groceries out of the bag I placed on the counter. She quickly does a double take to make sure we’re alone. “I already made sure,” I chuckle, leaning in to kiss her neck.

She’s changed into a simple white dress that falls almost to her ankles. It’s light and summery, the material thin enough that it moves with her body.

“Well, if you really want to help, you can chop the onions and garlic. That’s my least favorite task.”

“Happy to,” I say, reaching around her to grab the onions and garlic. “Cutting board?”

“Bottom cabinet to the right of the stove,” she says, motioning with her head. She fiddles with her phone for a moment before soft jazz begins playing through the speakers embedded in the ceiling. Then she turns her attention back to the chicken she’s prepping.

We fall in step like we’ve done this a hundred times. I catch myself glancing in her direction, catching her gaze a few times, which makes her blush then smile.

“I’ll take those,” she says, walking over to the cutting board to place the garlic and onions, along with some fresh lemon and thyme, on the chicken. “You can just scrape the scraps into the sink.”

I do, washing off the cutting board and knife. I leave the water running, flicking on the garbage disposal, which whirs to life. “Oh, weird, it’s working again?” I say, remembering that it was broken. I turn off the water and the disposal.

“Oh,” she spins around after placing the chicken in the oven, “yeah, I forgot to tell you it does that sometimes—seems to fix itself.” She shrugs.

“Let me just take a look.” I reach for the cabinet door, but she pushes it closed.

“It’s dinnertime, so you can look at it later.” She smiles sweetly. “Wine?”

“I, uh, don’t dr—”

“Oh, never mind,” she laughs nervously, “I forgot you don’t drink. Anything you enjoy besides water?”

I eye her for a moment. She seems a little off, almost nervous. I brush off my curiosity. She’s probably still jittery from what I did to her earlier.

“I’ll stick to water, but thank you. Anything else I can help prepare for dinner?”

“I’m going to roast some asparagus. You can get some water boiling for the wild rice, please.”

We go back to working in sync. She hums along with the music, her body swaying as she chops the asparagus. I lean against the counter opposite her, admiring her as she seems

lost in her own world. This is the first time since I've known her that she seems genuinely relaxed—dare I say, even happy.

“You keep moving like that,” I say as I push off the counter, my hand gliding over her ass and grabbing a handful, “and I'm going to get different ideas.” I wrap my arm around her waist, nuzzling my nose into her hair as I pull her against me. I close my eyes, savoring the scent of her floral perfume.

“Hmm, you're taking an awfully big risk when I've got this big knife in my hands,” she murmurs.

“You think that can stop me?” I grab her dress, pulling it up with my hand so I can slip beneath it. I dance my fingertips across her warm skin, between her thighs. “Then you must not know me very well, sweetheart.”

“Or maybe you like the risk—the thrill of going after an unavailable woman.”

I pause for a second. I'd let myself forget for a moment that this isn't real—just Juliette and me on a casual Sunday night making dinner together. This is still just a means to an end for both of us. A way for me to get a release and for her to indulge in her fantasy of a rough-around-the-edges kind of guy.

“Well now, isn't that the point? What was your phrase before? Conquering a woman who can't be tamed?” I rub my fingers against her panties, her grip on the knife loosening as she places her hands on the counter. “Getting her to submit to me even though it goes against every fiber of her being?” I nip at her ear. I'm seconds away from pushing her panties to the side when Chloe's voice interrupts us.

“Something smells good. I'm starving!” Her dramatic shout as she comes down the stairs startles both of us. I

remove my hand, turning around to hide my very obvious excitement as I fiddle with the sink. I glance over my shoulder, a pink blush blooming across Juliette's cheeks as she smiles at Chloe and goes back to chopping the asparagus.

“Good, dinner will be ready in another 10 minutes or so.”

“That comic book is epic, Mom. Do you think Mr. Terry has any more?”

“Oh, I'm sure he does. Did you read it that fast already?”

“No, I made myself slow down so I can savor it.”

“Who is Mr. Terry?” I ask, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Just a friend,” Juliette answers me quickly. “Can you set the table, Chloe?”

I ignore that niggling feeling in my stomach. I have no idea if she's seeing someone else. I guess I'd like to think I'd be aware since I'm always around her, but maybe it's someone from her past. I swallow down the jealousy that's beginning to rear its ugly head, wondering if it would bother her if I were sleeping with someone else.

You chose this life, I remind myself.

It's times like this I wish my older brother Zane were still alive. He'd know exactly what to say to get me out of this funk, even if it wasn't what I wanted to hear. Hell, I probably wouldn't be this way if he were still alive.

“Hey, you okay?” I glance up at Juliette, who's staring at me. Chloe is humming to herself as she sets the table.

“Yeah, great.” I smile, rubbing my hands together. “Ready to dig into this homemade meal. Been a minute since a woman has cooked for me.”

She gives me a sarcastic look, pointing the knife at me limply. “You just happened to be here while I was cooking. I’m not cooking *for you*.”

“Of course.” I lean over and grab the dish towel hanging off the handle of the stove. “I wouldn’t dare suggest that you were doing something nice for a man.” I snap the towel at her ass.

“Ow! You di—” She catches herself, Chloe spinning around to see me doubled over with laughter as Juliette shakes her head.

“You’re gonna pay for that,” she murmurs, rubbing her sore behind.

“How’d you do that? Can you show me?” Chloe walks over to where I’m standing in the kitchen.

“Of course, as long as you don’t get your mom with it.” I laugh. “Okay, so first you grab it by these two far corners, then you twist it around itself like this.” I flick my wrists in circles, the towel winding around itself. “Then you hold it and flick your wrist, like this.” The towel snaps and her eyes light up.

“Let me try.” She takes the towel and repeats the process, satisfied with the snapping sound echoing through the room. “That is awesome.” She walks away from us, snapping the towel over and over. I can’t help myself. I’m feeling something ... perhaps a sense of what I’m missing, or maybe it’s nostalgia from my own childhood. Zane and I often got in trouble for playing in the kitchen while my mom cooked.

I look up to see Juliette watching me. I try to get a read on her expression, but I can’t figure it out. I have the sudden urge to walk over to her, kiss her passionately, and tell her to give

this a chance—to see where it takes us—but I know it’s all a delusion.

“So, are we ready to eat or what?” Chloe asks.

“We’re ready,” Juliette says, pulling the chicken out of the oven.

“Do you have kids?” Chloe asks, staring at me intently.

“*Chloe.*” Juliette is probably about to tell her that’s not appropriate to ask, but I don’t mind.

“It’s okay,” I say, wiping my mouth with my napkin. “I don’t.”

“Why not? Do you want kids?”

“I guess I just got busy with work and the military ... next thing you know, I was an old man.” I wink at her and she giggles.

“You’re not *that* old. I wish my mom would have more kids so I could have a brother or sister.”

I glance up at Juliette and her eyes grow wide, making me smile.

“And what does your mom say about that?”

“She says it’s not something I want to talk about,” Juliette interrupts us.

“Come on, Mom, you’ve even said you hated being an only child growing up.”

I can see how uncomfortable Juliette is, or maybe it’s guilt for making Chloe an only child when she clearly didn’t enjoy it herself growing up.

“So tell me about this amazing new comic book you’re reading,” I say, changing the subject.

“Oh my gosh,” Chloe says, dropping her fork, “let me go grab it.” She takes off running up the stairs.

“Thank you,” Juliette says softly to me.

“For the record, this is actually the second time she’s brought up that topic. She mentioned it that morning I made pancakes.”

“Oh,” she fidgets with the fork in her hand, “and what did you say?”

“I just mentioned that I liked having a brother myself growing up.”

“*He-Man and the Power Sword!*” Chloe says, suddenly appearing from around the corner with the comic book raised above her head.

“No way!” I say, reaching for it. “I loved this one when I was a kid.”

“You’ve read it?”

“You bet I have. Probably a dozen or more times along with the rest of the *He-Man* comics.”

“Which one is your favorite?”

I flip through the book, smiling when I remember how Zane would get me copies and let me read them in his room while he worked on his car stereo.

“*The Vengeance of Skeletor,*” I say in my most menacing voice. “Did you know there was an animated show called *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe?*”

“Are you serious?” It’s like her little head is about to explode, and it makes Juliette smile.

“Oh yeah, check this out. Your mind is about to be blown,” I say, pulling out my phone and showing her some clips from YouTube.

“Mom can we pleeeeeease watch this tonight?”

“Yeah, but you have to finish your dinner and take a shower first. You have school in the morning, so probably only two episodes, okay?”

“Okay.” She jumps back into her chair, scarfing down the rest of her dinner before taking her plate to the sink. “I’m going to take a shower and come back down to watch it,” she says as she rounds the corner and darts back upstairs.

We finish dinner and I stand, grabbing a couple plates to take over to the sink.

“Are you and your brother still close?”

“No, unfortunately.” I wash off the plates, placing them in the dishwasher.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

I shrug. “Nothing to be sorry about. Life happens.”

“Thanks for joining us for dinner.” She reaches over, placing her hand on my forearm. I look down at her slender fingers resting on my skin. I reach my own hand out, placing it over hers. I tangle our fingers together, pulling her toward me so my lips find hers.

Her tongue still tastes like the white wine she was drinking. It’s like each new time we kiss, it feels different, deeper than before. Like this connection that I know we’re both ignoring is determined to make itself known. I know we only have a couple minutes before Chloe comes back downstairs, but that doesn’t stop me. I grab Juliette around the

waist and lift her onto the counter, stepping between her parted thighs and running my hand up her back to tangle in her hair.

She leans in to kiss me, but just as her lips graze mine, I yank her hair backward. I run my lips up her neck to her chin, letting them linger over her lips as her eyes stare desperately into mine.

“I’m in control,” I say quietly, half to her, half to myself, trying to remind myself that I’m not falling for this woman. It’s just lust. Her phone rings, ruining the moment. I release her hair and help her down off the counter.

“Hey, Brett, what’s up?” She steps around me, leaning against the counter. “Yeah, we are supposed to have Talia, the HR witness, in on Tuesday to be deposed. She confirmed with me both times that she’ll be there, but she did insist on having her own representation present.” She nods while she listens. “Honestly, I don’t think there are many more strings they can pull on this one. No judge is going to hear her testimony and say they aren’t culpable. They knowingly let these people work in a toxic environment and then lied to cover their asses, all while bullying their insurance company into denying their claims. Their ship is sunk as far as I’m concerned.” She laughs, talking a few more minutes before hanging up the phone.

“Good news then?”

“Yeah, I guess I didn’t tell you, but we have a whistleblower who is finally willing to come forward and testify against Delmore. She worked in their HR department and heard the victims’ testimonies and complaints firsthand. She even started recording her meetings about these complaints and has evidence of the CEO saying to ignore them and that they would be *handled*,” she says, using air quotes. “I

depose her on Tuesday. I figure that by Friday, we should have the settlement offer we want in hand.” She smiles confidently.

“That’s great news.” I smile, hoping it hides the fact that I’m not obtuse when it comes to the reality that great news for the case means she and I will no longer be working together.

“Yeah, I feel like my stress level is slowly lowering just a teeny tiny bit at a time.” She lets out a long sigh just as Chloe comes back downstairs.

“I’m ready!” she says, waiting for us to follow her into the living room. I’m suddenly very aware of my presence in this house and realize I should head upstairs and allow them to enjoy their evening.

“Well, you ladies have a good night, and Chloe, enjoy *He-Man*. I can’t wait to hear what you think about it.”

“You’re not gonna watch it with us?” Her eyes look sad and I instantly feel guilty.

“Oh, I thought that it was you and your mom’s time. I don’t want to intrude.”

“Maybe just one episode?” Juliette asks.

I pause, debating. “Okay, one episode.”

Chloe settles against her mom on the couch and I sit on the other end, keeping plenty of space between us. I find the show and start it, leaning back to rest my arm over the back of the couch. A few minutes later, Chloe is fully engrossed in the cartoon, leaning halfway off the couch, completely fixated on the screen. I feel a slight touch on my fingers, glancing over to see Juliette’s outstretched arm reaching for my hand. She keeps her eyes forward as she intertwines our fingers. I stare at her, wondering what she’s thinking—if this is still just some fun, or if it’s more. In all my years of having *arrangements*

with women, it never became romantic. There were no stolen kisses, no holding hands, no flirty glances like there are between us.

“I should do a lap of the grounds,” I say, dropping her hand and standing up.

“Are you leaving already?” Chloe asks, turning around to look up at me.

“I’ll be back. Just want to walk around the yard. Enjoy your show.” I smile, nodding toward the TV. She turns back around, and before Juliette can lock eyes with me, I turn and walk out of the living room and head toward the front door.

I double and triple-check the cameras, then the locks on the doors and windows. I do three full laps before taking a seat on the back porch, looking up at the sky that’s barely visible with the amount of lights in the city. I think about Zane, about Sierra, about the baby I thought was mine. Finally, I head back inside, knowing I can’t stay out here forever.

“Last episode,” Juliette says to Chloe as the next one starts.

“Ladies, I’m going to head to bed if that’s okay.”

“Okay, good night,” Chloe says, already engrossed in the next episode.

“You sure?” Juliette looks at me questioningly.

“Yeah.” I rub my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. “Been a long day. Thank you again for dinner. It was delicious.” I offer up the best smile I can muster, but I know my face is saying something completely different. “Good night.”

I walk upstairs, already pissed at the pathetic pity party I'm throwing for myself internally.

You did this to yourself. You pursued her. You told her it would never be anything more.

I try to tell myself over and over that I have no one to blame other than myself for the fact that I'm falling for her. I want her to see that there's more between us. I'm angry that she's doing exactly what she *should* do ... protecting herself from a man like me.

I take my time in the shower, allowing myself to feel whatever the fuck it is I'm feeling, but telling myself that this is it. Get it out of your head, out of your system, because starting tomorrow, this thing between Juliette and me is over. It's back to strictly business.

When I finally crawl into bed and shut off the light on my nightstand, I'm exhausted from the internal battle in my head. A shadow by the door catches my eye and I dart up. Then there's the softest knock. I don't answer and I hear it again. I watch as the shadow hovers by my door for another moment then quickly disappears. I tiptoe to the door, opening it softly and looking down the hallway to see Juliette walking away.

I want to tell her to turn around—to grab her and lose myself in her one last time—but I don't. Instead, I close the door again, letting her walk away, because we both know there's only one way things will end between us.

JULIETTE

I stand outside Alex's door, my hand paused midair as I decide if I should knock louder. I shake off the nervousness, knocking again, but still, there's no answer.

My shoulders drop in disappointment as I turn and tiptoe down the hallway back to my bedroom. I had hoped all the tension building between us during dinner prep and watching Chloe's show was leading somewhere, but I guess he really is exhausted.

"Can't blame the man," I mutter to myself, stifling a yawn.

Memories from our tryst in the back seat of his car rush back to me. I can't keep the smile off myself as I strip out of my dress and change into my pajamas. I turn on the warm water to wash my face, pulling my shirt away from my body to once again see the mark on my breast that Alex left. I trace it, closing my eyes when I think about his words from earlier.

"My little slut, Juliette. Mine."

I DON'T SEE Alex before I leave for the morning. He must have woken up earlier and is out walking the neighborhood. I get Chloe off to school then rush over to my office, noticing

his black Charger in my rear-view mirror as I navigate through traffic.

Was he already sitting in his car this morning to avoid me? I try to think through things last night; maybe I missed something obvious that upset him. Nothing comes to mind by the time I get to the office. I want to get out and go talk to him for a moment, but instead of parking, he waits until I get into the elevator, and just as the doors are closing, he speeds away.

“Morning.” I smile at my assistant, Nina.

“Good morning, Miss Pierce. I have an urgent request for you. Came in about 15 minutes ago.”

“Urgent?” I stop in my tracks. “From whom?”

“Talia Fernandez’s lawyer.” I can see the look on her face, and it already tells me what I need to know.

“Okay,” I say, stepping into my office and closing the door. I shake out my hands, trying not to jump to conclusions before dialing Clyde Warren’s number.

“Clyde,” I say cheerfully when he picks up, “Juliette Pierce just returning your call.”

“Morning, Juliette.” His tone is serious. “Sorry to call so early, but I’ll get straight to the point. Talia isn’t going to testify after all.”

“What? No.” I don’t attempt to hide the desperation in my voice. At this point, I’ll grovel to keep her testimony. “Why?”

“Something happened last night, Juliette—something that scared Talia shitless. I don’t blame her for not wanting to testify.”

“What happened, Clyde?” A chill runs straight down my spine, which is now stiff as a board. “Is she okay?”

“She’s okay physically but not mentally. Two guys showed up to her house ... at least she thinks it was two. They were terrorizing her, banging on her door and windows. They slashed her tires, shattered the windows on her car, and then threw a Molotov cocktail through her front window.”

“Oh my God!” I gasp, my hand shooting over my mouth. “How? How did they know she was testifying? There was no witness list leaked, so nobody knew but me, you, her, my assistant, and Brett.”

“I don’t know, Juliette, but this is serious shit. This isn’t just a message; it’s a threat.”

I sit in silence for several seconds, my heart feeling like it’s about to beat out of my chest. “Her kids? Are her kids okay?”

“Yes, her husband was able to throw a blanket on the fire and she grabbed the fire extinguisher. Thank God for quick thinking on their parts. Her sons are okay; they slept through most of it, shockingly.”

A cold sweat breaks out over my body thinking about somebody doing that to my home, to Chloe. I fight back tears, my voice obviously shaky. “I—I understand completely, Clyde, but without her, I—I don’t know if they’re going to settle. This will end up in the courts.” I feel like a slimy piece-of-shit lawyer right now, but all I can do is beg. “Is there any way—any chance—you can talk her into just holding off for a bit but still testifying? We can get her into protective custody.”

“As a mother, uprooting your kids like that, you know what kind of trauma that will bring to her family. I respect the hell out of you, Juliette, but no, I won’t even pressure her on this one. I’m sorry.”

The line goes dead and I sit back in my chair, tears streaming down my face. I feel like I've failed Talia. When she came to me after months of trying to convince herself this was the right decision, she was terrified something exactly like this would happen, and I talked her into trusting that everything would be fine.

"Hey, you okay?" Brett pokes his head into my office.

"Yeah," I say through a stuffy nose as I dab at my eyes.

"Oh my God, what happened? Who do I need to kill?" He slips through the doorway, closing the door behind him as he rushes over to my desk.

"They attacked Talia's family last night." I can barely get the words out. Brett has the same reaction as me: an audible gasp, his hand covering his mouth.

"Who?"

I explain what Clyde just told me. "I know it's the same assholes who were terrorizing me, only they never took it to these extremes. It's all my fault." I hiccup, my vision blurring through the tears that are falling faster than I can wipe. "I feel so bad for her."

"Oh, sweetie, first of all, it's not your fault. These degenerates are a scum that most of us as lawyers haven't even encountered." He rubs my shoulder then pulls back to look at me. "But if you're serious that these are the same people who have been after you, you have to tell Alex. They might be coming for you next now that they know what you were planning to do."

"I know." I nod, taking a tissue from Brett. "I'm finally the lawyer stereotype. I just stooped to a new low I didn't think I was capable of." He looks at me, confused. "I asked Clyde if

there was any way he thought he could convince her to still testify if we put her in protective custody.”

He shakes his head, sitting back in the chair across from me. “That’s ridiculous, Jules. What you asked was a valid question. This isn’t just a case of asking for money because people are looking for a payout. These are lives on the line: their futures, plus entire families’ futures would be financially wiped out from these medical bills and them being on disability. I know it’s uncomfortable to push for their rights when another witness is under extreme duress like this, but you’re not being selfish. You see the greater good—the bigger picture.”

“Maybe, but still, I could have let her tears dry before I asked for her help again after her children’s lives were in danger last night. She doesn’t deserve this, and now I’m terrified they’re going to ruin her in other ways—her reputation, her career.”

“Listen to me,” he leans forward, getting his serious *dad look* as I always called it when we were in law school together. “This is why you’re the best goddamn lawyer I’ve ever known and this firm has known: because you know that you will find a way to make these fuckers pay. This will light a fire under you so damn big that you will destroy these idiots and make them pay for what they did to Talia. I know you, Jules.”

I nod my head. “You’re right.” I dry my tears, grabbing my water bottle and taking a drink. “I refuse to let these billionaire asshole bullies destroy anyone else. I’m a damn shark and I smell blood in the water.”

I spend the entire day going through every shred of evidence we have against Delmore. Then I go through their

employee files, searching for anyone I haven't yet interviewed who was fired in the last two years.

"Did you even take lunch?" I look up from the stack of files on my desk to see Brett halfway out the door.

"No." I rub my forehead, closing my eyes for a second to give them some rest from the burning. I glance at the clock. "Shit, I need to head home so I can meet Chloe when she gets off the bus. Guess I'll just be eating dinner," I say as I grab my bag and pile my files into it.

"Hey," Brett says, grabbing my arm as I exit my office, "don't neglect yourself in all this."

"I won't." I smile, reaching out to touch his hand before heading down to the parking garage.

Thankfully, her bus is running a few minutes behind, so I have time to pop inside and drop my bag when I get back to the house. I notice Alex remains in his car. I walk outside, heading over to his Charger, and tap on the window.

"Hey." I smile sheepishly. "Everything okay? Didn't see you this morning." I'm close to telling him I missed him last night, but it doesn't feel right—like it'd be too familiar.

"Yeah, needed to get some things from my place, so I ran over there before you and Chloe were up. Everything okay?" His normal friendly, if not flirty, demeanor is subdued, even sad.

"Yeah." I shake my head. "Actually, no," I say, correcting myself. "I need to talk to you about something—something serious—but I don't want it to be in front of Chloe."

"Okay," he says slowly, his eyes dropping down to below the window. "Are you pregnant?"

“What? No! What made you ask that?” I say, horrified. “Do I look pregnant?” My hand instinctively goes to rest on my lower belly.

“No, sorry, didn’t mean to imply that. You don’t at all. You just seemed very serious about whatever it is you wanted to talk to me about. What is it, by the way?”

“Oh,” I say with a sigh of relief, “well, no need for you to worry. I promise I’m not pregnant, so I won’t be ruining your life anytime soon.” I chuckle, thinking he’ll let out a dramatic sigh or laugh, but he doesn’t. “Sorry, anyway, when I got to work today, I had a voi—” I hear Chloe’s bus turn the corner, the brakes screeching loudly as it comes to a stop. “I’ll explain it later,” I say as I jog across the street and wave at Mr. Lin, the bus driver.

“Hey, girlie, how was school?” I loop my arm around Chloe’s shoulder as we walk down the sidewalk and up the stairs to the front door.

“It was good. I got an A+ on my math test.”

“Of course you did.” I smile down at her. “You’re the smartest kid I know. How should we celebrate?”

“Mom, we don’t have to celebrate every time I do well on a test. It’s just a test!”

“Hey,” I say, closing the door behind her and grabbing her backpack. “It’s never just a test, and yes, we do. I want to celebrate every accomplishment of yours, even if it’s one of a million tests you’ll take in life.”

“Fine, how about ...” she taps her chin as she thinks, “three episodes of *He-Man* tonight?”

I narrow my gaze at her. “Okay, but only three and only because it’s a celebration.” I reach into the fridge, grabbing her

favorite yogurt and some granola to make her a snack.

“Mom, is Zara ever going to come over again?”

“I’m sure she is, sweetie. We just don’t need her services at the moment since I’m picking you up from school.”

“I know, I just miss hanging out with her. She’s so cool.” She takes a bite of her yogurt and smiles before shaking her head. “Sorry, not that *you’re* not cool, Mom, it’s just that she’s young, you know?”

I laugh. “I know, Chlo. How about I text her to see if she’s free this week? She can still come hang out with you while I’m home.”

“Yeah, that would be awesome!”

“Okay, go clean up after your snack. Do you have any homework?” I ask, reaching for her backpack.

“No, or, well, I did, but I finished it on the bus. It was a reading assignment.” She climbs down from the barstool and throws away her trash before heading upstairs.

I start to unzip her backpack when I hear the front door close and Alex’s footsteps coming down the hallway.

“Hey,” he leans up against the door frame. “Now a good time to talk?”

“Yeah, Chloe went upstairs. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Water?”

I grab two bottles, handing him one and opening one for myself. “What I had started to tell you earlier was when I got to my office today, I had an urgent call from the lawyer representing Talia, our lead witness against Delmore. He said

that she was no longer testifying because her family was ... they were attacked last night.” I struggle to finish the sentence.

“Attacked? How?” Alex steps further into the kitchen, placing his hands flat on the island as he narrows his gaze.

“I guess they smashed their car windows, slashed tires, and threw a Molotov cocktail into their front room.”

“Jesus Christ.” He shakes his head, taking a step back and running his hands through his dark hair. “Are they okay? Did they see who did it?”

“They’re okay, thankfully. Talia and her husband were able to put the fire out rather quickly and their sons slept through most of it. Clyde didn’t know anything else—like if they saw the faces of those who were involved.”

Alex paces the kitchen floor slowly, his hands stacked on top of his head as he thinks. “Okay, I’ll reach out to my contacts on the force—see if they can tell me anything. If the Fernandez’s have any cameras on their house, or their neighbors have something, I should be able to get access to that.”

“What’s that going to do though?”

“Help me identify this fucker. If I can find out who it is, I can take care of the problem.”

“Take care of it?” I ask nervously.

He gives me a look—one that tells me I don’t want to know. “I’d eliminate the problem, Juliette.”

“Understood,” I say softly, unsure of what to do or say next.

“Wait,” he pauses, “how did they know she was testifying? I thought that was confidential, and I can’t imagine she would

tell anyone, given that she's a whistleblower against a billion-dollar company."

"I don't know, and that's what I can't figure out. You knew, I knew, my assistant who signed an NDA knew, plus Talia and her husband, obviously, and Brett. I didn't even tell the partners."

I already know what he's about to say before he says it. "You thi—"

"No," I say before he can finish. "Brett wouldn't say a word. I'd bet my career and life on it." He nods, not doubling down. He stands there lost in thought while I reach for Chloe's backpack, unzipping it to see if there are any notes for parents or homework she might have overlooked. I pull out a stack of papers, going through them, before putting them back into her bag ... when a plain letter-sized envelope catches my eye.

I pull it out. There's no writing on the outside, so I open the closure and reach inside to pull out several black and white photos. I stare at them for several seconds in complete shock, my eyes not registering what I'm looking at until I see my own face staring back at me.

"Oh my God." I drop them on the counter. "Oh my God!" I repeat, my voice shaky.

"What?" Alex snaps his head toward me, but I can't take my eyes off of the stack of naked photos of myself. He reaches for the pictures, looking at them in horror. We both glance up toward the stairwell as the quick thumping of Chloe's footsteps brings us back to the moment. He grabs the pictures, scooping them up and sliding them back into the envelope in one quick movement.

“Sweetie,” I say, walking over to her slowly, “where did you get that envelope in your backpack?”

“Envelope?” She scrunches up her face, then realization settles over her. “Oh no,” she says, almost dismayed, “I forgot to tell you that your friend gave it to me today at recess. I’m sorry I forgot.”

“It’s okay,” I say, shaking my head. “Friend? What friend? What did he look like?” I try not to sound too panicked.

She shrugs. “I don’t know. He had sunglasses on and a hat. He said he knew you, and I know not to talk to strangers, but he knew my name and Alex’s name, too. He said you couldn’t meet him to grab the envelope for the case, so you told him to give it to me. Did I do something wrong?”

“No, sweetie,” I say, rubbing her arms. “Did—did you open it?”

“Nope,” she says matter-of-factly. “What are we having for dinner?”

“I—I, um I’m not sure yet, sweetie,” I say, trying to make sense of things. Alex is staring at me. I know he wants to question her to death, but he can also see the look on my face pleading with him to let me handle this. “How about you go watch an episode of *He-Man* right now while I try to figure it out, okay?”

“Yussss!” She pumps her arm in the air then spins around and runs to the living room.

Alex grabs the envelope again, pulling the pictures out and tilting his head. “This is your bathroom,” he says slowly before walking out of the room and heading toward the stairs.

I follow behind him quickly, my stomach in knots and my heart about to beat out of my chest. “How? How would they

get pictures in my bathroom?” I say in a hushed voice as we walk through my bedroom and into my en suite. “What are they going to do with them?” My stomach rolls and I feel like I’m going to be sick.

“My guess? Scare you with the threat—blackmail you.”

“Oh God.” I grab the edge of the sink, the room spinning. “This is so messed up.” I feel Alex’s hand on my back.

“Just breathe,” he says calmly. “They aren’t compromising photos, meaning they can’t extort you unless it’s just the threat of naked photos being leaked.” I give him a look as if to say, *And that’s not enough?* “I know that’s terrifying to think about, but these are clearly from a hidden camera and you’re in your bathroom. I think that’s more of the threat: Them letting you know they gained access to your home.”

“What are we going to do?”

Alex crouches down, running his hand along things and shining a flashlight everywhere. In a matter of seconds, he pauses on an electrical outlet. “You have a Phillips?”

“What?”

“A screwdriver,” he says more impatiently.

“Yeah.” I run down the hall to the utility closet and grab a pouch of tools. He rifles through it, finding the screwdriver, then removes the plate cover on the outlet. There in plain sight is a camera. He grabs it, yanking it from the wall and severing the connection.

“How the fuck did this get in here if it’s not Brett? He’s the only person who knew about Talia and had access to your home, Juliette.”

He stands up, holding the camera so I can see it, when it hits me. “I—I ... *Terry!*”

ALEX

“Terry? The friend you casually mentioned the other day who gave Chloe a comic book?”

She shakes her head. “No, no, it couldn’t have been Terry. He’s my plumber. He’s *everyone’s* plumber in the neighborhood, and we all trust him. We’ve known him for years.”

“Jesus Christ, Juliette.” He grits his teeth, looking up at the ceiling. “That’s why the garbage disposal magically started working again?”

She nods her head, her eyes big and full of tears. “He has a key, and I just th—”

“He’s had a key this entire time and you didn’t think to tell me? God knows how many other bugs or cameras are in this house.” I step around her, marching toward her closet to make sure the integrity of my security system is intact. I grab the iPad and scroll back through the security footage.

“This him?” I turn it around to show her the older man unlocking her front door.

“Yes,” she nods, sniffing. “He wouldn’t,” she says again.

I watch the video, and only a few minutes after Terry enters, a shadowy figure in the distance crosses the street. The

person is wearing all back, including gloves, a hat with a hoodie pulled over the baseball cap, and glasses. They also keep their head down as they make a beeline for Juliette's front door, walking right in.

“You're right,” I say. “It wasn't Terry.”

“It wasn't?” She watches the screen. “Oh my God, who is that?”

“I don't know, but it seems Terry didn't lock the door while he was in your house fixing the disposal. Whoever this is marched right in. My guess is that Terry was preoccupied and didn't even notice. We both hover over the screen intently, watching as the person walks out only a few minutes later.

“Why'd you hide this from me?” I'm trying to contain my anger, but I know yelling at her won't be productive. She's clearly already feeling guilty and unsettled and I don't want to upset her further.

“I knew you would be mad if I told you Terry had a key, and that you wouldn't trust him. I know I shouldn't have ... I just didn't think this would happen.”

“I understand. Can you think of anything else that seemed off or out of place after Terry was here?”

She shakes her head then stops. “Actually, yeah. That's the day I forgot my cell phone at home. You took me to the office and I had you tell Blaire I didn't have mine with me, remember? When I came back home that night, I was taking a shower and noticed my phone on the bathroom counter, but I didn't remember leaving it there. I thought I'd had it down in the kitchen with me and left it on the island. Maybe I just imagined that, bu—”

“Where's your phone?” I interrupt her.

“Downstairs.”

“Go grab it for me.”

I head to my room, grabbing my laptop. When she returns, I plug her phone into my laptop, running a malware scan that returns what I’d expected. I grab a small pin from my personal mini tool pouch, popping open the SIM card slot and breaking the card in half.

“What was that?”

“The SIM card,” I say as I grip her phone on both sides with my bare hands and bend it until it breaks in two.

“What the hell, Alex?” She reaches for the phone, but I walk to the bathroom and toss it in the sink, filling it with water just to be safe.

“Your phone was cloned, Juliette. When they came into the house, they clearly moved it. They cloned your SIM card, which means they’ve been listening to your calls and reading your messages and emails, plus listening to your voicemails. If I had to guess, that’s how they knew about Talia. I’ll get you a new phone by morning.”

“How would they have known Terry would be here—that they could get in?”

I shrug. “Probably watching the house. That’s why I’m always here,” I say, reassuring her, “and why we have a top-of-the-line security system, but it only works if you’re honest with me about who has access to your house.”

She stares at me, then slowly sinks down onto the edge of the bed as tears stream down her face. “I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I caused all this.” She buries her face in her hands, her shoulders beginning to shake. “I can’t believe they went to

Chloe's school. Should Luka stay at her school while she's there, or should I pull her out?"

"Hey, it's going to be okay," I say as I walk over to her. She wraps her arms around my waist, her tears soaking through my shirt. "I'll keep Luka at her school, don't worry about it. They sure as shit are going to hear from me about their lack of security on school property, though. No stranger should be able to access a child, let alone hand them something."

"I—let me handle that, please," she says, looking up at me for a second before nuzzling back against my stomach. I don't tell her I will, because I have every intention of going there myself.

"I need to scan the rest of the house for any bugs or cameras." She snaps her head up to look at me, fear replacing her tears. "I doubt there are any," I say reassuringly. "That person wasn't in here long enough, but still, I need to be sure."

"Okay." She wipes at her eyes.

"Juliette," I crouch down in front of her, "I need you to get yourself together for Chloe, okay? Act like everything is fine, make dinner, and we'll talk more about this later after she goes to bed. All right? But for now, I need you to put on a brave face."

She nods her head, fanning her face and letting out a soft exhale. She looks so broken in this moment, so vulnerable. For once, the always confident and calm Juliette looks scared and it shakes me to my core. Whoever did this, whoever broke into her home—her safe space—and took photos of her, to blackmail or exploit her, will pay. I will destroy them. The speech I gave myself last night and all through today—that I needed to step back from her and keep things strictly

professional—is pointless. I’m way past the point of letting this become personal, and I don’t think there’s a way for me to ever pretend like it hasn’t.

I lean forward, gently kissing her lips before standing up and heading to go sweep the rest of the house. I don’t tell Juliette, but I plan on going to Chloe’s school tomorrow to gain access to their security cameras. And if I have to threaten them with legal action because a criminal was able to gain access to one of their students on school property during school hours, then so be it.

I finish scanning the house and don’t find any other recording devices, so I make my way downstairs, where Chloe and Juliette are waiting for their frozen pizza to finish cooking.

“Hey, everything okay?” Juliette’s eyes are big as she tries to remain calm.

“Yeah, everything’s good.” I nod, reassuring her before turning to Chloe. “So, more *He-Man* tonight?” I take a seat on the barstool next to where she’s sitting, eating some carrots and dip.

“Yes! Mom said I can watch three episodes since I got an A+ on my math test, but I already watched an episode.”

“Sounds like that is absolutely a reason to celebrate. Is math your favorite subject?”

She nods enthusiastically. “And science.”

“Any thoughts about what you want to be when you grow up?” I look over at Juliette, who is watching us. I don’t think she even realizes that she’s smiling.

“I’ve got a few ideas. Either a scientist, like an astrophysicist who is preferably an astronaut for NASA, or

maybe a science fiction author.” She says it matter-of-factly before swiping her carrot through the dip and taking a bite.

“Well, I think you would be amazing at either of those jobs, and who knows? Maybe you’ll do both, especially given how smart your mom is.” I look up at Juliette again. “I have no doubt you’ll do amazing things.”

“What did you want to be when you grew up?”

I think it about it for a second, “Well, when I was your age, I think I wanted to be a cowboy or maybe a firefighter.”

“Why didn’t you do it?”

“You know,” I shake my head, chuckling, “I ask myself that all the time. When I was a few years older than you, I decided I wanted to be in the military, so I pursued that. So, here I am, almost a hundred years later, and sometimes I think I would have made a better cowboy and should have pursued that.” I wink at Chloe and she laughs.

“So, what about a girlfriend?”

“*Chloe,*” Juliette says with a warning tone.

“What? I’m just asking if he has one.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend. I’m usually pretty busy with work, so I don’t think I’d be around much and that wouldn’t be good.”

She cocks her head. “You should date my mom since you’re always around here.”

“Chloe!” Juliette says just as the oven timer goes off.

“Saved by the bell.” I nudge Chloe. Juliette gives both of us a stern look before turning to pull the pizza out of the oven.

“Hey, I got it.” I jog over, taking the oven mitts from her and pulling the door down. “Go sit down, and I’ll cut and plate it.”

Dinner feels normal. We laugh and talk, make jokes, and enjoy pizza and the two episodes of *He-Man* Chloe has left. She’s even gotten into the habit of telling me “good night” before she heads off to bed every night.

“You want a cup of decaf?” Juliette asks after Chloe goes to her room.

“Yeah, that would be nice.” We settle into the couch with our coffee. “So, you want to talk about things more?”

“Not really,” she says, staring down into her mug. “Between work and all this, I just feel so burned out.”

“I understand. What are you going to do now that Talia isn’t testifying?”

She lets out an exaggerated sigh. “Honestly, I don’t know. What I want is to get proof that Delmore was behind this whole thing—forcing them to agree to our settlement terms.”

“Is it a possibility that they would? If there was definitive proof?”

“Probably. They wouldn’t want a second lawsuit on their hands. And if the guy agreed to testify against them, even better.”

We both sit in silence, the soft hum of the dishwasher coming from the kitchen.

“Why aren’t you and your brother close anymore?” She turns her head to look at me.

“He’s dead.” I take a long sip of coffee. “Died when I was 13.”

“Oh—”

“It’s okay, don’t apologize,” I say before she can. She doesn’t ask anything else, but for some reason I keep talking. “He was seven years older than me. He was killed by a drunk driver the day after his 20th birthday.”

“Is that why you don’t drink?”

I nod. “Yeah, but I didn’t stop drinking until I was already heading down a bad path. Zane was my world and it completely fucked me up when he died. I didn’t have a dad and my mom was completely overtaken by grief, so I started lashing out.”

“That’s completely understandable. I know what it’s like to not have a parent while the other parent is preoccupied.”

“I don’t blame her for it. I can’t imagine going through what she did, but I took it out on her. I started skipping school and doing dumb shit with my friends. I was drinking heavily, smoking pot, and hanging out with older guys. I ended up getting arrested ... just misdemeanors, but it was enough that I realized it wasn’t a life I wanted. So when I turned 18, I decided to pursue Zane’s dream of being in the military. I was a big guy even when I was young—a lot of muscle tone—and I took orders well. I got noticed pretty quickly and rose through the ranks. That’s how I ended up in the Special Forces.” I look over at her. “Sorry, you didn’t ask for all that information.”

“No need to apologize. Seems like you needed to get it out.”

I stare at her. I like that she isn’t looking at me with pity. She isn’t rubbing my arm and telling me it wasn’t my fault. I know people always mean well, but I’m tired of it. It feels like

she sees me—like for the first time in forever, I don't feel judged or the need to be ashamed of my past. I reach my hand out and run the backs of my fingers against her jaw.

“Let's go to bed.”

Neither of us speaks again as we ascend the stairs to her bedroom. Before we're through the door, her lips are on mine, her hands beneath my T-shirt, tugging to remove it. I walk her backward, pressing against her until she's sitting on the edge looking up at me. I cup her face with my hands, running my thumb over her bottom lip.

“We both know we're fucked, right?” She doesn't respond, but I know she understands what I'm saying. “At some point,” I push her backward as I crawl over her, “when I'm not about to have you sit on my face, we need to have a conversation about things.”

Her back is already arching by the time my fingers are pushing her panties to the side and I'm dragging my lips up her neck.

“MRS. TAYLOR?”

“You can call me Shauna,” she says, extending her hand out toward me. “Mr. Rockwell, correct?”

“Alex,” I say, shaking her hand before taking a seat across from her.

“What can I do for you, Alex? Whatever it is sounded pretty urgent on the phone earlier.” She folds her hands over her belly, her brows knitted together.

“Thank you for seeing me on short notice, I’ll keep it short and to the point. I’m one of the owners of Four Forces Security.” I reach into my wallet and pull out a card, sliding it across her desk. “I was recently hired by one your students’ parents for safety measures. My client, Juliette Pierce ...”

An expression of recognition passes over her face. “Oh, Juliette. She is wonderful.”

“Yes, well, the other day, her daughter, Chloe, was approached by a stranger on the playground, on school property,” I say, “and was given some very inappropriate and compromising material.”

“Oh my goodness, what?”

“I won’t be sharing the exact contents of the envelope she was given, but it was blackmail material against her mother.” She gasps loudly, her hands covering her mouth. “That being said, I need access to your security cameras.”

“This is ... unheard of. We’ve never had a situation like this. Is Chloe okay?”

“She’s fine. Thankfully, she didn’t open the envelope, so she didn’t see what was inside, but her mother is very shaken, as you can imagine. This pertains to a very high-profile case she’s working on.”

“I really wish I could do something, Mr. Rockwell, but unfortunately, for everyone else’s safety, I can’t just hand over security camera footage. I’m sure you understand.”

“I thought you might say that.” I lean forward in the chair, leveling my gaze at her. “I didn’t want to have to go this route, but I will take legal action if necessary, and as you can imagine, with my client being a lawyer at the top firm in New York City, it most likely won’t end up in your favor when a

judge sees that a minor was given explicit material on your school's property, under your watch." Mrs. Taylor's eyes turn into slits. "I can promise you, I will keep it quick, and I only need to see the footage from a specific time on a specific day."

Thankfully, I don't need to argue with her any further. Begrudgingly, she leads me to their security officer's office, where I scan through the footage from the day in question.

"There," I say, pointing to the screen. "Freeze and crop that." The security guard obliges. I pull out my phone, looking at the image I took from the security footage at Juliette's house of the man who entered while Terry was working. "That look like the same guy to you?"

"Sure does," the guard mutters.

"Great. Can you print that for me?"

I take the photo and head back over to the office just as Jimmy is walking in.

"Good, glad you're here. Wanted to run something by you."

"Sure, what's going on?" He sits down at his desk and I pull out the printed photo and the image on my phone and slide them across his desk.

"Same guy, right?"

He picks them up, his eyes glancing between the two a few times before nodding. "Either that or he has a doppelgänger. Who is it?"

"Piece of shit who not only got into Juliette's house and planted a camera, but also cloned her phone. He took stills from the camera he put in her bathroom—naked stills—and gave them to her kid at school."

“Oh, what the fuck?” Jimmy leans back in his chair, looking up toward the ceiling in exasperation.

“Yeah. Thankfully, Chloe didn’t see the photos, but Juliette is really shaken up, obviously.”

“How the hell did he get in her house?” He gives me a look, but I explain the situation.

“I don’t mean to throw Juliette under the bus here, but goddamn this woman, I told you she’s frustrating. She doesn’t think before she does something and doesn’t realize the risk she’s putting herself in.” I shake my head. “Fucking pisses me off.”

Jimmy laughs, shaking his head. “I told you, man.”

“What?”

“I told you not to get involved with her. You have feelings, don’t you?”

“Oh, come on.” I brush off his comment. “You think I can’t be upset that my client, who I’m supposed to protect, is putting her and her daughter’s life in danger behind my back?”

“I think that’s a very normal thing to be upset about, but that reaction wasn’t you being upset, it was you being worried ... because you care. And before you try to deny it, remember that I was in your exact same shoes before when I was hired to protect Blaire.”

I can feel tension building in my chest—tension because I know he’s right and I haven’t even had the chance to flesh it out myself or talk to Juliette about it. “Look, man, I didn’t come here for some psychobabble bullshit. I wanted to ask if you think we can find out who this asshole is.”

He reaches for the photos again, looking at them. “Let’s get a copy of these to Luka and Harvey. We can ask our informants and contacts on the street.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“What’s the plan once you find out?”

“I want to kill him, but first I want to find out who he’s working for—see if we can get him to flip. My guess is he’s one of Delmore’s goons, in which case they’ll be forced to settle with Juliette’s firm and get her victims what they deserve.”

“Let’s stick with that plan. Don’t go killing him first.” He laughs.

“No promises,” I mutter as I stand up and head for the door.

“Hey,” Jimmy says, stopping me right before I exit, “don’t worry about this thing with Juliette. If you guys feel it, go for it. I know Sierra really fucked you over, buddy, but we both know Juliette is nothing like her. It was 10 years ago. I think it’s time you let it go and maybe let someone in.”

I stand there for a moment, thinking about it. I know he’s right about the fact that Juliette is nothing like Sierra, but the idea of opening up and letting someone in knowing full well it might not work out is still terrifying to me.

“Maybe,” I say as I give him a nod. “Maybe.”

JULIETTE

“**W**hat are you thinking?” Brett asks, looking at me over the file he’s holding.

“I’m thinking I’ve gone through this employee list a hundred times and nobody is willing to testify against Delmore.” I toss the paper I’m reading onto the conference table. “And now I’m going to have to tell the victims that this is most likely going to end up in court, where they’ll not only have to testify, but they’ll be grilled and torn apart by the defense.”

“Let’s not jump to that conclusion just yet. I mean, they have the same evidence we do, so they must know a judge wouldn’t rule in their favor.”

“Oh, of course they know that. That’s not what they’re banking on.” I stand up and start to pace in front of the large windows, rubbing my temples. “This is my prediction: I think Delmore knows that if we go to trial, a judge will absolutely rule in our favor. Nowadays, nobody wants to see a corporation getting away with this shit. However, I think they’re banking on one situation with two possible outcomes. First, they know that if we go to trial, that means we’ll have to tell our victims this means years of litigation and hours and hours of testimony and interrogation, where their lives will be

put under the spotlight and ripped to shreds. My guess is Delmore will then go to some of the victims and start offering them a buyout—offer to bribe them with something like \$1 million each—in turn, saving themselves hundreds of millions in a settlement because we’ll end up dropping the case at the request of the victims.”

“And the other outcome?”

“Delmore thinks they have the upper hand because we don’t want to be tied up in court for years with a class-action suit based on a contingency fee, so they’ll come in and offer us a much higher settlement but still lowball us. They know we want \$350 million, so they’ll come in with \$100 million.”

“You ever wonder why you got into law?” Brett asks with a chuckle.

“Only every other day.” I smile. I love my job, but it’s not for the faint of heart. Everyone thinks that lawyers are soulless money-hungry assholes because some *are*, like the firm representing Delmore, but for those of us who really do want to help, it’s soul-crushing at times. “But it’s still the only job I’ve ever wanted to do.”

“At least once a month, Nathan tries to convince me to come work at his design firm, usually after I’ve had a full-blown meltdown and stressed him out.”

“And do you consider it?”

He shakes his head. “No. Like you, I feel like this is what I’m meant to do.”

“You want to grab a glass of wine after work with me? I’m meeting Blaire at my house if you want to come home with me.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice, honey. That would be amazing. Just come find me before you leave. I’ll be buried in my office, as usual.” He smiles, grabbing the huge stack of files he brought into the conference room and walks out.

I feel like I’ve been staring at my computer screen for days. My eyes burn, my head is pounding ... the last thing I probably need right now is a glass of wine, but it’s the only thing keeping me from having a full-blown emotional meltdown right now.

I grab my purse and head to the bathroom to touch up my makeup before giving Alex a call.

“Hey,” he says softly when he picks up. Call me crazy, but it almost sounds like he’s smiling. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, just wanted to make sure Chloe got off the bus okay and Blaire made it there.”

“They did.” His voice sounds low, like he’s trying to be quiet.

“Thanks again for watching Chloe for a bit while I stay at work. Did she do her homework?”

He chuckles. “Yeah, I didn’t even have to ask. She came right in, sat at the counter, and did it while I made her a snack.” My heart feels like it jumps into my throat. “She’s talking to Blaire right now, filling her in on her recent *He-Man* obsession.”

“I bet Blaire is enjoying that.” I laugh nervously. This is a good thing. He’s a good man. A man who has shown a genuine interest in my daughter and puts her safety first. A man I can trust. A man who wants to see Chloe and me succeed and be happy ... but it isn’t real, because he’s been

hired to keep us safe. We're *supposed* to be able to trust him. He's required to put our safety first.

"Should I throw something in the oven for dinner?" he asks. The feeling I've been ignoring begins to bubble in my stomach—the feeling that, if I keep ignoring it, will end up in heartbreak. We aren't playing house and we certainly aren't in a relationship.

"Nah. Listen, I'm leaving in a few. I'm going to bring Brett home to join Blaire and me for a glass of wine. Blaire can take over with Chloe, so don't worry about anything else. I'll get her dinner ready when I get home."

"Okay, sounds good. Just an FYI, Luka will be on your tail tonight heading home."

"Thanks," I say before hanging up and walking back to my office to grab the rest of my things and get Brett.

"So, before we get back to your place and you act all coy, any developments between you and security boy?"

"Security boy?" I roll my eyes. "That makes me sound like a cougar."

"Oh, please. You're 30, which means I'm about to be 32, which means we are both still young spring chickens, because I refuse to ever get old."

"We've ... taken things to the next level," I say sheepishly, but Brett's loud gasp makes me laugh. "Okay, relax, it's nothing serious. But before you get excited, I've decided I'm putting an end to it."

"Aw, you're no fun. Why?" He pouts.

"Because I know where this is headed, and it's not good," I say, pulling up in front of my house. "And for the record, I

haven't told Blaire, so ...” I run my fingers over my lips like I'm zipping them.

“Scout's honor.”

When we walk through the front door, the entire house smells like Little Italy. “What smells so good?” I drop my bag by the front door and make my way into the kitchen, where Blaire spins around at the stove.

“It's my famous lasagna.” She smiles. “Chlo told me it's her favorite dish; she likes it even more than yours.”

“Chloe!” I grab at my heart dramatically.

“Sorry, Mom, but it's soooo good.”

“I know it is, sweetie.” I walk over and kiss her forehead. “And I don't blame you. Aunt Blaire's lasagna is the absolute best.”

“How do these two wines sound?” Alex says, coming around the corner. “Oh, hi, didn't realize you were home.” Blaire walks over and grabs the two bottles from his hands and looks them over.

“I told him to grab two reds for tonight,” she says to me before turning back to Alex. “Those are great choices, thank you. Oh, and would you be a dear and reach the wine glasses for me?” she says in a sweet voice. Brett looks over at me.

“I can grab them,” I say, quickly jumping in front of Alex and flinging open the kitchen cabinet. I grab two, but the third is just out of reach. I'm on my tiptoes, reaching, when I feel Alex's hand settle on my waist, his chest against my back as he leans over me and grabs the glass. “I said I can grab them,” I say a little more harshly than necessary. I can feel Blaire's eyes on me, but I ignore her stare.

“Sorry,” Alex says, stepping back with his hands raised. “Looks like you guys have a nice night prepared, so I’ll go ahead and exit. I’m going to do some rounds and then I’ll b—”

“Nonsense.” Blaire waves away his comment as she opens the oven door. “You’re going to eat with us,” she says, pulling out a large tray of lasagna, the cheese brown and bubbling on top. “Go do your patrol, but when you come back in, there will be a place setting for you.” She makes direct eye contact with me for a second before smiling at Alex.

Alex glances at me, giving us all a nod before ducking out of the kitchen. I’m about to tell Blaire how I feel about him joining us for dinner when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, seeing the administrator’s name from Chloe’s school on the screen.

“Mrs. Taylor?” I’m a little confused as to why she’s calling at this hour.

“Hello, Juliette. Apologies for calling so late. I hope I didn’t interrupt dinner?”

“No, not yet. What can I do for you?”

She lets out a sigh before she speaks. “I wanted to discuss the incident on the playground with Chloe and the stranger.”

“Oh, yes,” I say, a bit confused. “I didn’t realize you were aware it happened. I had planned on calling you earlier today to fill you in, but time got away from me.”

“Your employee did that for you.” Her tone sounds passive-aggressive.

“My employee?”

“Alex Rockwell. He came by and we had a ... pleasant chat.”

“Alex? He came by the school?”

“Yes, you didn’t know?”

“No,” I say bluntly, my frustration skyrocketing. “Actually, I asked him *not* to. I told him I would handle it.”

“Well, he came by and demanded to see the security footage under threat of legal action if we denied him.” I clench my jaw as she goes on. “Considering you didn’t send him here, I guess my point in calling is moot. I’d just wanted to express that I thought it was unnecessary to send him with his threats and demands, and that I hoped we could discuss it as adults between the two of us.”

“Now wait a damn minute, Mrs. Taylor.” I had planned on being cordial, but now I’m pissed. “I understand that Alex can be blunt, and while I wouldn’t have come in with threats, it’s awfully rude of you to come at me like this when you and your administration are the ones in the wrong here. You should be apologetic considering my child was approached by a complete stranger—a dangerous one, I might add—and given illicit material used for blackmail.” My voice continues to rise, my face probably beet-red as I gesture wildly with my hand.

“Miss Pierce, I only mea—”

“No,” I cut her off, “you have yet to apologize to me, and Alex is right, you are very lucky I’m not pursuing legal action against your school. Get better security practices, Mrs. Taylor. Until you do, my daughter will have her own private security parked on school property while on campus. If you have a problem with it, call your attorney and tell them to get in contact with me.”

I hit END CALL before she can respond—all the week’s issues and incidents culminating in this moment. I march

through the kitchen, toward the back door, to find Alex.

“Everything okay?” Brett asks, sipping his wine.

“It’s fine.” I jerk open the back door, looking outside, when I see Alex with his flashlight. “I told you to let me handle it!” I shout, marching up to him with zero context.

“So that’s what has you pissed off,” he half-mutters, not even bothering to look over at me.

“Yeah, I’m pissed off because Mrs. Taylor just called giving *me* attitude for your behavior.”

“Did she now?” he chuckles, shining his light up toward the cameras mounted on the corners of the house.

“Yes, she said you were rude and you threatened her.”

“Yeah, I fucking did, and I meant every word of it.” He spins around toward me. “She has zero right to cop an attitude with you regardless of if she thought I was rude. She’s lucky she isn’t getting fired and sued for her school’s negligence.”

“I agree with you, and I even told her as much.”

“Then what’s with the attitude?” He slides his flashlight into his back pocket as he slowly walks toward me.

“I’m not having an attitude,” I say, taking a few steps backward.

“Oh, yes, you are.”

“The point is you should have let me handle it. I’m her mother. I *said* I would handle it.”

“No.” He smiles, his toes practically touching mine when my back hits the rough brick of my house. “And you should certainly know by now that I’ll do whatever I think is best for you and Chloe when it comes to your safety.”

“Fine, but next time tell me. Don’t do it behind my back.”

He cocks his head. “Like you did with Terry?”

“Seriously? I apologized and told you how horrible I felt about that. As a mother, it’s—I feel terrible.”

“Good, I want you to. I want you to be terrified of making another mistake like that, because next time, it might not turn out so well.”

I glare up at him. “You’re an asshole, you know that?”

“Yeah, I do.” He reaches out to brush my hair behind my ear, but I turn my head away from him. He’s clearly upset. His hand darts out to grab my chin and turn my face back toward him. “But you like it, don’t you, Jules?” I stare at him. This is the first time he’s called me by my nickname. “Even if you never admit it,” he drags his hand down my jaw until it rests at the base of my throat, “we both know you like it. It gets you wet knowing I’m not a soft man you can boss around.” He presses his fingers against the sides of my throat. “Or maybe that’s what gets you off.”

“I’ve never pretended it doesn’t. I enjoy some fire—some attitude—but you try my patience.”

His other hand rests on the brick wall above my head as he leans in closer. “I don’t know what that was earlier—you suddenly giving me the cold shoulder when my cum was leaking down your thighs this morning when you woke up—but get it out of your system right now.”

“God,” I attempt to look away from him, but he jerks my head back into place, “you’re so crass.”

“Mm-hmm, and it’s about to get a whole lot worse, because after your friends leave tonight, I’m going to show you exactly what gets me off.” I roll my eyes and that only

spurs him on. “Go ahead, keep shit-talking, keep up the attitude, but when you’re begging for forgiveness later when my cock is so deep down your throat you can barely breathe, I’ll remember this.”

“And if I say *no*?”

He smirks. “You won’t.” His hand migrates up my neck, into my hair, as he tugs me forward, his lips hovering over mine. “I am going to stuff every fucking hole of your body tonight with my tongue, fingers, or cock. There won’t be a single fucking inch of you I haven’t touched.”

My entire body is alight with excitement. I lean forward to kiss him, but he jerks my neck back, shaking his head.

“Tsk, tsk. You don’t deserve that yet. If you behave yourself through dinner, I’ll let you touch me, otherwise, you’re my plaything tonight, kitten.”

He releases me, walking away like we just had a discussion about what color of paint would look best in the living room. He resumes his rounds, looking up at the cameras before disappearing around the corner.

I walk back into the house, my head feeling like it’s floating above my body, which is aching with need.

“Did you just—” Brett glances around then lowers his voice. “Did you just have a quickie?” The second he says it, Blaire’s head whips around like Linda Blair’s in *The Exorcist*.

“A WHAT?”

“No,” I say, bringing my finger up to my lips and shushing my friends. “Stop it! Chloe is in the other room,” I half-whisper, half-mouth. Blaire gives me a stare and I shrug. “Sorry, I was going to tell you. We’ll talk later.” I do a weird

sideways head tilt, trying to get the shock to dissipate quickly, when I hear the back door open and Alex walk in.

To my surprise, everyone behaves at dinner—most likely because Chloe is present. If she hadn't been, I'm sure the conversation would've been thick with innuendo and giggles from Brett and Blaire.

Chloe retires to her room to read, and after I make sure her lights are out and she's in bed, we sit in the living room, sipping wine and talking about the case until I can't take it any longer.

“Okay, enough work talk, please. What's new with you two?” I ask.

“Seriously?” Blaire asks, looking at me then Brett. “Spill.”

I look over my shoulder, double-checking that Alex isn't within earshot, and briefly tell her that he and I have kissed.

“That's it?” she says, clearly disappointed.

“Hey,” Alex says, interrupting us, appearing out of nowhere. “I'm going to shower and head upstairs. Just wanted to tell you guys good night and thanks for the lasagna, Blaire. Seriously fantastic.”

“Anytime,” she smiles.

“Good night.” I wave dismissively at him and he smirks, looking down at the floor before turning his eyes back on me. He steps through the doorway, walking over to where I'm seated on the couch. He grabs my hand, pulling me upright just as his hands are in my hair, his tongue in my mouth.

“See you in bed,” he says before walking out of the room and up the stairs, leaving me completely speechless.

“Clearly,” Blaire says after several seconds of silence,
“*way* more than just a kiss.”

ALEX

I sit in a chair in the corner of her bedroom, waiting patiently for her to come upstairs. I imagine she has to fill her friends in on things—something I have no idea if they already knew, but they sure as shit do now.

I smile, remembering the look on her face when I kissed her and walked out of the room. I can't decide if she'll come up here like a bat out of hell, or if she's finally accepted what I told her earlier about what was going to happen tonight.

Finally, the soft click of her footsteps echoes up the stairs. I sink down into the chair a little lower, my hand resting on my bare stomach, my legs outstretched.

“Wasn't sure if you were going to slap me again,” I say as she glances toward me once she enters the room. She kicks off her shoes, her blonde hair shimmering in the moonlight.

“I don't have it in me to fight with you tonight,” she says as she reaches for the buttons on her blouse. “And I'm too tipsy to care.”

“How tipsy?”

“Enough to tell you we can't keep doing this,” she huffs, unable to get the last button undone. She pulls the blouse over

her head, tossing it onto the floor before reaching for the zipper on the back of her skirt.

“I thought we said we would talk about things. Now you’re just making decisions for both of us?” I don’t attempt to hide the frustration in my voice.

“Yeah, we *are* talking about it now, aren’t we?” Her skirt slides down her legs into a puddle at her feet, which she steps out of. She’s in nothing but her lace bra and panties.

“No, you’re tipsy and we already discussed earlier what was going to happen tonight.”

“What’s the point?” Her arms flop by her side in a halfhearted attempt to gesture. “We both know this isn’t going anywhere. You’re jaded and I don’t trust anyone.”

I stand up, my cock already begging for attention at the sight of her body. Her eyes fall from mine down my bare chest to my low-slung pajama bottoms. She swallows.

“Is that what you think? That this isn’t going anywhere? Is that what you want?”

She stares at me, unblinking. “Isn’t that what *you* want? Isn’t that your entire reputation?”

“It was,” I say softly. “I’ve never met a woman like you.” I lean in, planting kisses along her neck until I reach her earlobe, where I bite down. “But if you think I’m going to let you tell me that this is done, you don’t know me very well.” I pull back to look at her, her eyes now dark. “I know you want more, Juliette, so tell me. Tell me what you want.”

Her eyes search mine, her lips part, and she reaches up to slowly pull her bra strap down her arm. “I want you to fuck me.”

I grab her firmly behind the back of her neck, tugging her forward. “Earn it.”

“H-how?”

“Get the toy I bought for you.” She turns around and walks over to her bedside table, opening the drawer and pulling it out. She hands it to me.

“Good girl. Now, strip and sit on the end of your bed.” She finishes removing her bra, then swivels her hips back and forth a little as she tugs her panties down her thighs. “Sit,” I repeat, and she obeys.

I place the vibrator on the bed next to her as I slowly crouch down. I place a hand on either knee, pushing them apart so she’s spread wide in front of me. She gasps, her fingers gripping the comforter.

“Now,” I say, reaching for the vibrator and turning it on, to a low speed. “I want you to get this nice and wet for me.” I drag it up and down her folds, dipping the tip just inside her opening. I repeat it a few more times, her wetness gradually covering the toy. I stand up, handing it to her. She looks up at me, confused, as I walk back over to the chair and sink down. “I want to watch you fuck yourself. But don’t come.”

She picks up the toy, dragging it over each nipple and down between her thighs. Either the wine has allowed her to loosen up or she’s just completely lost in the moment, because she puts on a show. Her head lolls back to one side, her tits jutting out as she dips the toy into her pussy.

“That’s right, baby. Stuff yourself for me.”

“Ohhhh,” a porn-star-worthy moan falls from her lips as she begins to slide the toy in and out of herself. “Ohhh, yesss,”

she groans, picking up the pace a little faster as she hits the button to increase the vibration.

“Don’t you dare come,” I say, reaching into my pajamas. I pull out my cock, a bead of precum already on the tip. I grip my shaft tightly, my eyes rolling back in my head as I have to force myself from coming already.

Juliette’s head falls back, her chest rising and falling rapidly as her thighs begin to shake. Then, before I can stop her, her body begins to convulse as an orgasm takes over her body.

“Don’t you d—” I jump up, knocking the toy from her hand, but it’s too late. Her fingers are rubbing her clit as she climaxes. I stare down at her, a look of pleasure on her face and not an ounce of regret. “You little slut.” My hand is around her throat as I pull her down to her knees. “Since you’re so greedy, open your fucking mouth.”

I grip my cock with my other hand and press it past her lips, into her mouth. I hold her head, thrusting with my hips in time with her head movements. She plants her hands on my ass, her nails digging into my flesh so hard it burns, but it feels so good.

“Oh, you want to play like that?” I say as I thrust in deeper, making her gag. “If you want pain, baby, I will gladly oblige.” I pull her off of my cock, lifting her to her feet and bending her over the bed. I reach my hand back and smack her ass so loudly, the sound echoes through the room.

“Oww.” She falls forward, screaming into the bed to stifle the sound. I drop to my knees, spreading her ass apart as I slide my tongue deep into her pussy from behind. She moans as I repeat it a few times, dragging her wetness up over her asshole as I swirl my tongue between her cheeks. I thrust two

fingers into her pussy as I eat her ass, pumping them in and out as her pussy begins to quiver.

“I warned you,” I say, standing back up. “I will claim every inch of you.” I spread her ass again, spitting right down onto her asshole as I line the tip of my cock up to her tight bud. “Relax, baby, take a deep breath,” I say as I press against her opening.

“What the f—oww, that hurts.”

“I said relax ... fuck, just breathe,” I say as I inch my way inside her, gritting my teeth so I don’t explode. “I promise it’ll feel good, baby, just don’t fight it.”

“Oh God,” she grips the comforter tighter, “I’ve never—I don’t think—”

“Yeah, I know you haven’t, sweetheart.” I can barely get the words out as I slide an inch deeper. “You’re way too fucking uptight to let a man stick his cock in your ass ... until now.” I go slowly. I don’t want to hurt her and I know I’m not going to last much longer. She shifts herself slightly forward. “Hold fucking still.” I pull back and smack her ass.

“I’m trying but it—it, oh!” Her body relaxes, letting me in further.

“Told you it would feel good, baby.” I grip her waist, sliding in and out of her slowly as her complaints turn to moans. “But fuck me, I’m not gonna last.” I grip her even tighter, my balls begging for release. I pull almost completely out, leaving just my tip inside her as I explode. I hold her in place, riding out the pleasure before looking down as I slide the rest of the way out.

“That was new.” She laughs, looking back over her shoulder at me.

“Now that’s an image I’ll never forget.” I drag my hands over her ass, spreading her apart to look at my cum dripping down between her cheeks. “Stay just like that.” I walk over to the bathroom, washing myself off before returning back to my spot behind her. I position my tip at her entrance, sliding it slowly up and down her to gather her wetness.

“Please, inside,” she begs as I toy with her.

“How do you want it, Juliette?” I press against her, an inch disappearing into her warmth. “Do you want me to be gentle?” I lean forward, sliding all the way inside her as I wrap my hand around her throat and tug. “Or you want me to remind you why you’re attracted to a man like me? A man who will fuck you so thoroughly, you’ll never forget what it feels like to have my cock inside you?”

“Fuck me,” she pants, pushing herself back onto my cock harder.

“That’s my girl.”

By the time I flip her to her back, she’s already come on my cock twice. I grab her toy, turning it on and spreading her thighs wide apart. “Grab your legs behind your knees for me.” She complies. “Now, whatever you do, don’t let go or I won’t let you come again.”

I place the toy at her clit, teasing her as I pump my cock in and out of her. I can see her start to reach her climax and I pull the toy away, edging her. Her mouth hangs open as she moans, her eyes rolling back in her head. “It’s too much.” Her hands start to slip.

“What did I say, Juliette?” I pull the toy away and still my movements, looking down at her swollen and pink pussy. “You’re throbbing for me, baby.” I place the toy back against

her clit, turning it to its highest setting as I thrust long, slow, deep strokes.

She tries to mumble—to tell me she’s coming—but the words are garbled. I leave the toy at her clit, her pussy milking my cock so thoroughly, my vision starts to blur as I unload inside her. “Fuuuuuuck yessss!” The muffled sound of the toy buzzes beside us as I collapse on top of her.

“Are you okay?” I pull myself up onto my arm and look down at her, a pleased look on her face.

“Yes.” She looks away from me.

“Hey, what is it?” I brush a stray lock of her hair out of her face.

“Just never expected to do that.” Her cheeks redden.

“Do you regret it?”

She thinks for a second, shaking her head *no*.

“Good. Something about you—” I hesitate, unsure if I should say it, but it’s like my brain won’t let me keep it inside. “Something about you makes me want to claim you in ways no other man has—to mark you.” I lean down and gently bite her shoulder. “Make you mine.” The last words are barely a whisper, but they’re there, out in the open.

“Alex.”

“Shh,” I press my lips against hers, “we can talk about it tomorrow.” I pull her body against mine as I deepen our kiss, hoping I can convey with my body what I can’t seem to say with my words. Praying she feels the same.

We take a shower together, neither of us talking as she allows me to wash her. I crawl into bed with her, pulling her back against my chest as I bury my nose in her neck.

“Are you staying?”

I can't tell if it's a request or a question, but I tighten my hold on her body. “Staying.”

“WE'VE LIKELY GOT one confirmed identification on one of them,” Luka says to me as I take a seat in the office. “Peter McDonald, goes by Mick.”

“Meaning?”

“My guy said it's for sure him. Harvey's guy said it looks like him, but can't confirm.”

“My contact said he's got a temper, known for putting his hands on women,” Harvey adds.

“Sounds like a real gentleman.” I nod, looking at Jimmy. “That enough for me to grab him?”

“What's your plan?” he asks.

“I'm thinking we find out where he likes to hang out, grab him, then take him to the warehouse for a little chat. The boys happen to mention where our friend Mick likes to hang out?” I look back at Luka and Harvey.

“Bay Ridge,” Harvey says. “Apparently his cousin owns a boxing gym over there. He also drinks at Sullivan's down the street from the boxing gym.”

“Well, lucky for us,” I smile, “our wise guy isn't so wise when it comes to being a creature of habit.”

“Let's keep it low-key, boys.” Jimmy gives us a stern look. “I don't need the cops getting involved.”

“Yes, sir.” I stand up and look over at Harvey. “You’re with me. Luka, you head over to Chloe’s school.”

Harvey and I walk out to the van and make our way over to the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bay Ridge. It’s not long before we see Mick exit Sullivan’s, making his way down the sidewalk toward his cousin’s gym.

“Let’s go.” We fling the doors open, Harvey hanging back to walk up behind him in case he runs. I swing around to walk toward him.

“Hey, Mick!” I smile. “Long time no see.”

He stops, looking at me suspiciously. “Do I know you?”

“Well, you don’t,” I say with an even bigger smile, “but you’re about to.” He turns and looks behind him, about to take off, when I shake my head.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” I point toward Harvey, his 6’6” frame towering over the smaller man. “You’ve got two choices here, Mick. You can make this easy and come with us, or you can make it difficult—or should I say, painful.”

He fakes left then darts to his right trying to scurry away, but Harvey reaches one arm out and clotheslines the guy, sending him straight onto his back on the concrete sidewalk. He coughs, sputtering for breath with the wind knocked out of him.

“Looks like you went with the difficult route.” I smile over him as Harvey leans down and grabs his jacket, pulling him up in one swift move and walking him toward the van, where he shoves him inside. He zip-ties Mick’s hands, shoving a bag over his head before we take off and head toward the warehouse.

“Who the fuck are you?” Mick asks after we sit him down and remove the bag.

“That’s not really important,” I say, taking a seat in the chair across from him. “What *is* important is what we want.”

“Which is?”

“Information. Rumor has it, Mick—I can call you Mick, right?—is that you like to break into women’s homes, plant cameras, clone their phones, approach their children at their school, and give them illicit photographs. Sound familiar?”

Mick shrugs, a smirk on his face. “Doesn’t sound like me.”

“I thought you might say that.” I pull out the photos of him entering and exiting Juliette’s house, along with ones from the school’s security camera. “Now we both know you’re aware you were under surveillance when you did these things, which is why you wore a disguise ... or so you thought. Turns out, sunglasses, a hoodie, and a hat aren’t enough to keep people from recognizing you.”

“Please,” he scoffs, “that could be anybody.”

I look at the photos. “I wouldn’t say that. I mean, how else are we sitting here right now? Clearly, two people recognized you, and they were more than happy to identify you—sell you out for ... what did we give them, Harvey?”

“Five hundred dollars,” Harvey’s deep voice echoes in the almost-empty warehouse.

“Five hundred dollars.” I smile.

“You can torture me all you want, I’m not saying shit.”

“I have no interest in torturing you. There are no weapons here.” I motion to the emptiness around us. “In fact,” I reach into my holster, removing my gun and taking the clip out,

holding them up in different hands. “I won’t even be armed.” I walk my gun over to Harvey and hand it to him.

“So what is this, then?”

“A negotiation. Look, we both know who you work for, and if I had to guess, this isn’t the first time they’ve employed your services, which makes me think you know the importance of protecting yourself. I don’t have any proof, but my guess is you also intimidated Talia Fernandez’s family as well, at your employer’s behest. A billion-dollar company like Delmore wouldn’t risk having a paper trail that led back to you, and Prince, Dune & Bellows are far too smart to incriminate themselves like that. But a lowlife like yourself is probably pretty street smart and knows how to document conversations, offers, etc., so you have an insurance policy. Am I right?”

Mick looks to the side then back at me, telling me exactly what I already know.

“Good, I was counting on that.”

“So that’s what this is about? That I’m working for these guys?”

“I don’t give a fuck who you work for. I know that your business endeavors aren’t legal, but I don’t give a fuck about that either. What I do care about is you coming after someone I was hired to protect. And I was hired to protect Juliette Pierce. While you might be a low-level criminal, the people she’s going after—the people you’re working for—are the real bad guys. I’m talking scum of the earth, worst of the worst.”

For a brief second, I think I see compassion flash across his face. “Why should I care?” He shrugs. “Has nothing to do with me.”

“Well, it does and it doesn’t, Mick. You see, Delmore has destroyed people’s lives. The victims have lost their homes, their health, and now are trapped in more medical debt than you can imagine because of this greedy company. Miss Pierce is fighting to get those people the money they deserve, but they’re fighting her and trying to lowball these victims.” I try to appeal to some sense of decency with this asshole, but I don’t think it’s actually going to work.

“Again, what does that have to do with me? I don’t give a shit.”

“I thought you might say that. Here’s my plan: I know you work for them, and I have evidence with these photos of you breaking and entering and approaching a minor with pornographic material, so based on those charges alone, and with your already extensive record, I’d say you’d get 10 years minimum at Rikers Island. Right, Harvey? Ten years?”

“Yeah, and they don’t take kindly to people who have any sort of charges involving minors,” Harvey reiterates.

“So here’s the fucking deal: You’re going to set up a meeting with your contact, and you’re going to let me know when and where you’re meeting them. I’ll be surveilling with Harvey and you’ll be wired. And before you even think about saying you’re not a snitch and won’t do it, they will kill you when I tell them what I know. All I have to do is send them this photo.” I pull out my phone and snap a picture of Mick tied to the chair in front of me. “You’re not an asset to them; you’re a fucking liability. And they’ll make damn sure you won’t talk.”

“What the hell am I supposed to be meeting them about?”

“I don’t give a shit. Think of something; you’re a criminal. Tell them you want to negotiate your pay. And just so you’re

clear, if you think there's a way you can tell them about this meeting and convince them not to kill you, again, I'll go to the cops with what I have and you'll be slapped with a summons to testify in court against Delmore. You will be dragged through the legal process and forced on the stand to testify against the billion-dollar corporation you ratted out, and then you'll be left on your own to hide from them when they come to hunt you down. Basically, Mick, unless you agree to work with us, you're fucked with a capital F."

"How are you going to keep me safe? If I testify against them and they come after me, then that means they'll be after me anyway if they find out I snitched."

"Yeah, I've thought about that too. If you don't go along with our plan and we're forced to make you testify, my men and I will walk—no protection, nothing. You'll be on your own. If you do it our way, we'll have you on a first-class flight back to Ireland long before we take the information to them."

He bounces on his toes, glancing between Harvey and me, calculating his odds. "Fine. What do I have to do?"

"First, you can give me all the photos you have of Miss Pierce from that bathroom camera you installed, then delete any digital copies."

JULIETTE

“I need to talk to you about something.”

I glance over at Alex after putting away the dinner leftovers. He has a serious look on his face. “Okay. Right now?”

“If that’s okay?”

“Sure.” I wipe my hands on the dish towel and lean against the counter.

“I found the guy—the one who broke into your house and gave Chloe the envelope. His name is Peter McDonald, goes by Mick.”

“What?” I feel the color drain from my face. “You found him? Where is he?”

“I did. He confessed to everything—had to, with the proof I had. And just so you’re aware, I shredded the photos from the camera he put in your bathroom and made sure he deleted all the digital files. But with all that being said, I let him go.”

“What?” I shake my head as if I didn’t hear him correctly. “Let him go?”

“Yeah. Harvey and I picked him up and I made him an offer he couldn’t refuse. He agreed to it and it’s going to save your case.”

“Okay, I’m going to need a breakdown, step by step, on what you’re saying. Also, how do you know he won’t just run now that you’ve let him go?”

“We’re watching him. If he so much as makes the first step toward the airport, he knows there will consequences.” He launches into everything, telling me about how Mick agreed to wear a wire and set up a meeting with his contact.

“So when is this meeting?”

“Tomorrow. Harvey and I will tail him, get surveillance, have audio, video, pictures, you name it.”

“And how does that save my case?”

“We made sure he had some key phrases to say to get them talking. He’s going in under the guise of negotiating his pay with them—what he’s getting paid to blackmail you. He’s going to drop your name, the firm’s name, the company’s name, and make sure they acknowledge that they paid him to follow you.”

“What if they don’t? What if they know it’s a setup?”

“We asked him that, and he said his contact either isn’t too sharp or is so arrogant that they don’t give a shit, because according to him, they work at the firm.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “This is crazy. Someone from Prince, Dune & Bellows hired him on behalf of Delmore? He said that?”

“Yes, and he has proof. He’s smart and has worked with them long enough that he has his own insurance policy, I guess.”

“Okay,” I pace, thinking about what this means, “so then when the cops show up and arrest him, he testifies.” I talk

through it, but Alex interrupts me.

“No Jules, no cops. Just Harvey and me on this. Jimmy doesn’t want the cops involved.”

“Then how does that help me? I can’t just have some rogue security team kidnapping a man and blackmailing him into testifying. That can get me disbarred.”

“I’m not talking about testifying. I’m saying we get the proof and go straight to your meeting with the law firm and Delmore and shove it in their faces so they accept your offer.”

“Are you serious?” I can’t help but laugh. “Do you really think that would fly at my firm? This isn’t a TV law drama, Alex. That shit doesn’t happen, and if it does, we end up getting sued or the case gets thrown out.”

“So what? You want to just bend over and let this company fuck you and all their victims over because you don’t want to get your hands dirty?” His tone goes from even to elevated.

“Excuse me, but I didn’t ask you to solve this problem for me. That is quite literally my job as the attorney on this case. And it’s not that I don’t want to get my hands dirty, it’s that getting my hands dirty can have serious repercussions for me and my firm ... and my family.” I toss the towel on the counter, frustrated.

“Then let me do it. You don’t have to get involved.”

“No, I want to win this case the right way.”

“The right way or the hard way?”

“So now you’re an expert on my job?” I can feel my blood pressure rising. “Look,” I sigh, “I appreciate what you’re doing, I do, but I can’t handle it this way. I can’t risk my reputation, the integrity of my firm, or the deal itself by

bringing in information that was obtained illegally. I can, however, allow Mick to testify of his own free will that he was paid to blackmail me by Delmore, and identify the person who paid him.”

“He won’t do it,” Alex says, shaking his head. “This is the only option.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s not an idiot and neither are you. Delmore won’t let him testify. The second they see his name on the witness list, he’s dead.”

“And you and Harvey and Luka can’t keep him safe?”

“For how long? Forever? If you ask him to testify, you’ll seal his death warrant. After he testifies and he’s no longer under our protection, Delmore will ensure he never testifies again.”

He’s right. I don’t think I can live with that on my conscience. “And what about if he rats them out? You think they won’t come after him?”

“I’m sure they would, but I promised him I’d send him back to Ireland and help him disappear.”

“Is he the one who went after Talia?”

He nods. “Pretty sure, yes.”

“Shit,” I mutter, rubbing my temples. This is the easy way out, but I can’t take the risk. “I can’t,” I say again. “I have to figure this out. I have a meeting with Delmore and their lawyers in three days. I just need to go back over the evidence and material and work through another negotiation with them.”

Alex shakes his head. “Unbelievable,” he mutters. “I’m giving you a way out right here. Let me do it. Let me make the call to them. You just want to make it harder than it needs to be because you are so fucking hardheaded, you refuse to accept help.”

I narrow my gaze. At this point, any effort to soften the blow is out the window. “No, Alex, it’s that I don’t *want* your help, nor do I need it. You were hired to keep Chloe and me safe, not help me with my case, so do us both a favor and stick to your job and stay the hell out of mine.”

I spin on my heels, marching across the kitchen floor and stomping up the stairs. I slam my bedroom door, the anger and frustration from this case, my conflicting feelings for Alex, my sadness over getting Chloe involved in this all hitting me at once. I collapse on my bed, letting the tears I’ve been holding in fall in rapid succession.

“ARE WE READY TO SETTLE?” Terry Dune’s sweaty face is redder than usual, his eyes squinting half-closed from his chubby cheeks as he smiles at me. His grimy smile makes my skin crawl.

“Depends. Are we talking about you accepting our original offer?”

He laughs, looking over at his counterparts. “Come on now, sweetheart, we both know that’s never going to happen.”

I give Brett a look. “Okay, then, Terry, what’s your offer?”

“Hundred mil, take it or leave it.” He slides the offer across the table and I have to stifle a chuckle at the fact that

it's exactly the amount I told Brett it would be. "The way we see it, your only option is to go to trial, which we know is going to be a long, drawn-out process." He adjusts himself in his seat, leaning forward in an attempt to appear more menacing. "And if you think we won't use every resource we have to bury you in paper, you're dreaming, young lady." He jams his fat finger down against the top of the table as he speaks. "I can just about guarantee that your firm doesn't want to lose you to three years of litigation on this mess."

I smile. "I fully expected that this was going to be your move. You threaten us with paperwork and then come in as a knight in shining armor with your hundred-million-dollar offer that's less than a third of what we're asking for." I pick up the paper and toss it back toward him. "No deal."

His face goes from red to purple just as there's a tap on the glass conference room door and it opens slightly. Nina pokes her head into the room. "Sorry to interrupt, Miss Pierce, but there's a man here to see you. He says it's urgent—that it pertains to the case."

"Okay, tell him I'll be right there." I look across the table, Terry's face growing white as he looks over at the other men on his team. "Excuse me, gentlemen," I say as I'm exiting the room and walking down the hall toward my office. A man is seated in front of my desk. "Can I help you?"

The man stands, his red hair disheveled. "Sorry to show up like this, but, uh," he hangs his head, "I'm Mick. Peter McDonald. I heard my testimony could help you out."

BY THE TIME I make it home, I'm still in complete shock. Alex agreed to pick Chloe up from school today since he knew I had the meeting.

"I'm home!" I say, placing my things down and walking into the kitchen. The house is quiet. I walk through the living room and head upstairs, making my way down the hall toward Chloe's room.

"Now that it's set up, we just have to wait until it's a little darker to really see some cool stuff." I hear Alex talking as I approach Chloe's door.

"What are you guys doing?" I ask as I lean against her door frame, a large black telescope standing by her window.

"Mom, look! Alex gave me this!"

"Well, that was incredibly nice of him." I look over Alex, who's standing by the telescope.

"I figured it would get a lot more use with Chloe than collecting dust at my place."

"Did you tell him thank you?" I ask Chloe, who spins around and wraps her arms around him.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she chants, making him laugh.

"I'm going to go talk to your mom for a bit, okay?"

"Okay," she shrugs, turning back to the telescope.

We barely get out into the hallway before I, too, am wrapping my arms around Alex.

"Whoa," he laughs, stepping backward, his hands coming to rest against my back as I start to cry. "Hey, hey, what's wrong?"

“I’m sorry,” I say, nuzzled against his shirt, “I’m sorry I was so rude to you about the Mick thing.”

He pulls me back, his palms on either side of my face as he smiles at me. “No, I’m sorry I tried to fix things for you—that I lied to you.”

“Lied to me?” I step back, my stomach dropping.

“By making you think that testifying wasn’t an option. It was. I just thought it would be easier to do it my way, but I was wrong.”

“So, did you ask him to testify? Is that why he showed up at my office today?”

“I did ... well, I didn’t *ask*,” he laughs. “I told him that’s what the new plan was, and that we’ve found a way to offer him protection—a way back home. Is it going to work?”

I can’t keep the smile off my face. “It *did* work. They accepted our offer at the mere mention of him testifying. At first, they acted like they had no clue who he was—said it was all made-up lies—but Mick looked right in Terry’s face and told him he had everything documented. Apparently, Mick’s dumbass contact at the law firm was Terry Dune himself!”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Nope, that’s how arrogant that moron is. Part of the deal is that Mick won’t testify, but after the meeting, Steinberg called me into his office and said he was reaching out to the bar and reporting Terry ... soooo pretty sure he’s going to get disbarred.”

“Oh, shit, you sure you want to make him your enemy?”

“I thought about that,” I say as I slowly drag my finger down Alex’s chest, “but then I’ve got you to protect me,” I say

softly against his lips as I lift up onto my tippy toes and kiss him.

“Is that right?” he says, backing me down the hallway toward my bedroom. “Does that mean I’m forgiven?”

“Maybe.” I reach for the buttons on my dress, undoing them as I walk across the room and into the bathroom.

“What about Chloe?”

“Make it quick and be quiet.” I close the bathroom door behind him.

“I can make it quick, baby, but I don’t think you know what *quiet* means.” He grabs my hair, pulling my head to the side as he kisses my neck, his other hand pushing my dress off my body.

I do in fact stay quiet ... for the most part. After our quick shower, we head downstairs to make dinner together, something that has weirdly become a routine for us. Chloe sits at the counter, working on her math homework as we talk about her day.

“Can you hand me the large knife?” I point to the knife block next to Alex as he marinates the shrimp.

“Here you go.” He leans over to hand it to me, and without a second thought, I lean in, kissing him quickly.

“Thank you.” I pause, realizing what I just did. He looks at me then turns back to Chloe, who is furiously erasing something on her paper.

“I saw that,” she says without looking up.

“Saw what, sweetie?” I try to play it off, turning back to chopping the spinach as Alex attempts to stifle a laugh.

“K-i-s-s-i-n-g,” she sings as I feel my face turn red. “It’s okay, you guys are in love, so I’m not surprised.”

I drop the knife and it clatters to the cutting board. I can feel Alex staring at me, but I’m speechless. Part of me wants to burst into laughter—the two of us sneaking around, thinking Chloe had no idea—but the other part of me wants to ask him if it’s real, because it feels real. I don’t know how we could be living together, sharing space and time so intimately, and connecting with our bodies the way we have night after night without there being something between us.

“Well, with a woman as amazing as your mom, it’s hard not to fall for her. She’s a pretty special lady, am I right?”

“The best.” Chloe smiles. “Are you guys going to get married now?”

“Dinner is going to be ready in about 20 minutes, Chloe, so finish up your homework and then wash your hands, okay?”

“Okay.” She turns back to her homework, completely moving on from her question.

“You good?” Alex murmurs as he leans down to put the chicken in the oven.

“Yup.” I finish making the salad and place it in the fridge to chill while I set the table.

During dinner, the three of us talk about science, space, and *He-Man*, of course, and Chloe asks Alex a litany of questions about his life. Afterward, we settle in with bowls of ice cream while we watch an episode of *He-Man* before I take Chloe upstairs for bed.

“Hey, sweetie, I wanted to talk to you really quick about earlier.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, Alex and I haven’t talked about anything serious, if you know what I mean.” She scrunches up her face in confusion. “We haven’t said the L word to each other.”

“You haven’t? Why not?”

“Well, it’s complicated when you’re my age and you’re a mom. You have to be very careful about who you say that to.”

“So you don’t love him?”

“Well,” my stomach flips and my heart feels like it’s in my throat, “I think that’s something I’ll need to discuss with him first, but I promise, no matter what happens between Alex and me, it doesn’t change anything with us.” I poke her nose and she swats it away.

“Mom, I’m not a little kid. I know.” She rolls her eyes dramatically.

“I wish you’d stay a little kid forever.” I grab her and pull her in for a hug, kissing the top of her head. “I don’t want you to grow up.”

“That’s why you need to be in love with Alex and marry him so I can have a little sister and you can have a baby.”

“Oookaay, enough of that, young lady.” I laugh, mussing her hair and tucking her in. “Good night, Chloe. I love you.” I shut off her light, lingering in her doorway for a minute. A massive weight has been lifted from my shoulders now that there isn’t the impending threat of someone watching my house or waiting to blackmail me.

Coming face to face with the man who had been terrorizing Chloe and me wasn’t as scary as I thought it would be. Maybe it was because he was in my office, and once I saw

him in person, the threat of him didn't seem so scary. Also, knowing that Alex and the guys at Four Forces were probably waiting outside certainly helped.

I let out a sigh of relief, closing her door and making my way back downstairs. Alex has just finished putting our ice cream bowls in the dishwasher, and he walks out of the kitchen to meet me at the bottom of the stairs.

He slides his arms around my waist, my mouth level with his as I stand a few stairs up. "So why are you still here, Mr. Rockwell? Especially now that the threat of someone hurting me has been mitigated and the settlement with Delmore has been reached?"

"Well, I always like to make sure I thoroughly see a job through." He flashes me a sexy smile.

"And when will you decide if it's through or not?" I keep my teasing, lighthearted tone. I know this is a very real conversation we've both been avoiding, but we can't put it off forever.

"Chloe's right, you know." His lips hover over mine. His hand comes up to cup my cheek as he leans in, kissing me so gently. "I *am* in love with you." My heart skips what feels like 10 beats. "I don't need you to say it back; I just need you to know it's how I feel."

He kisses me again. I can't keep the smile off my face. I open my mouth to tell him that I'm scared—unsure about how to navigate this while being a single mom—when there's a faint knock at the front door. I pause. "Did you hear a knock?"

"I did," he says, stepping away from me. "Stay there." He grabs his gun from his holster by the front door as I creep

behind him. He holds the gun down by his side, out of view of the person at the door as he slowly opens it.

“Can I help you?”

“Hi, sorry, maybe I have the wrong address. I’m looking for Juliette Pierce?”

I recognize the voice instantly. *There’s no way.* I walk through the entryway, stepping up beside Alex to pull the door back.

“Caleb?”

ALEX

The ex-husband? You've got to be kidding me.

“Hey, Jules, sorry to stop by unexpectedly like this. How have you been?” He’s exactly what I pictured she’d go for: tall, fit, dresses like he comes from old money with a suit that was custom-made and a vintage Rolex on his wrist. You’d never know by looking at him that the man either had or still has any sort of drinking or substance abuse problem. But I’ve been around enough of these super-rich corporate types to know they hide it well. You’d be surprised the amount of cocaine most of these powerful guys mainline.

“I—I’m surprised to see you.” Juliette lets out a nervous laugh.

“I can imagine. Any chance we could talk inside?”

She looks back at me and I step out of the way so she can open the door. “Yeah, sure, come on in.”

I feel awkward. Caleb looks at me then back at Juliette.

“Sorry, I’m just in shock. This is Alex,” she says, pointing to me. I hold out my hand toward him.

“Pleasure,” he says with a smile, offering a firm handshake.

“Why don’t we go in the living room?” Juliette gestures and Caleb starts to follow her.

“I’m going to head upstairs so you two can talk.”

“No,” she blurts the word out then smiles. “Why don’t you stay with us?”

“Of course.” I grab her hand and walk to the living room, taking a seat beside her on the couch.

“What brings you to New York?” Juliette asks him.

“Well, I live here now. I moved here about six months ago, working for a hedge fund on Wall Street.”

“Wow, congrats.”

“Thanks. I wanted to get settled and get my place furnished before I came over here. It’s funny, because I pretty much had to stop myself every single day from reaching out to you.”

My stomach doesn’t feel great. It’s more than uncomfortable to sit here and listen to the woman I love’s ex-husband talk about wanting to see her.

“Look, Juliette,” he leans forward in the chair he’s sitting in, “I want to be a part of your life—of Chloe’s life. I know that I messed up. I was selfish and an addict. I’ve been to rehab, and I’ve been clean and sober for over a year now. I want to be the father that Chloe needs.”

“I’m happy for you, Caleb,” Juliette says earnestly, “really, I am. I’m not surprised you’re working on Wall Street, either. You’re incredibly smart and driven. But you can’t just expect to pop back into our lives and be a father to her. You abandoned her, and frankly, she doesn’t even know you.”

“I understand, but if you’ll just give me a chance, I know I can—” Suddenly, he stops and looks over at me. “I’m sorry, but this just feels very uncomfortable discussing our business in front of a complete stranger. Why is he here?”

Juliette grabs my hand when she feels me stir on the couch. “Because I want him here. He’s my partner and I’m not going to keep something like this from him.” Her response takes me by surprise. “And we don’t have business, Caleb. You signed away your parental rights willingly.”

“I know that, Jules, and it haunts me every single day. It really does. I’m just begging for a chance, even to see her, talk to her.”

Silence settles over us. Juliette chews her bottom lip. “I’ll think about it. I’m not agreeing to anything, and I’ll need to talk to your sponsor first.”

“Absolutely, I’ll give you his number right now.” He pulls it up and grabs her phone, typing in the number. “I’m adding mine in there too.”

“Thanks. It’s late ...” Juliette says and Caleb stands up. She walks him to the front door and I hang back, out of eyesight but still within earshot.

“Who is that guy? Is he living here?”

“I told you, Caleb, he’s my partner and we more or less live together.”

“Well, just be careful, okay? You can’t trust people these days, especially with your kids. Can’t say I love the idea of a strange man sleeping in the same house as my young daughter.”

I can’t take another second, so I walk around the corner. “You have some fucking nerve making a statement like that

considering you haven't even seen your daughter ... in how many years? ... because you chose a good time over her."

"Alex, don't," Juliette says, reaching for me, but I don't stop.

"You don't even know her favorite book, cartoon, or what she wants to be when she grows up. You're not even her father anymore. Like Jules said, you willingly signed that right away like a deadbeat piece of shit. You're just biological source." I slam the door in his face, his mouth hanging open in shock when I do.

"Alex." Juliette has a disappointed look on her face.

"He doesn't deserve a second chance."

"More like a fifth or sixth chance," she says, reaching for me. "Hey, look at me." I look down at her, her big eyes staring up at me. "Can we get back to what we were talking about before he showed up?"

I wrap my arms around her, resting my cheek on top of her head. "And what were we talking about exactly?"

"That you love me," she says. I pick her up, her legs wrapping around me as I walk us back into the living room.

"I did say that, didn't I?" I sit down with her in my lap.

"Did you mean it?"

"Of course I meant it." I brush her hair away from her face. "What are you going to do about Caleb?" Her face drops when I change the subject again.

"I don't know for sure. Why?"

"Because I think you should kick him to the curb."

“Alex,” she slides off my lap, “it doesn’t work like that. He’s still her father.”

“No, he’s not. He bailed on her.”

“You’re right, he did, but he seems to be doing well and wants to actually try to be involved in her life. Why wouldn’t I want to give her that chance? You know what it’s like to grow up without a father.”

“Yeah, and I was just fine without him. I was better off being raised by a strong single mom than having a deadbeat dad break my heart over and over again.”

“I get that, but Caleb is making an effort to change, or so it seems. I’m not saying he’s going to be getting her every other weekend or that he’s a completely changed man now, but it feels pretty selfish to hold him back from her because of his past. The least I can do is give him a chance, and if he messes it up this time, that’s it.”

“And what about Chloe? She just has to risk getting her heart broken again?” I can feel my chest tighten. I know that a big part of my resistance to this is my fear of losing them to him. Will I just be pushed aside and replaced—forgotten? The same feeling I had when I found out Sierra was pregnant—only to realize almost seven months in that it wasn’t my baby—starts to make its way through my body.

“I don’t know, Alex.” Juliette’s frustration causes her voice to raise a little. “I don’t have it all figured out yet, but I also don’t expect you to understand. You’re not a parent. You seem to have gone out of your way to avoid responsibility, actually.”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Sorry,” she shakes her head, “that was out of line. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Why can’t I understand just because I’m not a parent?”

“It’s not an insult.”

“Sure as shit sounds like one.”

“You’re taking it wrong. I just meant you don’t know the pain of wanting the best for your kid while also trying to protect them and do what’s right. It’s exhausting and there isn’t some handbook telling me what to do. I know that if she gets hurt or it falls apart, it’s on me.”

“I can understand that without being a parent, Jules. What I don’t understand is how you can just jump back in and trust him after crying to me about how he almost destroyed you.”

“Because it’s not about me, Alex. It’s about Chloe and what’s best for her, even if that means betraying my own feelings. *That* is what you cannot understand without being a parent.” Her face starts to grow red and her eyes line with tears. “And fuck you for throwing that back in my face. I’m not letting Caleb back into my life *or* my heart. I would simply be letting him have access to his daughter.”

“Fuck me, huh?” I laugh in anger. “That’s really nice, especially after expressing how I feel about you just minutes ago.”

“Seriously? So you’re going to use that to manipulate me now?” She scoffs, shaking her head. “Unbelievable. Can I just remind you that you’re the one who told me over and over that it was just physical between us ... and then what? You just get to change the rules on me because it’s what you want? You expect me to keep my feelings to myself and not catch feelings for you, and then when you change your mind, I’m just supposed to do the same? You told me I don’t get to walk away from this. But have you ever considered what I want?”

What's going on with me? My entire world has been chaos lately, and now when things seem to finally settle down, Caleb shows up and I'm just supposed to go with the flow and figure that out on my own while cultivating a relationship with you?"

I don't know where this is coming from. It's like the floodgates have opened and now we're being fully honest with each other.

"Manipulate you with it? How the fuck am I doing that? I told you I loved you and I meant it. I even said you don't have to say it back."

"Because now it feels like I'm forced to make a decision that makes you happy or my daughter happy. It would be great if you were supportive in this, but you're not. Instead of standing by my side, you're throwing it in my face like I'm a bad mother for considering letting her father back into her life."

"You're not a bad mother, and I wouldn't think that for a second. I'm sorry if it came across that way, but—" I rub my forehead, "I'm not going to stick around if you don't want what I want. If you want things to just be casual between us, I get it and I don't blame you, but it's not going to work for me. I'm too far in it to act like it wouldn't bother me."

"So that was bullshit a little bit ago when you said, 'It's okay if you don't say it back'?"

"No." I feel flustered. "I guess, maybe. If you aren't ready to say it, I get that, and I wouldn't want to force it, but if you're saying that's all it can ever be between us, that you can't offer me more than ..." I don't finish the sentence. I don't want to finish it.

She slowly sinks down into the couch, tears falling down her cheeks now. “So I was right? You’re making me choose? It’s either what you want or nothing?”

I hang my head. I feel like an asshole. Fuck it, I *am* an asshole, but I won’t wait around to get my heart broken again. Here I go again, pulling the rug out from under myself because I’m a coward.

“No, because I won’t ask a mother to choose between what’s right for her kid and what I need. I’ll never ask you to choose between Chloe and me. It’s my issue. I’m not strong enough. I’ll make it easier on you, Jules. You don’t have to make a choice at all.”

I turn and walk to the front door, grabbing my holster and keys and walking out to my car to drive home.

JULIETTE

I crawl into my bed, my head pounding from the amount of crying I've done in the last hour. I just want to go to sleep and wake up tomorrow to a new day, even though I know it won't solve my problems.

When the sun rises the next morning, I'm already awake. I stare at the ceiling, regretting everything I said last night. I was scared, plus I was angry at Caleb for showing up, and angry that Alex took the choice away from me to choose him.

I want a life with Alex. I love him. But I'm scared of losing him. I'm scared of it being too much—that he'll walk away like he did last night. I'm scared of Chloe getting hurt, but I know that shielding her from having her father in her life and the love that Alex could show her wouldn't be fair either.

“Mom? You awake?”

“Hey, sweetie.” I sit up and open my arms as Chloe walks into my room and crawls into bed.

“Where's Alex?”

“He went home last night.”

“Is he coming back?”

I hesitate. I'm not sure if he is. “Well, I think his stuff is still here, so he'll at least return for that. Why?”

“I heard you guys fighting last night. Are you mad at him?”

“Oh, Chlo.” I kiss her head as she cuddles up next to me. “I’m so sorry you had to hear that. Mommy just got upset and I raised my voice when I shouldn’t have.”

“Were you mean to him? Is that why he left?”

I laugh, a single tear falling. “I was a little mean to him, yes.”

“Why? I thought you loved him.” Her big eyes stare straight through me.

“I do love him,” I say for the first time out loud. “We just had a disagreement. Adult stuff. I’m just scared, is all.”

“What are you scared about?”

“I just want what’s best for you. I want you to be happy and feel loved. I didn’t have both parents growing up, and it made me really sad. I’ve always felt guilty that you don’t have both parents, either. Do you ever think about that?”

She shrugs. “Sometimes, but there are other kids at school who only have a dad or have two dads or four parents.”

“How would you feel about your dad coming back into your life?”

She tilts her head to look up at me. “Like moving in and stuff?”

“No,” I’m quick to shut down that idea. “Just on a trial basis. Maybe we could have him over for dinner and you could show him your telescope, talk about school.”

She furrows her brow, picking at the edge of the comforter on my bed. “I was hoping Alex was gonna be my dad.”

Shit.

“You what?”

“I want Alex to be my dad. He listens to me, he knows cool things, and he lets me help him with projects. Plus he makes you happy.”

I choke back tears. I had no idea Chloe was watching us so closely. I guess I also didn't realize the impact Alex's presence had on her. He did listen to her. He would talk to her about her books, school, whatever. And while I know she loves talking to me about everything, I think having a second set of ears around made it even better for her.

“He does make me happy. But what if there were a way to have both Alex and your dad in your life? Would you be interested in that?”

“Is dad still sick?”

When Caleb started missing appointments and failing to show up—eventually not showing up at all—I had told Chloe that it was because he was sick. It wasn't a lie, since that *is* why he failed her as a father. His addiction took control of his life and he couldn't seem to find his way out of it. I knew she was too young to fully understand addiction, but she could understand that he was sick.

“Yes and no. He's a lot better now. He has a job here in New York, actually, and he's been healthy for over a year. He's always going to struggle with his sickness, but he can also be better and be in your life, but only if that's something you're interested in.”

“Okay.”

“Chlo, look at me.” I cup her little cheeks in the palms of my hands. “I want you to know that if anything happens and

for some reason your dad gets sick again and he starts acting like he used to—missing dates and not showing up—it doesn't mean he doesn't love you, and we can go right back to how things were before.”

She nods. “Okay, sounds good. But I still get to see Alex, right?”

“Right.” I smile, pulling her back in my arms as I hope and pray that he and I can work things out enough to at least be friends.

I know I love him, but I need his help and support with things regarding Caleb. I need to know why he's so scared. Why he always runs.

“Tell him you're sorry and then you guys can have a baby. I'm tired of being an only child.”

“Okay, well, let's not get ahead of ourselves.” I laugh as I tickle her.

“Hey, can I have Zara over later? I want to show her my telescope.”

“That sounds like a great idea.”

I STARE DOWN at the name of Caleb's sponsor on my phone, hesitating before I hit the CALL button.

“Hello?” a man's voice answers after only one ring.

“Hi, Tony, this is Juliette Pierce, Caleb Hanson's ex-wife.”

“Oh, hi, Juliette. How are you?”

“I'm good. Caleb dropped by my house unexpectedly last night, and we talked a little about him getting involved again

in our daughter's life. He gave me your number to call you. I hope that's okay?"

"Yeah, of course." The man's voice is warm, peppered with a slight Boston accent. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, I guess I'm just looking for some insight from you on whether it's a good idea or not to have him back in our lives. I know that sounds awful."

"Not at all. Look, I've been doing this for two decades, so I completely understand the pain and upheaval an addiction can cause in a family. You want to protect yourself and your daughter. I've been working with Caleb for about three years now. He was a completely different man when he came to me. He would get clean for a few months—hell, almost a year once—then fall off the wagon. I think part of it was he still surrounded himself with old habits and influences, but he also didn't have the motivation to get clean."

"What changed?"

"I'm not sure, but it was like he woke up one day and realized that was the only thing holding himself back from being a father. He's always managed to stay successful in business, but I think the fact that he willingly walked away from you and your daughter just drove him deeper into addiction."

I take a deep breath. "Do you think it's a good idea to allow him to spend some time with her? Supervised, of course."

"I think that's something you'll need to decide for yourself, but I can say that I think this time is different for him. The fact that he moved away from his world here and has

stayed clean for over a year now is a massive accomplishment.”

“Can we stay in contact if you feel like you see things changing for him—like if things start taking a turn for the worse? If he approves it, of course.”

“If he approves of that then, yes, absolutely.”

I take a few seconds. “Okay, thank you so much for your time, Tony. I really appreciate it.”

“Of course, Juliette. Thanks for reaching out, and call back anytime.”

I hang up the phone and send a quick text to Caleb asking if we can meet.

Me: *Hey, it's Juliette. Any chance you're around to grab a coffee?*

He responds immediately.

Caleb: *Absolutely. Name a time and place and I'll be there.*

I give Zara a call to confirm that she can come watch Chloe for an hour before sending an address to Caleb and asking him to meet me in 30 minutes.

“Hey, Miss Pierce! Long time, no see.” Zara smiles, hugging me after stepping over the threshold. Her hair is now a dark brown—almost black—that fades into electric blue tips.

“I know, life has been a shit show lately. I promise to sit down and explain it all to you soon.” I barely get the door shut behind her before Chloe is running down the stairs.

“Zara!” She runs straight into her, almost knocking over her waif-thin frame, making Zara laugh. “I have so much to

show you,” Chloe says, grabbing her hand and starting back upstairs.

“Okay, I’ll be back within the hour.”

“Bye!” The girls wave before running upstairs, and I head outside.

When I get to the coffee shop, Caleb is already seated. He waves, standing up as I approach.

“Hey.” I smile awkwardly as he leans in for a hug.

“Hey, thanks for reaching out. I took the liberty of ordering for you. You still take your coffee the same?”

“I do, thank you.” I smile at the gesture even though I find it annoying considering he hasn’t been in our lives for the past several years. I push the thought aside, reminding myself that he’s trying before taking the cup in my hands and having a sip. “I spoke to Tony before I came here.”

“And? Did it go well?”

“Yeah, it did. He mentioned that you’d tried to get sober previously, but something changed this last time that made you really stick with it. Can I ask what that was?”

He looks away from me, down at his mug, then back up at me. “It was you.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I found and reread the letter you’d written to me the last time we saw each other. You had every right to hate me—to tell me to go to hell—but you didn’t. You wrote that you would always root for me—that you’d always want me to get better, because Chloe would always love me. It just clicked. I can’t say why, but it was like I realized I was staying stagnant while you and Chloe moved on and were living, thriving.” He

shakes his head. “All this time, I had convinced myself I was only hurting myself, but the reality is, I was hurting everyone around me—all the people I loved the most. I knew that if I didn’t get clean, I would never be able to live with myself, because I would never see you or Chloe again.”

I fight back the tears. He’s saying the things I’d wanted him to say years ago. I’ve gone through all of the stages already: anger, denial, you name it. Now I just feel relief. “I don’t think I was expecting you to say that.” I dab at my eyes with my napkin. “I’m going to be very honest with you. I want you to succeed, Caleb. I want you to stay clean more than anything, because I want you and Chloe to have a relationship. I’m not saying it’s going to be perfect from day one. I think you’re going to have to work really hard to earn her trust and friendship—and hopefully respect and unconditional love—but I know that’s possible. I believe in you.”

He wipes at his eyes. “Now I’m the one crying.” He laughs. “I can’t tell you how much that means to me. I want to be that man. And I know it will take time. I’m willing to work for it. I’m willing to do whatever you feel is best.”

“I appreciate that. I think maybe we’ll start with just reintroducing you two. We can always have dinner some night if she feels comfortable.

“I would love that. Also,” he hangs his head, “I owe your boyfriend an apology. I know I was way out of line. I think I was feeling threatened over the fact that someone new now has what I stupidly threw away.”

“Well ...” I’m not sure what to say, since I don’t think Alex is or ever was my boyfriend. “We can cross that bridge later. For now, I’ll talk to Chloe and see what she feels

comfortable with. I did talk to her this morning about seeing you and having you in her life, and she is open to it.”

We talk for a little while longer, catching up on our lives. “I should get back. I told the babysitter I’d be back within the hour.”

“Hey, Jules,” he reaches out and grabs my hand as I stand up, “thank you.”

I take my time walking back to the house. The crisp autumn air is refreshing. I think about taking some time off from work—just having a few days of downtime so I can try to feel rested and refreshed after these last few months.

As I round the corner and start down my street, I see a familiar black sports car parked on the side of the road. As I approach, the driver’s side door swings open and Alex’s long, black-jean-clad legs swing out. He stands up, walking around to the sidewalk I’m on to lean against the passenger side of his car.

The butterflies I normally get when I see him feel like a lead weight in the bottom of my stomach. I’m guessing he’s here to get his things, and I can’t bear the thought of this being the end. The closer I get, the heavier the feeling becomes. I open my mouth to apologize when I’m within a foot of him, but he reaches his arm out to grab my wrist and pulls me right into his arms.

“I lied,” he says as he kisses me, “I can’t walk away.”

Suddenly, the heavy weight in my stomach bursts into a million butterflies, dancing through me as I smile against his lips.

“I don’t want you to walk away,” I say between kisses, his tongue sweeping into my mouth as he pulls me closer,

pressing his body against mine. “I’m so sorry. I love you. I do. I love you.” I repeat the words as he kisses me, both of us completely lost in each other on the sidewalk.

ALEX

“Alex, you’re home!” Chloe barrels down the stairs, throwing her arms around me. “Did Mom apologize to you?”

“Apologize to me?” I ask, looking over at Juliette. “For what?”

“Chloe heard us arguing last night and asked me if I was being mean to you and if that’s why you left.”

“She said she was mean to you,” Chloe says in complete seriousness, making me laugh.

“Your mom wasn’t mean to me. I was the one being mean, and she had every right to be upset with me. But we both apologized to each other.”

“So you’re staying here forever then?”

I glance up at Juliette. “I think that’s something your mom and I will need to talk about first.”

“But you’re staying tonight?”

“I’m staying tonight,” I reassure her.

“Woo-hoo!” Chloe punches the air then turns to her mom. “Can Zara stay and can we have a pizza party? She wants to see the *He-Man* cartoons I was telling her about.”

“You sure about that, Zara?” Juliette smiles at her.

“Yeah, for sure. I’ve missed hanging out with Chloe.”

“Okay, well, you girls decide what you want on your pizzas and I’ll order it in a little bit.”

Juliette orders the pizzas and grabs herself a glass of wine and me a sparkling water as we head out on the back porch to talk.

“I talked to Caleb today. That’s where I was coming back from when you saw me earlier.”

“Oh yeah? How’d that go?” I ask nervously.

“Good. I talked to his sponsor beforehand, which made me feel better, and I talked to Chloe about it this morning.”

Juliette’s bare feet rest on my lap. I run my thumb leisurely over her instep. “How does she feel about all of it?”

“I think she’s overwhelmed by it but plays it off. Either that or she really doesn’t fully understand it all yet.” She sips her wine, looking up at the sky, which is full of pink and orange streaks—like someone took a paintbrush to it. “She said she’s open to having her dad in her life. I told her it would be very limited. I don’t want to just throw her into it. I’m thinking supervised interactions, maybe a coffee date or dinner first.”

“About that ... my behavior last night was out of line. Well, no, it was more than that: It was wrong. Chloe should have her dad in her life, and I was coming from a place of jealousy and feeling insecure and threatened.”

“May I ask why?”

I stare down at where my fingers massage her feet. “Yes. I don’t talk about it, but you deserve to know my past and why I’ve chosen not to settle down. When I was in high school, I

fell head over heels for this girl, Sierra West. She and I seemed like soulmates, which I know sounds crazy for a couple of kids, but we just meshed. We wanted to get married and have it all, so I proposed. She fully supported my military career, and when I was 24, she told me she was pregnant. I was ecstatic—over the moon—and couldn't wait to be a dad. I started noticing, though, that the people I thought would be happy for us didn't seem too happy; they seemed weird. My best friend, Nick, even started avoiding me. One night, I ran into him and he'd been drinking. He confided in me that he and Sierra had been hooking up behind my back for over a year. It started when I was away at training. He thought the baby was his, and that turned out to be true. Seven months into the pregnancy, she confirmed it with a paternity test and my entire world shattered.”

“Oh my God.” She reaches her hand out to rest on my arm.

“The worst part about it was she and Nick just moved on with each other like I never existed. Everyone who was supposed to be happy for Sierra and me were now in their corner. I never got closure, never understood what I did wrong. I mean, I could see if we we'd been fighting or were toxic and always breaking up, but it truly seemed like we had the perfect relationship. We always talked about how we were each other's other half—how we completed each other and couldn't wait to have kids and grow old together ... and then, just like that, it was all gone.”

I stare off into nothing. It feels strange to say this out loud, because while my heart doesn't still pine for Sierra—and honestly, I'm not even angry at her and Nick anymore—I still hurt for myself because I let it almost destroy me for so long.

“I wish there was something I could say that would make things better, but I know there isn’t. I understand now why you felt scared. I understand what it feels like to not feel like you’re enough for someone.”

“Yeah, that’s the worst part, ya know? Never understanding how someone you thought loved you and who you loved can make you feel the absolute worst you’ve ever felt. I guess I get scared of going through that again. I think that’s also why I was confused as to why you’d let Caleb back into Chloe’s life after he left. But I understand it’s not the same as my situation, and I can’t project my insecurities from my past onto you and Chloe. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I really do understand. For what it’s worth, Caleb did say he owes you an apology.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I told him we can work on that later.” She laughs. “Also, at the time, I wasn’t sure if it was something we’d even get a chance to talk about again when I saw Caleb earlier. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever see you again.”

“I’m sorry, baby. I hate that I made you feel that way.” I reach my hand across us and cup her face. “I’m happy to talk to him and apologize for how I responded. I want Chloe to feel supported by me and I don’t ever want to come between her and happiness.”

“You’re amazing, you know that, Mr. This-Is-All-It-Can-Ever-Be?” She gives me a snarky look and I swing her legs down, pulling her forward in her chair till my lips are on hers.

“Pizza’s here!” Chloe swings the back door open just as our lips meet. “Come on, lovebirds,” she says, making us both burst out laughing.

We eat dinner like a family—laughing, joking. We even play a board game and watch a few episodes of *He-Man* before Zara heads home and Juliette puts Chloe to bed.

“Do I get time with Mommy now?” I pull her hair back, admiring her long, slender neck in the mirror of her bathroom. I lean in, kissing the soft skin of her shoulder as I pull the neck of her blouse to the side.

“Is that what Daddy wants?” she giggles, her face turning red. “I’m sorry, I don’t know why I said that.”

“Mmm, Daddy. We could have some fun with that.” I reach my hand around and press it against her belly so she’s flat against me. “Maybe you’ll finally obey me.” I tug her hair gently. “Naughty girl.”

“You know, Chloe told me we should have a baby so she’s not an only child.”

My eyes look up to meet hers in the mirror. “And what did you say to her?”

“I told her not to get ahead of herself. She also ... she said she wanted you to be her dad.” Her smile fades and she turns around to look at me. “What’s with the look?”

“I just ... didn’t realize how happy it’d make me to hear that.” I shrug. “But I don’t think it’s getting ahead of ourselves.”

“You don’t?” Her eyes grow wide.

“No. Does that scare you?”

“I ... no ... but I just didn’t know if you were thinking that far ahead with us.”

“Baby,” I grab her hands, bringing her fingertips to my lips to kiss them softly, “I’ve thought of marrying you, growing

old with you, having babies with you. This is it. You're not escaping." I smile as her face goes from surprise to happiness, the edges of her eyes crinkling with how wide her smile is. "In fact," I pick her up and put her on the edge of the counter, "I think we should practice making those babies right now."

"That sounds lovely," she purrs as I drag my lips over her warm skin, my fingers undoing her blouse and pulling it from her body.

"You look like sex personified." I pull back to look at her full breasts spilling over her sheer bra—her pink nipples visible through the material, her hair mussed and pushed to one side. "I could eat you alive," I groan into her ear as I pull her bra straps over her arms, taking her breasts in my hands. "I still want to fuck your tits, see my cum dripping from your nipples."

"I need ..." she reaches for my belt, frantically undoing it, "I *want* you," she pleads against my lips as her hand reaches into my jeans, her fingers wrapping around my cock.

"Are you ready for me?"

"Yes, please." She strokes me. I pull her skirt up, reaching beneath to slide my fingers past her panties.

"Oh baby, yes, you're ready." I pull my fingers back out and wrap my lips around them. "So wet. Fuck, you taste so good." I slide my jeans down my ass, pulling my cock free. I slide my tip over her, through her panties. "Ask nicely." Her eyes meet mine and I wrap my hand around her throat.

"Please," she says.

"Please what, sweetheart?"

"Please fuck me." The words are so gentle, but they make my cock twitch. I step forward, inching inside her as she

groans, her fingers digging into my shoulders.

“Like that, baby? Is that what you need? My thick cock deep in your tight little pussy?”

“Yesss.”

“Good girl. I think you like being reminded of who owns you, don’t you?”

I slide in further, her thighs gripping either side of me as I begin to thrust in and out of her. We’re both on edge already. I lean her back, my hand flat on the mirror behind her as I drive into her harder with each stroke. Her tits bounce in time with the rhythm. I lean forward, clamping my teeth down around one nipple as I feel her pussy tighten. Her body convulses as she comes on my cock.

I let her finish before slowly removing myself from her and walking her to the bed, where I lay her down. I pull my jeans the rest of the way off, climbing up her body until my knees are on either side of her chest, my cock between her tits.

“Oh fuck, yes.” I squeeze her tits around my cock as I continue thrusting my hips, my thumbs toying with her nipples as I feel my release building. My chest burns and a sweat breaks across my body as I grunt and groan. “I’m gonna come, baby.” I barely get the words out before I’m exploding, my cum shooting across her tits. I grab myself, stroking one last time, leaving every last drop on her skin.

I catch my breath, looking down at her. “You look so fucking good with my cum on your tits, but you look even better with it dripping out of you.” I remove myself from her body, walking to her bathroom to grab a towel to clean her up. I toss it to the floor, grabbing her behind the knees and

yanking her down to the edge of the bed. “But first, I need to taste your sweet cunt again.”

My mouth waters and my jaw clenches tightly at the mere scent of her. I spread her thighs, taking a moment to appreciate how beautiful and pink she is. “Goddamn, I love the sight of you. So pretty, so fucking perfect.” I lean in, dragging my tongue right up her slit. “Like an edible flower just for me.” I devour her, my tongue sweeping inside her, teasing her clit, her wetness soaking my tongue as my cock begs for release.

“I could eat you for hours.” My fingers dig into her flesh, and while I know she’ll probably have bruises tomorrow, I don’t care. I want her to bruise. I want her to see where my hands have claimed her. My nose is crammed against her clit as I slide my tongue as deep as I can inside her. I can feel her body trembling.

“Alex, yes!” she pants my name. It sounds like heaven falling from her lips in such ecstasy. She shakes, quivers, finally coming on my lips, flooding my tongue with her desire.

“You’re a fucking fantasy,” I murmur, dragging my tongue over her belly, between her breasts to her lips. “Taste yourself.” I slide my tongue past her lips, wanting her to taste the sweetness of her own release.

When I pull back to look in her eyes, I can see the desire, lust ... love she has for me. “Tell me you’re mine.” I kiss her gently. “Tell me you’ll be mine forever.”

“I’m yours,” she kisses me back, “forever.”

When I finally enter her, our bodies move in rhythm together. Our eyes are locked as I fill her with long, deep strokes and her back arches off the bed. This is intimacy like

I've never experienced before. We make love for hours, our bodies finally falling limp and exhausted next to each other.

The next morning, I gingerly remove myself from the bed, not wanting to disturb Juliette, who is still sleeping peacefully beside me. I pull on my pajamas and walk downstairs to make a cup of coffee and figure out what to make Chloe for breakfast.

"You beat me today." I spin around and see Chloe pulling out one of the barstools and plopping down on it.

"Good morning, kiddo. I was just trying to decide what to make you and your mom for breakfast."

"Hmm, waffles?" she says with a tilt of her head.

"Waffles it is."

"With blueberries." She smiles.

"With blueberries," I repeat as I begin to pull ingredients out of the fridge.

"So are you staying forever?"

I pause, reaching for the eggs. "Well, I'd like to."

"I'd like you to stay too."

I pour her a glass of orange juice and hand it to her, choosing my words carefully. "So, speaking of me staying here, how would you feel about me asking your mom to marry me?"

"Are you serious?" She extends her hands dramatically.

"I am," I say nervously, laughing internally at how nervous I am right now asking for a 10-year-old's blessing to marry her mother.

“OMG, please do, pleeeeeease!” She folds her hands into a prayer position. “I told my mom that she should marry you.”

I laugh. “*Phew.*” I pretend to dramatically wipe my brow. “I was nervous asking you. I love you and your mom very much, but I never want to intrude on your life with her.” Chloe’s face morphs from a smile to shock.

“You love me too?”

“I do, Chloe. You’re an amazing kid and I feel so privileged to know you and know you trust me enough to love your mom.”

She jumps down from the barstool, running around the kitchen island and throwing her little body at me so hard it knocks me sideways. She buries her face in my shirt, her arms squeezing me tight.

“Hey!” I tug at her arms but she squeezes me tighter. “Are you okay, Chloe?” Finally, she lets me pull her arms off of me and I squat down to be eye level with her. Tears stain her red face. “Oh, sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She shakes her head, her chin quivering. “I’m just happy.”

“You don’t look very happy.” I laugh, pulling her back in for a hug. She’s struggling to explain her emotions, and I don’t want to force her.

“Will you be my dad?”

My heart feels like it’s about to rip out of my chest. I choke down the lump in my throat and nod my head. “I’ll be your bonus dad. I know you’re working on things with your real dad, and I never want him to feel he’s being replaced. But that won’t change a thing when it comes to how I feel about you. I’ll always see you as my girl.” A huge grin spreads

across her face, making me smile too. “Now, are you ready to demolish a stack of waffles?”

“*Blueberry* waffles,” she corrects me before climbing back up on her stool.

A little later, after the first round of waffles for Chloe, I prepare a plate of waffles with a fresh cup of coffee and glass of juice on a tray and tiptoe upstairs to Juliette’s bedroom.

“Good morning, beautiful.” I gently brush her hair away from her face as I kiss her forehead, causing her to stir.

“Good morning,” she says through a yawn, stretching her arms overhead as she sits up. “Smells like coffee.” She smiles then looks over to see the tray on the end of the bed. “Oh my God, did you bring me breakfast in bed?”

“I did.” I pull back the curtains, handing her my T-shirt after pulling it over my head.

“This is amazing. I’ve never had breakfast in bed before!” She smiles, shoving a pillow behind her.

“Never?” I ask in disbelief and shake my head. “Well, get used to it, baby, because I’m going to make sure I spend the rest of my life spoiling you.”

“Rest of your life, huh?” She gives me a coy smirk, reaching for the coffee as I bring the tray over to her.

“Oh yeah, thought we established that last night. You’re never escaping, and if you try, we both know I’ve got the skills to track you down.”

“Mmm, sexy stalker vibes.” She giggles.

“You have no idea.” I nibble her neck, making her laugh even more.

“Oh, need my pill.” She tosses the sheets aside, reaching into her nightstand to pull out her birth control.

“You do?”

She pauses her movements, her fingers about to push a pill through the packet. “I don’t?”

I slowly lean forward, taking the pill packet from her hand. “You don’t.” I toss it on the bed.

“So we’re really doing this?”

“Oh, we’re doing this,” I crawl up her body, “and I’m going to enjoy every delicious moment of it.”

JULIETTE

THREE MONTHS LATER ...

“Here, I wanted to give you something I found at my parents’ house. These were mine when I was your age.” Caleb smiles as he hands a gift bag to Chloe.

The first few times we met with her father, Chloe was closed off, quiet, and unsure of how to handle herself. But with each visit, she’s become more comfortable, telling her dad about school, things she’s learned recently, and books she’s reading.

“Oh, wow,” Chloe gasps, pulling out a stack of comic books from the bag. She looks at me then over to her dad. “Thank you! These are so cool.” She flips through them, checking each one out in great detail.

“Hey, I wanted to say thank you again for reaching out to Alex.”

“Yeah, of course.” He nods. “It’s the least I could do after my behavior. He’s a good man, Jules. I’m happy for you.” He smiles.

“Thank you.” Caleb had reached out to Alex a few weeks after their first meeting. Alex said that Caleb was extremely apologetic and the guys even spent a few hours together talking and getting to know each other.

Caleb has been to every appointment he's made to see Chloe, and while I know it's only been three months, it feels good to see their relationship starting to grow. Caleb smiles and laughs, reminding me of the man he was back when we were in college, before addiction took control of his life.

"Hey, Jules, something else I wanted to talk to you about is my parents." I look up at him then over at Chloe. His parents are still a very sore subject for me.

"Yeah?"

"My relationship with them has deteriorated over the years—strangely, not because of my addiction, but because of their lack of interest in ..." He tilts his head toward Chloe, who is reading one of the comic books. "While I realize I don't have a leg to stand on here—being angry with them for not being involved—I *am* angry with them. All that to say, I've addressed it with them and we're working on things. I just want you to know they've acknowledged their poor behavior and want to work on fixing things with you and Chloe."

I sigh. "I appreciate that, and maybe with time, but for now, let's just focus on the three of us working on stuff if that's okay?"

"Totally understand," he says. "I just wanted to put it out there and I do hope that someday we can all work through things."

"I hope so too." I smile. "We should head out. We're going to a get-together at a friend's house today."

Chloe and I drive back home to meet Alex and head over to Blaire and Jameson's for a cookout.

"You ready to face the wolves?" Alex laughs as we pull up outside their house.

While our friends know that we had a little *thing* while I was his client, we haven't told anyone he's officially moved in and that we're a couple. We wanted to keep it between us and just enjoy our little bubble of intimacy.

"Can we finally tell everyone now?" Chloe says, exasperated, making us both laugh. We told her not to tell anyone, which she was not happy about.

"Yes, sweetie, we can tell them today."

"Finally!" She pushes open her door and hops out of the car.

"I knew it!" Harper shouts, pointing toward us as we head up the walkway hand in hand. "Didn't I, Blaire?" she says, turning toward her then back to me. "I told Blaire and Aspen that you seemed way too happy to have just had a fling and it was over. Chloe, how could you?" she says, pointing toward her.

"They made me lie about it!" she says, pointing toward Alex and me.

"Okay, fine, I'm sorry, but we just wanted to enjoy some time without all of you hyenas surrounding us, asking for details."

"So you guys are together, like, for real?" Blaire asks with a huge grin.

"For real," Alex says, looping his arm around my neck and pulling me in for a kiss.

"Well, shit, never thought I'd see the day." Luka laughs, slapping Alex on the back.

"Yeah, I thought you were our 'confirmed bachelor' forever," Harvey adds.

“That’s rich coming from you, man. Still pining after your new, mysterious neighbor?” Alex teases and Harvey shakes his head, quickly glancing over his shoulder then back at Alex. “What’s that look for?”

“Nothing.” Harvey shrugs, tossing his empty beer bottle into the recycling bin.

“On that note, I’m going to go talk with the ladies while you and the men chat. No details,” I say, pointing my finger at Luka and Harvey.

“So, now that it’s just us ladies,” Harper says, bouncing her eyebrows, “what’s *it* like?”

“It’s, um ...” I make sure Chloe is out of earshot as she plays with Harper’s daughter, Daisy. “It’s *so* good—like really, really good.”

“What is with these men?” Blaire asks. “Seriously, they all seem to know exactly how to please a woman.”

“Verdict is still out on Harvey,” Harper adds. “Aspen, take one for the team and ask him out.”

“Oh, he’s actually my neighbor now,” she replies in her cute high-pitched voice.

“He is?”

“Mm-hmm. He lives in my building, on my floor. I smiled and waved at him the other day and he just kind of nodded and went into his apartment. I don’t think he’s very social.”

“Well, that won’t work, then, because you’re not very social either. You two would never end up going out.” I laugh.

“He’s not my type,” she says quickly. “I prefer a more reserved man. Someone who enjoys puzzles and warm tea in

the evening.” Aspen is like a Disney princess, all sugar and spice and everything nice.

“He is a beast,” Blaire adds as we all turn to look at the men. They’re all tall, well over 6’, but Harvey still stands a head taller than them. He has broad shoulders and a square jaw, so he’d fit right in with the Rock in an action movie.

“Yeah, he’d probably snap you in half with his dick,” Harper says, making Aspen nearly spit out her wine. “I bet it’s like Thor’s hammer, just thick and enormous.” She mimics a hammer pounding with her arm.

“Jesus,” Blaire laughs. “You have a way with words, Harp. Jules, what are you drinking? I’ll grab you something.”

“Oh, um, you have any Sprite?” I barely finish saying the word when all three of the women freeze.

“Sprite?” Blaire repeats back to me.

“Yes,” I say cautiously, wondering why they’re all staring at me.

“You’re pregnant, aren’t you?” Harper says.

“Wha ... ?” I try to play it cool, but they’re right. I realized the other morning my period was eight days late, so I took a test, and sure enough, it came back positive. “Fine,” I say, realizing right away that there’s zero chance I’m getting out of telling them. “Yes, but keep it down.” I say the words through gritted teeth. Harper slaps her hand over her mouth dramatically.

“Oh my goodness, I’m just so happy!” Blaire is already tearing up and Aspen has pulled me in for a very tight hug.

“Okay, guys, keep it cool, please. I haven’t told Alex or Chloe yet. I plan on telling him tonight after she goes to bed,

then he and I will tell her together later.”

“Is she going to be happy?” Aspen questions.

“Ecstatic,” I reassure them. “She has been asking me for a baby for the last eight months, and ever since Alex and I got together, she’s asked us about three to five times a week ... so yeah, I’d say she’s going to be very happy.”

“And Alex?”

“He’s the one who threw my damn birth control pills away.”

“Well, shit,” Harper says, clutching her chest, “that man means business.”

By the time we head back to our house, Chloe has passed out in the back seat and the sun has set. Alex carries her into the house, putting her to bed.

“She’s beat.” I say, smiling as I stand in her doorway. “Playing with Daisy wore her out.”

“What about you? You ready for bed, or you want to stay up?” Alex rests his hands on my shoulders, leaning down to kiss my neck.

“I’d love a nice long shower and then to hang out with you for a bit.”

“That sounds lovely.”

He takes me into the bathroom, stripping me out of my clothes and lovingly washing every inch of my body. The care and attention this man shows me is unreal; I can only imagine how it will be once I tell him about the baby. After my shower, he lotions and oils my body, dressing me in my pajamas.

“You seriously spoil me. Or is this all just an act to get me to stick around?” I tease.

“Not an act, baby. You deserve to be spoiled.”

We walk downstairs to the living room, sitting on the couch together, my feet in his lap as I stretch out. It’s become one of our favorite ways to spend time together: no TV, no music, no distractions. Just us talking, sharing.

“I did have something I wanted to tell you,” I say, looking down the couch at him.

“Oh yeah? Well, I have something I wanted to give you.” He smiles.

“Technically, I have something to give you as well. Should we go get them and exchange gifts?”

“Already got it,” he says, patting his pocket.

“Give me a second. I’ll be right back.” I tiptoe upstairs then down the hall to my bathroom. I pull open my makeup drawer, reaching into the back to grab the positive pregnancy test. I stare down at it, my heart beating just as fast as it did when I took it. I let out a shaky breath, sliding it into the waistband of my shorts as I walk back downstairs.

“You go first,” I say to him as I pull the test out of my shorts beneath my shirt and slide it around my back.

“Same time?” he asks, reaching into his pocket.

“Same time.”

“Will you marry me?” he asks, pulling out a stunning solitaire diamond ring set on a rose gold band, complete with a vine and leaves wrapping around it.

“I’m pregnant!” I say at the same time, pulling out the positive pregnancy test. “Oh my God!”

“I ... I’m gonna be a dad?”

We both stare at each other in complete shock, finally jumping into each other’s arms.

“Yes,” I say into his neck through broken tears.

“How long? When?”

“I suspected something when my period was late. I took a test a few days ago and it was positive almost instantly.”

“A few days?”

“Yeah, it’s been absolute torture hiding it from you. How long have you had the ring?”

“I bought it a week after we got back together.” He smiles, sliding the one-of-a-kind ring on my finger. “You are the most incredible woman I’ve ever met. I never thought—*truly* never thought—I would meet someone like you, and now I get to marry you and be the father of your children.” With his thumbs, he wipes away the tears I’m still crying, swiping them across my cheeks. “You’ve restored my faith in love and healed my broken heart.” He leans in, kissing the tip of my nose. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for loving Chloe and me.”

“I just want you to know that I did ask her for your hand in marriage before I proposed.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, a few months ago, actually. I wanted to make sure she was happy and knew she was loved and wanted this. I also

wanted her to know that I wasn't replacing her real dad, but that I would be her bonus dad."

I fan my face as more tears pour down my cheeks. Alex reaches for a tissue and dabs at the tears. "Pregnancy hormones?" He laughs.

"Yeah, something like that."

His hand falls down to my belly, which hasn't begun to show yet, and he's just staring at his hand. "I can't believe I'm going to be a dad. Finally," he adds on, just above a whisper, "I've wanted this for so long."

I take his other arm, draping it over my shoulders as I rest my back against him. We sit like this forever, his hands on my belly, telling me how much he loves me and our unborn child—promising me that no matter what life throws our way, he will always be there for us—that he will always put our family first.

"I know that neither of us came from a traditional family, and I know our baby won't have grandparents, but the two of us and Chloe will shower them with so much unconditional love. Plus with the support of our friends, our baby will never ever spend a single day not knowing what love is."

"I know, baby." I close my eyes and rest against his strong, firm chest. The feelings of true love, loyalty, happiness, and security surround me—finally letting me understand love and believe that not only do I deserve it, but that it does exist.

"How should we tell Chloe?"

I turn around to look at him. "I have the perfect idea. I found an illustrator online who will create a custom comic book for us with our own character descriptions, and a writer who will create our own storyline. I wanted to have them turn

it into a family adventure with all of us and the baby being revealed at the end. What do you think?”

He laughs. “Are you kidding me? She’s going to love it.” He kisses my forehead again. “Seriously, the most amazing mom in the world.”

That night, Alex and I spend some time drafting up the storyline for the comic book. In the morning, I send it to the illustrator and writer with a promise of a return date a few weeks later.

THREE WEEKS LATER ...

“WHAT’S ALL THIS?” Chloe asks, sliding her backpack down her arms as she walks into the house, which is full of balloons.

“We have a surprise for you,” I say, leading her into the kitchen.

“Another surprise?” she asks, pointing toward my ring. The morning after Alex proposed, we told Chloe about it. She was so excited, she insisted we go wedding dress shopping for me that weekend.

“Another surprise,” I say, leading her toward the gift box with a bow on it.

“I love surprises,” she says, tearing the bow off the box and ripping it open. She pulls out the comic book, staring at it for a few seconds. She reads the title then looks at the characters with their names above them. “Is this us?”

“It is,” Alex says, smiling.

“This is the coolest thing I’ve ever seen!” She starts reading through it, smiling, then I see her face change. She looks at the page she’s on, then over at me, then back to the page. “Baby sibling?”

I nod my head slowly, hoping she’s putting two and two together.

“Wait,” she says, confused. “Am I gonna have a baby sister?”

I laugh. “Well, we don’t know if it’s a baby sister or brother,” I touch my stomach, “but you’re going to have a baby sibling.”

Her face scrunches, then she covers it with her hands as she starts to sob. I run over, wrapping my arms around her as Alex joins us.

“Are those happy tears?” I ask nervously, and she nods against my arms.

“I’m so happy,” she says through her broken sobs, making me start to cry. “Are we a family?” she asks, looking up at Alex and me.

“We are a family, sweetheart,” he says, smiling at her. “And nothing will ever change that. Nothing will ever break that apart,” he says, reassuring her. “And I promise you right here, right now, that I will never, ever leave you or your mom, Chloe.” He wraps his arms around us.

Alex might feel like I restored his faith in true love and made him believe in it again, but he restored Chloe’s faith—and my faith—in trust and family. He made us realize that it *is* possible to find our happily ever after, even if it wasn’t the

traditional way. He has shown us that no matter what happens in life, he will always be our guardian.

Want more of the Four Forces? Keep reading for a sample of *The Protector* and *The Savior*.

THE PROTECTOR

I've been to hell and back during my time in the Special Forces.

But only one woman has brought me to my knees, and I was just hired to protect her.

Billionaire heiress Blaire Hanson.

A bottle blonde, walking pilates ad with perfect skin, a designer wardrobe and a fierce desire to prove herself.

Not to mention, my little sister's best friend.

She and I got off on the wrong foot the first time we met, and the day after...we both woke up on the wrong side of the bed—her bed.

But now that she's my client, those days are behind us. No matter how much my body aches to remember her.

I thought *babysitting* the princess was going to be the hardest part of this job, until her father is taken hostage leaving her to take control of the company and my security firm to negotiate with the kidnappers.

There's one problem—in order to gain control of the board and the finances, she has to be married.

With time running out and her father's life and legacy on the line I step up—to the altar.

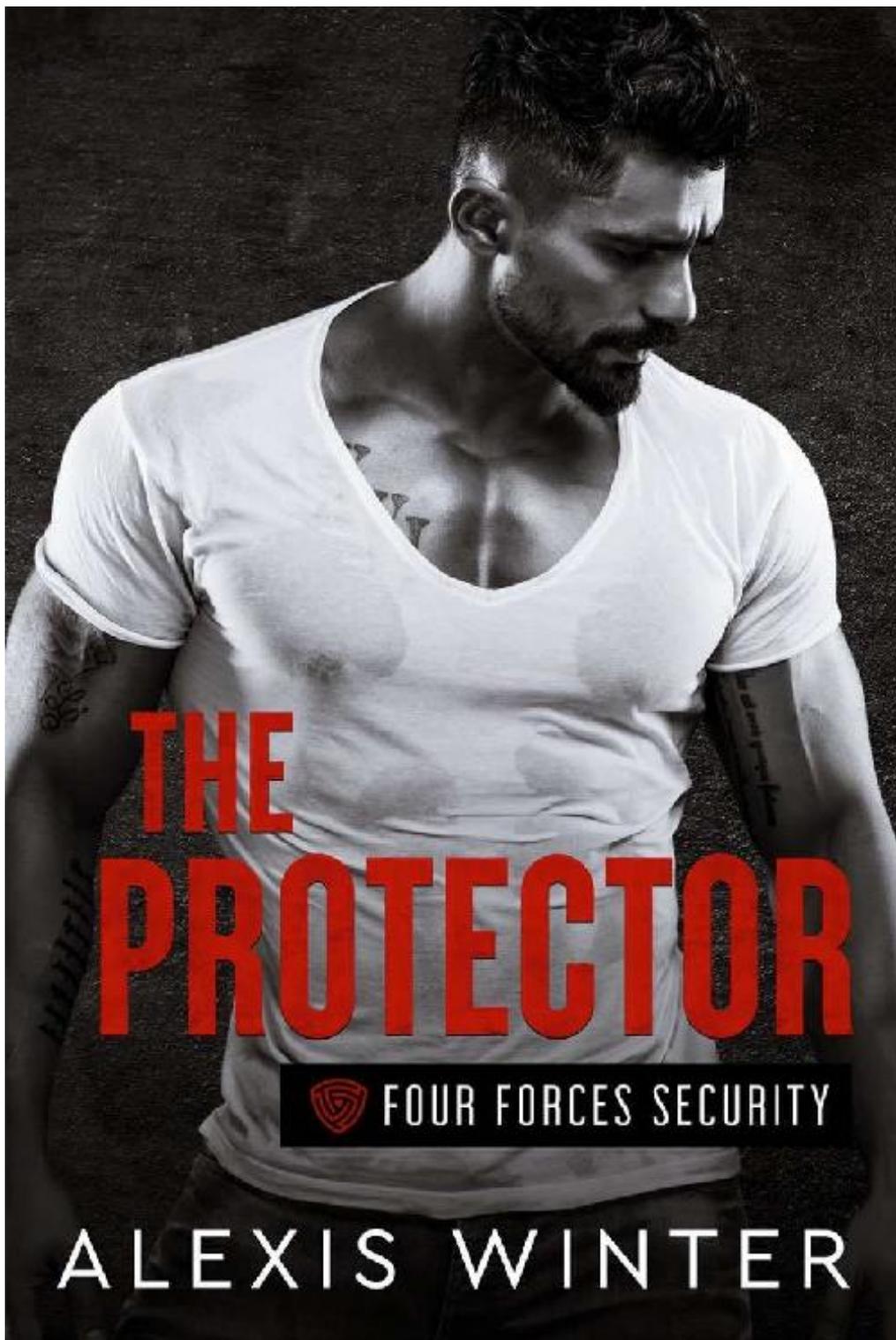
But the moment I start to see hope in her eyes, I'm reminded that in this game, falling in love with your client can end in a deadly tragedy.

Something I learned the hard way.

At the end of the day only one thing is going to keep her alive—reminding myself that she is just a job.

Not happily ever after.

She might have control over my body, but she'll never have my heart.



**THE
PROTECTOR**



FOUR FORCES SECURITY

ALEXIS WINTER

CHAPTER 1

JIMMY

“Have a seat, Jameson.”

I silently huff at the sound of Mr. Hanson’s insistence on my full name instead of my nickname, Jimmy. Of course, I’m not going to fight Charles on that matter; nobody fights Charles Hanson on anything.

I do as he instructs and take a seat in one of the black leather chairs in front of his glass desk. Charles Hanson, owner of Hanson Enterprises, has called me in for some help. He’s not just a whale in the financial world; he’s the giant fucking kahuna. We’ve rubbed elbows at a few events, me being the one to organize the security for several of his friends in the business world. He’s a big client for the security firm several of my Army brothers and I have started, and I’m anxious to get the ball rolling.

“How can I help you, Mr. Hanson?” I ask.

The old man smiles at me, leaning back in his chair. “Please. Call me Charles. I’ve called you in because I need your help.”

“How so?”

Charles shifts in his chair to lean on the desk with his elbows. His hands clasp together tight enough to turn his

knuckles white, and his mouth presses into a hard line.

“Someone is after me,” he says in a low whisper.

My eyebrows narrow together. “Do you know who?”

He shakes his head. “No. Unfortunately.”

I try to show consideration and sympathy for this situation even though it’s not uncommon. Billionaire sought after for money or revenge... I see it all the time.

“Where do I come in at?” I press.

For a moment, I think I see some sadness in Charles’ eyes. They shift from me to a picture on his desk. He stares at it a moment before picking it up in his hands and showing me the picture.

“You see this girl?” he asks, the sadness now in his voice.

I nod my head, looking at the face of the familiar blond woman staring back at me. I know who’s in this picture. “Yes,” I say.

It’s a picture of his well-known daughter, Blaire. Blaire Hanson, total bitch and spoiled brat, has been on the cover of *Forbes* and *Vogue* several times for her achievements while working for her father... and she’s been in my bed... once. But that’s a story for another time.

Who knew months later, I’d end up taking on a job for her father.

“This is my pride and joy. My only reason to live. My *soul*. My daughter means more to me than all the money in the world.”

“Is someone after your daughter, sir?”

Charles places the picture of Blaire back down on his desk with a sigh. He rubs his face with both hands before settling his eyes back on me. “I’m not sure,” he says, “but I want her protected in case there is.”

“What exactly is going on?” I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. While I appreciate Charles’ love for his daughter, I need to know the breach here.

“Someone—not sure who—has been making threats lately toward the company. I’ve had my men on it day and night trying to track down the son of a bitch, but so far, no luck. I need you to watch over Blaire. Keep her protected at all costs. Every second of every day. She’s all I have left, Jameson. She’s the only one left.”

Now I shift in my chair. Is this man asking me what I think he’s asking me? To babysit his god-awful daughter that I thought I got rid of months ago? Fuck me.

“Let me get this straight,” I start. “You want *me* to be your daughter’s bodyguard? Follow her everywhere she goes day and night?”

Charles nods his head. “That’s exactly what I’m saying, Jameson.”

I suppress the need to sigh. I’ll definitely be needing a stiff drink when this meeting is over. When I first started this company, yeah, I’d jump at these opportunities but now—now I organize security for high-ranking political officials and billionaires, *not* their spoiled kids.

“She’s my angel,” he adds. “She’s—”

The door to the office bursts open. My head jerks to see who’s walking in and—

Fuck. Me.

Speak of the devil. In she walks—Blaire Hanson.

Her platinum-blond-topped head is tucked down as she looks at the stacks of papers in her hands and walks farther into the room, her heels clacking on the tile. The sleeveless cream dress she's wearing hugs every slight curve of her lean body. Her nails are perfectly manicured an icy white, just like her cold exterior.

“Daddy, I've gone over these reports dozens of times now. I don't see the—”

Her voice stops the second her eyes land on me. Her whole body freezes, and I watch as the memory of the one dreadful night we shared flashes through her mind. It almost makes me laugh to know what she's thinking this very second. I nonchalantly cover my mouth with my fingers to keep from laughing.

“You,” she whispers, narrowing her eyes.

Charles appears to be oblivious to the situation by the way he cheerily says, “Blaire, darling, excellent timing! Meet Jameson Maxwell. He's going to be watching out for you for the next little bit.”

I smile at Blaire as she shoots daggers at me, obviously not looking forward to her new reality. My, my, my, how funny is this.

“You've got to be kidding me,” she says, turning her attention to her father. She crosses her arms over her chest and shifts her weight onto her left hip.

“Sweetheart, we've already discussed this.”

“I can take care of myself,” she protests, now looking back at me. “I don't need some wannabe undercover spy attached to my hip.”

Oh, I've been attached to a lot more of you, sweetheart.

“Blaire, this decision is final whether you like it or not.” Charles’ voice is more stern and forceful.

Blaire gives her dad a look that could kill. The room is silent for a moment as the two of them have a stare down with me sitting in between them until Blaire interrupts it. “What about when I travel?”

“He’ll be right with you.”

“And when I go to the store?”

“He’ll push your cart.”

“What about when I’m at home cooking or sleeping?”

“He’ll wash the dishes and tuck you in.”

Charles folds his arms across his chest as if he’s sizing up Blaire. His mouth is pressed into a hard line, and the two hold each other’s gaze for a few more silent seconds. Something tells me this man has seen a lifetime of her behaving this way. I love seeing this woman being put in her place.

Without another word, Blaire’s heels clack loudly on the floor as she walks to Charles’ desk and slaps the papers in front of him.

“Read ’em yourself,” she says, storming out of the room.

The door slams with a loud *thump*, and it’s all I can do to keep from laughing.

Aw, the princess doesn't get what she wants. How unfortunate.

Charles gives me an apologetic look. “She just needs some time to get used to it. She’ll come around.”

I give him a large genuine smile. Something tells me I might actually enjoy this job.

“I’ve got all the time in the world.”

CHAPTER 2

BLAIRE

I immediately hit the gym the second I'm done with work. I need something to release my anger and the boxing bag is *screaming* my name.

By the time I'm done with my workout, I'm drenched in sweat. The hour I spent punching the life out of that hanging bag should have left me exhausted, but instead I feel refreshed. The whole time, I pictured the bag to be Jimmy, his face the center of it. With every punch I threw, I pretended like I was aiming for that pathetic, sleazy smile of his. I even threw in a kick to his imaginary groin.

How could my father treat me like this? Like I'm some child who needs babysitting or chaperoning? I've heard the whispers from my father about the threats he's been receiving; I know he's in some sort of trouble. But still, attaching some man to me at all hours of the day? And it's somehow *Jimmy Maxwell*? How fucked up can this world be?

I chug some water as I push open the door to the gym. The cool autumn New York air greets my skin with a refreshing breeze as a contrast to my hot, sweaty body. As I start to walk to my apartment, my mind drifts off to dinner options. I have stuff at home for a grilled chicken salad, or I could stop by the Chinese place just down the—

My phone begins to ring, breaking up my dinner thoughts. I pause on the sidewalk as I fish it out of my bag.

“Hello?” I say into the receiver.

“Hey, girl!” my best friend Juliette squeals. “Where are you? Harper and I are at Murphy’s, if you want to join us for drinks. She’s having another one of her mope sessions, and I need you here to get me through it and cheer her up.”

The sound of Harper’s name makes my stomach churn. She’s the last person I want to see right now, given that her older brother is now going to be by my side twenty-four seven starting who knows when and I can’t tell her why I hate him.

“I can’t, Jules. I just left the gym, and I’m sweating like a pig.”

“So? Get your ass over here now. You can shower when you get home. Just for an hour? Please?”

I pause once more on the sidewalk to ponder over my options. I was really looking forward to Chinese once I thought of it, but I haven’t seen my girls in over two weeks. I can push aside my anger at my best friend’s brother for an hour or so.

“Okay, fine. *One* hour,” I say when my mind is made up.

Juliette squeals again. “I’ll have a cosmo waiting on you when you get here.”

I hang up the phone and start walking back in the direction I came from. When I get to Murphy’s, sure enough, there’s a cosmo waiting for me at our table.

Juliette stands to greet me with a hug as I approach the table. To avoid rubbing my sweat on her, I lean into her for one of those awkward butt-out hugs.

“Sorry. I don’t think you want my sweat on you,” I say, sliding into my seat.

Juliette swats the air at my comment. “Please. I already have Harper’s tears on me. What’s a little bit of sweat going to hurt?”

“Where *is* Harper?” I ask, noting her lack of presence at the table.

Juliette rolls her eyes. “In the bathroom fixing her makeup.”

“What happened this time?”

“Some guy she met off Bumble. I keep telling her Plenty of Fish is where the real ones are at.”

“So, another bad date?”

Juliette shakes her head. “Another *stood up* date.”

The problem with our friend Harper is her lack of social cues when it comes to dating. Harper Sinclaire Maxwell, voted Most Beautiful for our senior superlative, has never had a clue on how to date successfully. She’s too naive and too... *much*. Always smothering the guys right away, talking marriage and babies and white picket fences. She makes herself too vulnerable, believing the cut and paste lies they tell every woman to get her into bed. I know part of her problem is she’s too trusting but she needs to guard her heart and stop trusting every penis that tells her she’s amazing. We’ve tried to tell her this gently before, but it didn’t work. It just resulted in tears like it always does.

But out of the four of us—Juliette, me, Harper, and Aspen—she has the purest heart.

“So, how’s your love life going? It’s been a while since we’ve talked about it,” I ask her.

Juliette shrugs her shoulders. “Same old, same old. Josh is great. Can’t complain. Anything new with you?”

I give her the *I had a shit day and it’s because of a boy* look.

Juliette’s mouth drops. “Spill.”

I take a long sip of my cosmo, savoring the slight burn as it travels down my throat. My, oh, my, I can’t wait to see how she takes this news.

“You remember that night I went out with that guy Jimmy?”

Juliette narrows her eyes as she tries to recollect. Seconds later, she loudly gasps and her eyes widen. “Harper’s *brother?*”

“Yes. That one.” My voice is flat.

“Oh my God, is he hot?” She smiles.

“Yeah, well, I’m stuck with him now.”

“You’re what?”

“It’s a long story. Basically, he’s my protection now.”

“I’m so fucking confused,” she says. “You need to spell this out for me.”

I feel hunger and annoyance beginning to build in me. I briefly wish I would have just gone home after the gym and fueled up on lo mein and egg rolls instead of rehashing today’s unfortunate events.

I take a deep breath and reposition in my seat as I start to explain my situation, double-checking Harper isn’t returning

to the table. “My dad has apparently gotten himself in deep shit and, for some reason, thinks that I need a bodyguard at *all hours of the day*. So, who’s the lucky man? Jimmy fucking Maxwell.”

I chug the rest of my cosmo and set it down hard on the table. I glance around again. Where is Harper?

“Oh my God,” Juliette says in a low voice. “Does your dad know about you two? Does Harper?”

I shrug my shoulders. “No, and I don’t know. I don’t think so or she probably would have said something to me. After the way things ended between him and I the first time we met, I’m sure Harper would be blowing my phone up if she knew he was hired to babysit me. It’s all purely coincidental, which is the crazy part about it.”

“But... what if it’s not? What if this is fate?”

I roll my eyes. Typical Juliette being her hopeless romantic self. She knows I don’t believe in that fate, love at first sight, romance bullshit. None of it’s real. Even Jimmy proved that to me.

“I doubt that’s what it is,” I mumble.

“So, like, when you say he’s your *bodyguard* at all hours of the day... does that mean...”

I nod my head. “Yeah. He *literally* has to be with me everywhere I go every second of every day.”

A faint trace of a smile tries to spread itself on Juliette’s lips. I shoot her daggers and she calms down. “This is crazy,” she says. “Where is he now?”

“Who fucking cares. I need another cosmo,” I say, looking at my empty glass.

I feel the need to drink now that I've refreshed myself on what's about to happen to me.

The conversation dies when a recovering Harper makes her way back to the table, sniffing and all. I look to Juliette to give a *keep this on the down-low for now* look.

"Hey, Blaire," Harper says with a weary tone.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes at her woe-is-me face.

"Hey, Harps. Juliette told me what happened. I'm really sorry. It's his loss, you know?"

Harper sniffles again and wipes under her smeared off eyeliner. Her lips begin to quiver as if she's going to break again, and I inwardly kick myself for opening back up the floodgates.

"I just don't understand why guys aren't into me. Like, what am I doing wrong?" she says through tears, putting her face in her hands.

We've heard these questions time and time again, and by now, all Juliette and I do is *shh* her and gently stroke Harp's back. It's not that we don't care about her getting her heart broken; it's that every guy she meets was going to be *the one*.

"It's going to be okay. You'll find your Prince Charming," I tell her, looking across the table to Juliette.

A waitress at the bar approaches our table and sets a new full cosmo in front of me. I look at it questioningly and then back to the waitress. "I didn't order this," I tell her.

She turns to look back at me. "The gentleman over there did. He said to tell you to watch your limit this time." With that, she turns to walk away.

I look at the cosmo and then glance around the rest of the bar to figure out who sent over this drink. My eyes scan the stools at the bar until they stop at the very end. My stomach sinks. I feel my blood beginning to boil, and I narrow my eyes at the smirk belonging to Jimmy Maxwell.

Great. This is all just fucking great.

“Holy shit,” I hear Juliette say once her eyes find Jimmy.

Jimmy waves a hand at me with a boyish grin that tells me he’s doing this out of spite.

Keeping my eyes locked with his, I pick up the cosmo and chug the whole thing, setting it back down with more force than necessary. Thankfully, Harper is too busy consoling herself to notice.

“I guess it’s starting now,” Juliette whispers.

I ignore her as I keep my eyes on Jimmy. I guess now is when it really does start.

I feel the urge to get away from him. I turn back to my friends and tell them goodbye before grabbing my wallet and heading out of the bar. It’s now nighttime in New York City, and goosebumps form on my skin. I knew I should have brought a jacket. My teeth begin to chatter as I walk briskly through the wind to my apartment and away from Jimmy fucking Maxwell.

How did he know I was at Murphy’s?

It’s not a question I ponder over long as the thought to distance myself as far away from him as possible floods my mind. If Jimmy was going to be next to me twenty-four seven now, I was going to have to find a way to get in some alone time. It’s what I do best. I enjoy my personal space, and it’s what I love about living on my own. I’ve never been one to

crave the company of a companion. I'm completely fine on my own. I *can* take care of myself, which is something I really wish my father would have realized before hiring me some hitman or whatever it is Jimmy does.

I continue to speed walk down the streets of New York City toward my apartment before Jimmy can catch up to me. *If* he followed me. My eyes want to look back to see if he's right there, following me to my apartment, but my mind keeps telling me to not look. Just keep going.

So, it's what I do.

I make the fifteen-minute walk in seven minutes, lightly jogging the last three to shorten the time and warm myself up. When I'm in my building and riding the elevator to my floor, I peek my head out of the elevator door to see if he's in the hall waiting on me. Relief washes over me when my hall is empty.

I open my door and quickly step into my apartment, closing the door and locking it like Michael Myers is chasing me. I double-check the dead bolt and slide the lock in the hole for extra protection from Jimmy and whoever is out there trying to get me in my father's mind. My apartment was dark from when I left earlier, so I turn on the lights and step into the kitchen. My stomach rumbles, and I'm instantly reminded just how hungry I am.

I could cook something, but I don't feel like washing the dishes... I'll just order takeout and make them deliver it.

I pull open the drawer that contains the take-out menu to the Chinese restaurant and scan the items. Once I've decided on the chicken lo mein and egg rolls, I start to dial their number when, out of nowhere, I hear a deep voice from across the room.

“I’ll take the beef and broccoli with a side of steamed carrots, please.”

I scream and jump in place at the suddenness of the voice. My heart begins to quicken and nearly beat out of my chest, and my knees buckle at the fear. *Who the fuck is that?*

As if he’s in a movie, Jimmy Maxwell steps out of the darkness of my living room and into the light of the kitchen.

“What the hell, Jimmy? You scared the living shit out of me!”

He chuckles and takes a seat at my counter.

“Sorry, love. It was either now or let you turn on the light to see me. Either way, you were going to be startled.”

“How the fuck did you get in here?” I yell, trying to calm down.

My knees feel like Jell-O, and my breathing is still ragged.

“The key.” He holds up a brass key that looks like a safety pin in his massive hands. “Your father had one made for me.” He smiles.

“My *father* shouldn’t have a key to my apartment to begin with.”

“How he made the key is none of my concern. I have the right copy, and that’s all that matters.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, partly to calm down my breathing, but also to try and not lose my shit at the man whom I hate more than my annual gynecological exam.

“I’m going to say this as nicely as I can, and I’m only going to say it once,” I say in the best calm and collected

manner I can muster right now. “Get out of my apartment and stay at least a thousand yards away from me.”

Jimmy pretends to think this over. He taps his chin with his finger and looks up at the ceiling before shrugging his shoulders. “Can’t do that, princess. I’m under strict orders.”

“Ugh!” I fist my hair and begin to pace back and forth in the kitchen. “Why does my father treat me like such a child!”

“Maybe because you act like one?” Jimmy says sarcastically.

I turn on my heel to face him and point a finger in his face. “You don’t know a *thing* about me, so don’t pretend like you do.”

Jimmy lightly grabs my finger and pushes it out of his face. “Hate to break it to you, kitten, but I know you better than you think. And you can’t tell me what to do. I hate this just as much, if not more than you do. I’ve got better things to do than follow your spoiled ass all day.”

“Then don’t do it.” I’m so angry, I overlook his insult.

He shakes his head once. “Can’t. I’ve got a job to do.”

“Why don’t you lie and pretend to do your job? I won’t tell if you don’t.”

Jimmy chuckles and leans back in the stool, crossing his arms over his broad chest. My eyes skim over his body in his white T-shirt. His muscles completely fill out the sleeves, making it look like they’re about to bust through the seams. I remember his body and how attracted to it I was the first time I met him and, honestly, still am. Jimmy is built like a romance novel guy—cut abs, bulging muscles, rock-hard body, and a pretty face. But all of that means nothing with the shit personality that he has.

I had to learn that the hard way.

“See something you like, princess?”

His words draw me back to reality, and I’m forced to look at the smirk he’s giving me. He caught me looking at him in the way I didn’t want him to see.

“Or better yet, see something you *want* again?”

I narrow my eyes and bite my lip, trying to suppress the anger. How in the world am I going to survive this? I don’t even know how long I have to put up with him.

“How long will this be going on?” I ask, hoping he knows so I can have a date on the calendar to look forward to.

“Until your father gives me the all clear.”

I whimper and place my face in my hands. I hate thinking that Jimmy holds some kind of power over me with information that I don’t know. It’s like he enjoys seeing me miserable. It’s almost like it fuels him.

I sigh and try to mentally come to terms with my present situation. There’s no way around this. Jimmy will be with me every second of every damn day until he is told not to be. My life now includes Jimmy, whether I like it or not. The only way to get through this is to not play into his games and to act like he isn’t there.

But with a face and body like his... that’s going to be hard to do.

“Why don’t we set up some boundaries?” I suggest, looking up at him.

“What kind of boundaries?”

“I get that you have a job to do, I really do, but you *are* invading my life and personal space now, so out of respect for me, there are a few terms we need to go over.”

Jimmy quietly holds my gaze for a few seconds. “Shoot.”

“First off, you have to text me when you are at the apartment before me, okay? I don’t like coming home and being scared like I was today.”

He chuckles and smiles. “What’s next?”

“You *have* to give me my space. I cannot be smothered by you, understood?”

“Define ‘smothered.’”

“I don’t want you to be closer than fifty feet away from me at all times. I don’t want to feel you breathing down my neck. I need to breathe and be alone every now and then.”

“Fine. I’ll do my best. Just know I have to obey your father’s orders. Whatever he asks of me, I have to do.”

I nod my head. I know he’s right. He does have a job to do, and I know he doesn’t want to be here with me, just like I don’t want to be here with him. But at the end of the day, I am still a person who needs to be free and have their own space. I’m thirty-one. I’m an adult who doesn’t need a bodyguard, whether there’s a hitman after my father or not.

“One last thing,” I say. “*We* are on our own. Don’t talk to me unless you absolutely have to, and do not get in my way. Pretend as if you’re living your life without me in it.”

Jimmy nods his head and runs his hands through his dark hair, which matches the scruff on his face. “I thought you’d never ask.”

I roll my eyes at him.

“Are you going to call in that order?” he asks, nodding his head toward the take-out menu on the counter in front of me. “Oh, and why was my sister crying earlier tonight?”

“Nope, we aren’t friends, and my loyalty lies with her,” I say as I roll my eyes at him and disappear into my room. I do end up calling in the order, and I even order his broccoli and beef with a side of steamed carrots.

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THE SAVIOR

“You better not fall in love with my sister.”

I never laughed so hard at a threat when I agreed to protect my best friend’s little sister...until she ended up pregnant with my baby.

I take my job very seriously.

I like my life disciplined with no distractions and no drama.

Then she entered my life...

Harper Maxwell is the epitome of a bratty party girl in stilettos looking for the next good time.

She’s young, I get it, but I’d be lying if I didn’t say I’m annoyed after just ten minutes in her presence.

She has a penchant for throwing caution to the wind and a soft spot for a pathetic, man-child who keeps causing chaos in her life.

So when he lays his hands on her and the police get involved, her brother Jimmy asked me to accept the assignment of protecting her.

What I thought was going to be just a quick weekend job of babysitting a party girl has turned into weeks on end of not

only trying to keep her safe once her ex is out of jail, but also trying to keep my hands off her petite little body.

She's made it clear she thinks it's a fun game to tease me—to tempt me into wanting to wreck her little body but she has no idea who she's messing with.

I tried to resist, or maybe I didn't. But either way I fucked up—I had a taste and now I want more.

No matter how hard I try to get her to see that her ex is a dangerous asshole who needs to be put in his place, she can't seem to decide between the two of us.

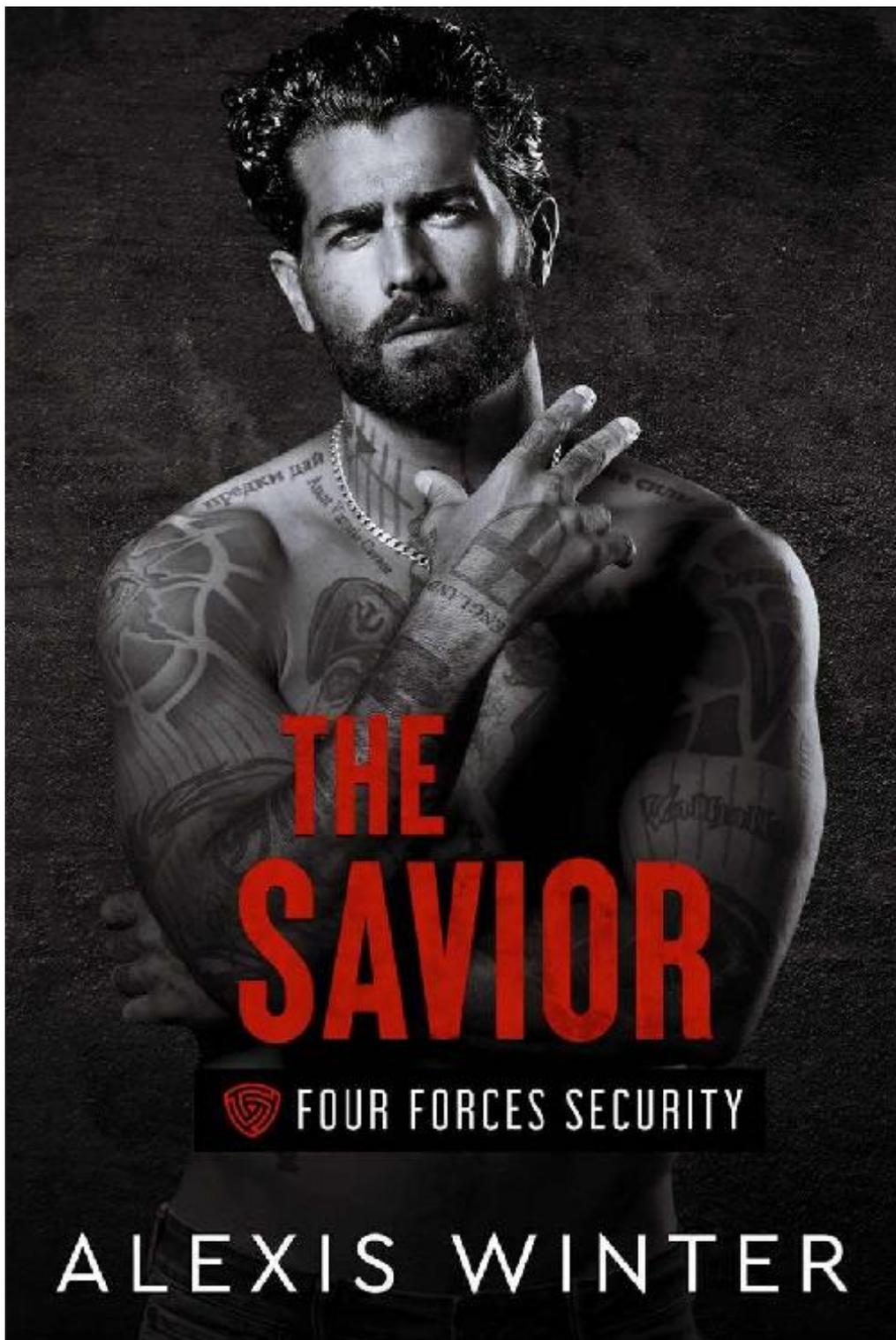
After finding out my fiancé fell in love with my best friend while I was deployed, I swore I'd never fall in love again.

You might think I'm a jaded, coldhearted bastard but I've got nothing left to give.

I learned the hard way that life can screw you over in an instant no matter how much good is in your heart or how much good you've done.

The last thing I expected when I promised Jimmy I'd protect his sister, is that sometimes it takes falling in love with the wrong person to realize what you truly want in life, especially when it's about to be ripped from your fingertips.

This just might be the first mission I've ever failed.



THE SAVIOR



FOUR FORCES SECURITY

ALEXIS WINTER

CHAPTER 1

“I told you that it’s not like that!”

“Then what is it? What—or who—has you acting like such a bitch, huh? Why do you think you don’t have to listen to me all of a sudden?”

I scoff and turn my back to him, but I’m not nearly as strong as I’m trying to project. My legs are shaking and I can barely keep my keys from slipping between my sweaty palms. I hate it when he’s angry like this. When Mason gets like this, it’s impossible to convince him that he’s wrong.

I hear footsteps behind me and I squeeze my eyes shut as my muscles tense. Mason’s rage-filled voice calls out to me, “I told you I didn’t want you hanging out with those girls!”

He puts his hand on my shoulder and jerks it toward him. Pain shoots through my shoulder and I push his hand off of me. My smaller hands can hardly get the job done, and at the moment, I’m finding myself wishing I had taken my brother Jimmy up on his offer to train me to fight military-style.

I love Mason, but I can’t keep letting him do this to me.

Mason is successful, he comes from a good family, and he’s sexy as hell. He’s everything I want in a guy, and if we could just get past this roadblock that we keep running into—

if he would stop being so insecure—we could be a total power couple.

“Harper!”

My teeth click together as his hand smacks the back of my head hard. I can't help the terrified yelp that comes flying out of my mouth. I throw my hand up so I can press it to the back of my head.

I turn to look at Mason and my eyes fall on his wild gaze. His fists are clenched and he's shaking with rage. His bright blue eyes are focused on me, but just past his shoulder, I can see my neighbor, Lucinda, running into the parking lot.

Lucinda pulls her bright pink robe tighter around her waist. She hollers, “Hey! What the hell is going on here?”

Mason whips his head around and I feel a wave of relief flow through me for a moment.

“Don't worry about it; this is between us!” he shouts.

Lucinda frowns and reaches into her pocket. She fishes around and pulls out her cell phone. “I saw you hit her! I'm calling the police!”

Mason takes a few steps toward her. “You don't want to do that. My family is very powerful.”

Mason goes out of his way to remind everyone how powerful his family is. In his world, he's untouchable.

Lucinda holds her hand up to silence him. “Stop! Hello? 911? Yes, my neighbor is being attacked by her boyfriend—”

I throw my hands up in the air. “No, wait, please! It's just a misunderstanding! We're having a fight!” I rush forward and press my hands into Mason's arm. “We're fine!”

It doesn't make a difference. Now the evening I could have spent relaxing after going out with the girls is probably going to be spent bailing Mason out of jail. I know that most women would leave him there, letting him stew overnight, but I can't do that to him. We've been through too much together.

Mason gets into a screaming match with Lucinda, and they hurl insults back and forth. His face is tomato red as he screams, "You'll be homeless by the time I'm done with you! You don't want to make an enemy out of me, bitch!"

A police cruiser pulls into the parking lot and slows to a stop just in front of us. A 6' police officer steps out of the car, with his fingers hooked in his belt loops. He strides over to us. "Is there a problem?"

Lucinda jerks a thumb at Mason. "I saw him bash her across the back of the head!"

Reflexively, my hand goes up and brushes against my tender scalp. The police officer narrows his eyes and glances between Mason and me.

Mason crosses his arms over his chest. "This woman has no idea what she's talking about. My girlfriend and I are just having a dispute," he turns to me, "right, babe?"

My heartbeat goes into overdrive as I look at Mason then the police officer. The officer purses his lips and turns his head to one side.

"Ma'am?"

My head hurts and my chest aches. I take a deep breath and try to exhale, but it comes out as a long, shuddering sound.

The police officer reaches to his belt and pulls out his handcuffs. "Okay, at the very least, you guys could use some space. Let's get going, buddy."

“Are you insane? Do you know who I am?”

The cop shakes his head. “Pfft. You’re an asshole who’s about to spend the night in jail. Let’s go.”

Mason stands still as the cop walks up to him and opens the handcuffs. The look Mason gives me sends daggers of fear sliding through my chest. The cop nods at me as he walks Mason over to the car.

Lucinda rushes over to me and wraps me in her arms. “Oh, honey, I can’t believe you would let him do that to you,” she smooths my hair, gliding her fingers across what I know is going to be a nasty bruise. “You deserve so much more than that.”

I frown as I bury my face in her shoulder. Lucinda is usually a little batty, spending her time with some cats and a few friends. I’ve never seen her bring a man home, so what would she know about what I’m doing? We’re going to be fine; I’m not letting Mason do anything to me.

Am I?

CHAPTER 2

I step into a light jog up the steps as I make it into one of the least pretentious bars in Manhattan. Most of these places are filled with business types—the kind of men who have never gotten their hands dirty, and probably never will. I'm used to getting more than a few side-eyes when I step into Rico's. It's clear I don't belong.

The smell of expensive perfume floats into my nostrils as a waitress in a tight skirt slides past me and rubs her ass right up against my crotch. Her breasts are front and center, and she's hoping I'll steal a glance. After all the time I've spent around women while traveling around the world, I've learned that when a woman looks at you like that—that shamelessly—she wants to cut the bullshit and jump into bed.

That's not for me ... at least not these days.

I had my time with that kind of fun years ago. Now I like to savor the simple things, like a cold glass of beer with one of my best friends.

Jimmy stands up as I walk over to him. He's seated on a cushy sofa set with a small table in front of him. A tall glass of beer is already sitting on the table, and it looks like he's already sucked down half of it.

Jimmy smirks as we sit down. The waitress comes over—the same one from before—and says, “See anything you like?”

I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes. “What?”

She points to the laminated black-and-red menu the size of a postcard. “On the menu, I mean.”

Jimmy’s poorly-stifled chuckle makes things even more awkward. I clear my throat. “I’ll take whatever he’s ordered. Keep them coming.”

She nods then flashes me a nervous smile. “Coming right up.”

Jimmy watches her go, then whistles through his teeth. “Looks like you’ve had an effect on that one.”

“Whatever. I’m used to it.” I sit back against the booth. The waitress scurries over with my beer, then promptly returns to wherever she came from.

I take a long sip of the ice-cold beer. “So, what’s going on? Why didn’t you just tell me what you wanted to talk about over the phone?”

Jimmy’s smile turns into a mirthless, stone-cold expression. It’s the face he wears when he’s focused on the enemy.

“I want to talk to you about Harper.”

“What about Harper?”

Jimmy’s kid sister has been an annoying fixture in my life for all the years I’ve known Jimmy. She’s the total opposite of Jimmy’s serious, sarcastic disposition. She’s loud, bubbly, and doesn’t know how to stay out of anyone’s business.

But she's probably one of the sexiest women in New York. There's no way she's any taller than 5'2", and there's a lot of good stuff wrapped up in that tiny package. She's got perfect round breasts, the kind you want to measure the circumference of with your tongue. She's got dainty little curves that could make any warm-blooded man's heart stop, and her back-length chestnut-colored hair makes me want to wrap my fist in it and tug her toward me.

However, she is still probably one of the most annoying people I have ever met.

"Well, I know you're not busy dating—"

I hold up my hand. I raise my voice over the chatter in the bar so I can make myself extra clear to Jimmy. "I'm not dating your fucking sister."

Jimmy's eyes widen. "Ha! As if I would ask you to date my sister. I'd beat the shit out of you. No, what I was going to say is, since it's nearly impossible for you to get laid—"

"Fuck you."

"—I know you're not busy. So I was hoping you could do me a favor—a paid favor, of course."

I frown as I raise my glass to my lips. "What? What does the favor have to do with Harper?"

His eyes darken as he leans toward me. He balls his fingers into fists and says, "She's real keen on dating this asshole. He's some rich kid prick who thinks he can treat her however he wants. I'm afraid he's getting too ballsy."

"What do you mean?"

"Harper looked pretty shaken up when I went to go see her the other day. She was saying that she and Mason had gotten

into an argument. Neighbor stopped me in the parking lot and said that things got pretty rough between them.”

“So what are you going to do?”

Jimmy sighs. “Harper is never going to be honest with me about what’s going on, but I don’t have a good feeling about any of it. That’s where you come in. I want you to look after her.”

I nearly spit out my beer. I quickly set it on the table. “What the hell did you just say?”

“She needs someone to look after her, or she’s going to keep getting into stupid shit with this Mason kid. I need to know that she’s safe. I know that I can trust you to make sure no one puts a hand on her.”

“I feel for you, but I’m not a babysitter. Plus Harper is incredibly annoying.”

“Doesn’t matter. She needs protection, and I’m turning to you, as my friend. Can you look after her?”

I scan Jimmy’s face to see if he’s bullshitting me. It wouldn’t be the first time he’s spent days or weeks setting me up for a prank. But I think he’s serious. I think that he really wants me to watch over his little sister. I can’t help but picture those soft-looking, full lips, and how much they’ll be gabbing when I’m watching over her.

But the look on Jimmy’s face is enough to convince me. He’s serious. He’s afraid for Harper.

I sigh and say, “You’re paying for these drinks. I’ll do it, though. I’ll watch over your sister.”

The distressed look on his face immediately fades away and he slaps the table. “You got it!”

I chuckle as I scan the menu for something strong and expensive to order. Jimmy turns to me wearing a half smile and says, “And Luka?”

“Yeah, Jimmy?”

“Don’t fall in love with my fucking sister.”

Now that makes me actually laugh. I laugh so hard that the people at the next table give me a weird look. I laugh so hard that Jimmy almost looks offended.

“Trust me, Jimmy, you don’t have to worry about me falling in love with Harper.”

Keep Reading *The Savior*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexis Winter is a contemporary romance author who loves to share her steamy stories with the world. She specializes in billionaires, alpha males and the women they love.

If you love to curl up with a good romance book you will certainly enjoy her work. Whether it's a story about an innocent young woman learning about the world or a sassy and fierce heroine who knows what she wants you, 're sure to enjoy the happily ever afters she provides.

When Alexis isn't writing away furiously, you can find her exploring the Rocky Mountains, traveling, enjoying a glass of wine or petting a cat.



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****ALL BOOKS CAN BE READ AS STAND-ALONE READS WITHIN
THESE SERIES****