



Redleg Security

Unexpected Duet Book One

UNEXPECTED HERO

JACKIE WALKER

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BOOK ONE

REDLEG SECURITY SERIES

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DEDICATION

For my Junkies.

You've made my group the most inappropriate and unhinged place on the book of faces, and I fucking love you for it. So I threw as many of you into this book as I possibly could to thank you for being my happy place. Have fun reading about your shenanigans. (Don't worry if you aren't in this one. There's a whole other book coming.)



And also... for Tomer and Lettie.

Here's your fucking story, you loud ass fuckers. Well, part one. Because you're so damn greedy one book just wasn't good enough for you, was it?

Fuckers.

Meanwhile, Big Al and Madeline are gonna die of old age before I get to write their story.

PLAYLIST

INSPIRED BY UNEXPECTED HERO

- From the Ashes - Martina McBride
- Yes I'm a Mess - AJR
- Scared - Jeremy Zucker
- Ceilings - Lizzy McAlpine
- Paralyzed - NF
- Enchanted - Taylor Swift
- Bad Liar - Imagine Dragons
- Kindly Calm Me Down - Meghan Trainor
- Sway My Way (acoustic) - R3hab and Amy Shark
- Heartfirst - Kelsea Ballerini
- Butterfly - Jessica Mauboy
- Save Your Tears - The Weeknd
- Unfolding - Lucas Fogale
- Don't Give Up On Me - Andy Grammer
- Lover - Taylor Swift and Shawn Mendes
- Stay In the Dark - The Band Perry
- Wildest Dreams - Taylor Swift
- Favorite Kind of High - Kelly Clarkson
- Die a Happy Man - Thomas Rhett

- Broken Parts - Clyde
- Everybody Loves You - Charlotte Lawrence
- Someone Saved My Life - Elton John
- Lift Me Up - Rihanna



[Available on Jackie's Spotify.](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story begins a year and a half after the conclusion of Heartbreak Hero (that's about six months before Forbidden Hero and a full year before Rival Hero).

This is part 1 of 2 in Tomer and Lettie's story and ends with a cliffhanger.

Part 2 (Unexpected Hero Redeemed) will take place after the events of Rival Hero.

The next page includes content warnings, kinks, and tropes. [If you'd like to avoid spoilers, click here to skip to Chapter One.](#)

CONTENT WARNINGS, TROPES, & KINKS

*****This page contains light spoilers*****

Read at your discretion.

[If you'd like to skip ahead to Chapter One, please click here.](#)

KINKY SHOPPING LIST:

Dom/sub, Sex Club, Virgin Deflowering, Intro to BDSM/Kink, Bondage/Rope Suspension, Praise, Praise, More Praise, Voyeurism, Exhibitionism, Masturbation, Spanking, Sex Toys, Throat Fucking, Face Riding, Sex Tape Making & Watching.

TROPES:

- Age Gap
- Virgin Heroine & Experienced Hero
- Forbidden Love (Boss's daughter)
- Stalker "light" (think of it as an *unleaded* stalker romance)
- Secret Identity
- Sexual Liberation after Religious Upbringing
- Neurodivergent Main Characters
- Wounded Hero

CONTENT / TRIGGER WARNINGS:

- *Childhood Neglect & Abuse* - There is one flashback detailing the neglect, then it's mostly fade to black of the physical abuse. If this is a trigger for you, simply skip the majority of chapter four. The flashback/dream is designated in italics.
- *Purity Culture, Religious Trauma, and Sexual Shaming* - This happens off page (in the past), but she is dealing with it in the present, so it comes up periodically. The hero helps her reclaim her body gloriously.
- *Abduction via Date Rape Drugs (roofies)* - The drugging and abduction happen on page to one main

character (it isn't perpetrated by the other main character).

- *Trafficking / Sexual Assault* - The assaults happen off page, fade to black; but she does have some scenes that take place inside the trafficking prep house where she's interacting with the other girls and such. (The perpetrator is not the other main character).
- *Death of a Parent* - Mostly fade to black and not heavily detailed.

As always, I did my best to handle these topics with the utmost care out of concern for my readers. If you have any questions, I'm happy to discuss them with you. Email me at AuthorJackieWalker@gmail.com.

CHAPTER I

HIDDEN TRUTHS ARE STILL LIES

LETTIE

L iars. Both of them.

Ever wonder what it's like to learn your entire life is bullshit? Speaking from experience, it's awful. And what makes it worse is that somewhere deep down, I always knew something was *off* about my parents.

Or my *grandparents*, as it would appear.

I was raised in a haze of deceit.

Disgust unfurls from deep within me as I stare into the gaunt face of Lionel Holt — the only father I've ever known — while listening to his tearful confession.

“Lettie, I'm beggin' ya to try to understand —”

“Understand?” I squeak, my voice shaky. “How could I *ever* understand something like this? You both lied to me for my entire life.” My arms wave around as if they're trying to grasp a shred of stability from among the crumbling walls of my reality. “The people who raised me have been lyin' to my face. Every single day of my life. And not about something

piddly. You lied about who I am. Who you are. *This is who we are as a family.*”

A farce — that’s who we are as a family.

His wrinkled chin quivers, and I begin to regret my outburst. Especially with his failing health.

I launch to my feet to pace around his bedroom. His regular bed was replaced with an adjustable hospital bed a few days ago.

With forced control in my tone, I ask, “Why are you telling me this now? What am I supposed to do with this information?”

“I couldn’t die with this secret in my heart. You deserve to know, and unless somethin’ changes, your mama ain’t ever gonna tell ya. It’s been tearin’ me up for so long, Lettie. We never wanted to hurt ya. You are everything to us. This don’t change —”

My angry glare cuts off his words. “It changes *everything*. And don’t call her my mama since she obviously ain’t.”

I’m so upset my Podunk accent and god-awful grammar rage out of control.

Dragging my palm through my hair, I tug my ponytail at the ends. Tears pool in my eyes, but I quickly blink them away, determined not to cry.

My parents are not my parents.

It’s like I’m suddenly starring in a cliché soap opera instead of trudging through my boring life in the microscopic town of Climax, Georgia.

“Papa...” I start but then choke the word back. Because he’s not my papa. “Can I even call you that anymore?”

“Of course you can. I’m still the man who raised you, Lettie bear. The man who read to you at night. Who made sure you had all you needed. Who loves you more than anything in the world. I *am* your father.”

Not the time to think about Darth Vader, so I quash that unwanted ADHD interjection.

Unable to stave them off, my tears flow freely. “Why did you hide this from me?”

He takes a haggard breath, and the monitors beside his bed register the change in oxygen levels. Oddly, it’s easier to stare at the machines than to look at his face.

I’ve never felt such bone-deep betrayal before. I had no idea my chest could hurt this much from words alone.

As if knowing the cancer was about to take him from me wasn’t bad enough. Now this?

It’s not fair.

“We had our reasons, Lettie. Your mama had the best intentions. When she suggested we hide it, I went along with it. We had just lost our only daughter when we made the decision. You can’t imagine that heartache, and I pray you never know such pain. But we were given such a beautiful gift in you. And we loved you so much. I know we weren’t perfect, but we did the best we could.”

Resentment grabs me by the throat, threatening to shut my airway.

He’s about to die.

I don’t have the luxury of time to come to terms with this before I need to say goodbye.

My so-called parents divorced a while ago, and Mama and I aren’t on good terms. Soon, I’ll be all alone in the world.

With only the memory of a life chock full of lies to keep me company.

Unless I’m *not* alone.

A seed of hope implants itself in my gut. My birth mother died shortly after having me, but what about...

“Papa, what about my birth father?”

His face sours, and his lips pinch tight. He simply shakes his head, unable to hold my stare.

My chin wobbles. “He didn’t want me?”

Papa looks at me through shimmering brown eyes. “Nah, sweetie. It ain’t that. He went to Afghanistan to fight. I don’t think he knew you existed before...” His words trail off, sadness surrounding us both.

“He was in the military?”

“Yeah. The Army.”

“He died when she was pregnant with me?”

He nods solemnly.

“So I probably don’t have siblings.”

“No.”

Returning to my seat beside his bed, I settle into my cold new reality. Both parents dead before I was even a week old.

And twenty-four years later, I’m about to lose another one.

He reaches out to me, palm facing up. The tubes from his IV are tangled around his arm. I grip his hand and squeeze gently, careful not to aggravate the bruises visible through his paper-thin, aged skin.

“I’m so sorry, Lettie bear. Will you be okay?”

I nod, sucking in a cleansing breath. “I will. It’ll take some time, but I’ll make peace with it eventually. I love you, Papa. But I really wish you had told me sooner. It’s not like I would have loved you less.”

“After I’m gone, don’t let this ruin the relationship you have with your mama. She loves you.”

A hundred snarky replies die on my tongue, all of them with the same sentiment.

She has a funny way of showing it.

Are you sure about that?

If that’s love, I’ll pass.

You don't treat someone you love the way she treated me.

But I hold them back because he doesn't need to worry about me and Mama. It's not his fault she's grown cold these last few years.

Knowing I'm not her real daughter sheds light on some of her treatment of me. The little snide comments that reeked of resentment. The periodic outbursts. Nothing I did was ever good enough.

Now I know why. Because I killed her real daughter.

With my free hand, I wipe the remaining tears from my cheek and offer a watery smile to the man who raised me.

Right then and there, I decide I'm done talking about it. I'd rather make the most of our limited time together by reminiscing about happier days.

"Papa, do you remember that time Stella came over with them fake arms for Colonel Sanders?"

My bestie Stella has always been a troublemaker.

Papa's weathered face brightens in response to my abrupt subject change, his smile slowly spreading. "I thought your mama was gonna have a heart attack."

I snicker into my hand. "From running after the chicken or from how mad she was at me and Stella?"

"Both." His chuckle turns into a cough, making my heart pinch. He shakes it off, then asks, "How long did she chase the bird before she finally caught her?"

"About an hour, I think."

"I still say the damn chicken liked it."

A snort laugh escapes me. "Of course she did. It made her look tough."

There wasn't much to do in Climax during summer breaks. Stella came over one day with nothing more than some string, two plastic arms she'd taken off an old baby doll, and a hilariously bad idea. She tied the arms together with a string. With my help, she threw the contraption over the back of

Colonel Sanders — our female chicken — so the arms hung down on both sides. The damn hen looked like she was ready to tussle.

Mama was fit to be tied. She doted on her *sweet baby* chickens more than she ever did on me. Needless to say, she was not amused with the Colonel's new accessories. She's never had a sense of humor, though. Mama, not the bird. On the contrary, the hen had a terrific sense of humor. Case in point, how she loved wearing her fightin' arms.

Papa and I trade stories for the next hour or so until he grows tired. As he sleeps, I sit by his bed, holding his ever-weakening hand.

The next few days pass in much the same manner. Laughs, tears, and lots of hand holding.

And waiting for the inevitable end to his suffering.

Stella comes over once a day to check on me. She sits with him while I shower and freshen up.

Then I'm back in my seat. Right by his side. Just like he'd be for me if the tables were turned.

Even if he's not my birth father, he's still my daddy.

Day by day, his naps grow more frequent.

His breathing becomes more labored.

His voice eventually fails as his body prepares to do the same.

And when he takes his last breath, I'm there.

Holding his hand.

With one final kiss on his head, I say goodbye.



TWO WEEKS LATER, I stand at his grave site.

Alone — inside and out.

All the mourners have left. I asked Stella to wait for me in the car. The grounds crew excused themselves to give me

privacy. The pastor stood with me for a while before he realized I wasn't going to reciprocate his sentiments of *Lionel Holt being in the Promised Land, smiling down on us*.

That's nice and all, but I guess I'm as selfish as they come. Because I still want him with me.

Mama made her appearance, gave me an awkward hug, and left with her Bible-thumping friends. She seemed sad enough, considering how ugly their divorce was five years ago.

Alone in a Georgia cemetery on an overcast Tuesday afternoon, I scream into the wind.

At some point, it begins to rain. Instead of running for cover, I let it soak me to the bone. My tears mingle with the rain drops, cascading in rivulets and falling to the earth where Papa's body will remain when I leave.

Once I'm all cried out, I tuck the swirling emotions deep inside and prepare to leave.

And I don't mean the cemetery. It's time to leave my old life behind.

CHAPTER 2

WELL, WELL, WELL. WHAT DO WE HAVE HERE?

TOMER

If I ever see Millie Amos-O'Malley again, it'll be too soon.

I grit my teeth as I remove the *Chuck Nofunfuck* sign from my office door and toss it in the trash can. Just as I've done every single week for the last two years.

Damn Millie — a former client — for giving me that nickname. And damn my coworker Sawyer for running with it.

When he first put up the sign, I laughed along with everyone else. A few days later, I took the sign down, assuming he got his jollies. Unfortunately, he wasn't done milking the joke.

Another door sign appeared.

Then another and another.

It's the running gag among the bodyguards who work here. And I let them have it. Just like I did when we all served together in the Army Rangers, where I often found myself as the butt of a joke. Same as in High School and before that. As long as I can remember, honestly.

I've become an expert at letting it roll off my shoulders. But I'd be lying if I said it didn't get to me at times.

But here, I know my Redleg brothers don't mean it maliciously. It's good-natured ribbing. Something you expect when you're part of a unit like this with a bunch of military vets.

Although, I don't usually feel like I'm part of the unit. I tend to hover along the periphery. It's safer that way.

Now that I've properly disposed of the sign, I can move on with my day without giving it another thought. Until Big Al hires someone full-time to help me run the brains of Redleg Security, I don't have the mental power to waste on stupid pranks.

Not that I would ever squander my thoughts on shit like that anyway.

First in the office, same as always, I power on the computers and adjust the thermostat since the heat from the machines will hike up the temperature, making it unbearable in here.

After settling in, I run the morning reports and start on my never-ending task list: updating programs, pushing out firmware patches, and monitoring for new issues or network vulnerability. Plus, these damn bodyguards are always getting into shit they shouldn't be, and I need to be ready for anything.

There's no rest when you're the designated *guy-in-the-chair*, and lives are on the line.

An hour or two later, my on-again, off-again office partner Klein arrives. "Morning, T. I see you're here bright and early, as usual."

Without looking up from my primary screen, I quip, "And you're here bright and late, as usual."

And I do mean *bright*. He's almost too much for me to deal with at times. I wouldn't quite call him a ray of sunshine, but it wouldn't be far from the truth.

Surprisingly, he has good taste in music. Although, I'll never admit that. It's better if he thinks I have no opinion on the matter. That's my preferred approach with everyone.

Once he's taken his seat and docked his laptop, we go over the plan for the day — a mixture of training and tasks for him.

Two years ago, he assisted with designing our proprietary security system for all the Redleg employees' homes. Since then, he's been sporadically training with me here in the lair between his bodyguard shifts. He's a fast learner and great with gadgets too. But I haven't decided if he's got what it takes to be my number two.

Since he's eager to get out of the field, Boss wants me to feel him out.

Klein's good out there, though. Most of our guys are top-notch. At least the A and B-team guys are. Like me, Klein's a former Army Ranger. But unlike me, he doesn't have a top-secret intelligence background.

Then again... finding someone with my skill set in Clearwater isn't likely, so I'll take what I can get. A *warm* body is better than *no* body.

Speaking of which, I need to get back to the club. It's been too long since I've blown off some steam inside a soft, warm body.

A few minutes after he gets settled, he queues up his Dean Martin playlist and raises his brows at me questioningly.

I flick my wrist at him. "Fine."

Although I prefer Sammy Davis Jr., I don't mind Dean.

A few hours into our workday, a notification comes through, capturing my attention instantly.

Looks like someone I've been tracking has appeared in Florida, according to her social media post. Interesting. And potentially problematic. Let's see what she's doing here.

Maybe she's on vacation. After the death of her so-called *father*, she may have needed to get away.

I glance discreetly at Klein, noting he's bopping along to the music and focused on his programming task. It should take him at least another two hours, given his slow speed. He probably won't pay any mind to what I'm doing. And if he does, I'll explain that I'm researching a private case for Boss.

It's almost true.

Planting my feet, I gently shove away from the desk and rotate to another machine with the power needed to run facial recognition. With a shake of the mouse, the screen comes to life. A dozen keystrokes and clicks later, I've got the program searching for her. I need to see where she's headed.

While that runs, I return to my main machine to perform a series of web searches, some of which need more *aggressive* tactics than others to present me with what I need.

Bingo. There she is.

Violet Holt.

Her debit card was used to check into a seedy residential hotel earlier today. One of those pay-by-the-week types with kitchenettes and questionable clientèle. A place where you're likely to have a prostitute in the room on the right and a drug dealer in one on the left.

I don't like this one bit.

That's not a vacation resort, nor is it a condo rental. This is Clearwater, and there are thousands of places to stay that are better than that shit hole. Some are fairly affordable.

What is she doing? Has she gotten mixed up with a bad crowd? Or is she in danger?

Boss wouldn't like his daughter to be unprotected in a place like that.

If he knew about her, that is.

But he doesn't know she exists.

That's why I'm watching over her. It's what he would want me to do until I can tell him about her.

Ten minutes later, I'm bustling with nerves. There's an antsy stirring in my gut that gets harder to ignore as the minutes tick by.

Something tells me she isn't safe.

After another twenty minutes, my knee bounces uncontrollably under the desk.

Klein notices, tossing me a bemused glance. "What's with the shakes? You good?"

Not answering directly, I push my chair back from my desk. "I'm going to run out for lunch. Can you watch over shit for an hour?"

He holds out his knuckles for a fist bump. "No problem."

Ignoring his offer, I lock my systems and head out.

Fifteen minutes later, I arrive at the hotel. With a ball cap pulled down low and dark sunglasses on, I park around back, a few spaces away from what I recognize as Violet's car.

While deciding what to do next, I study the area, cataloging the make and models of the cars in the vicinity. I jot down all the visible license plate numbers. I'll check those when I get back to the office.

After sliding my laptop into my tech go-bag, I toss it over my shoulder and exit the car. When I'm sure no one is looking, I approach her vehicle, squat down, and pretend to tie my shoe. After swiftly attaching a tracking tag under her bumper, I pop up and continue walking.

The hotel rooms surround a courtyard with a pool. The building consists of two floors, and all the rooms have exterior entrance points. Yet another safety concern for a young girl staying on her own. On the bright side, it will make hearing inside the rooms easier for me.

Since it's centrally located, the pool area looks ripe for getting a feel for what's happening in this shady hotel.

Hotel? That's a laugh. Barely qualifies as a motel.

I take a seat at a moldy patio table. It's covered by a ripped umbrella flapping in the breeze. After removing my laptop, I set up my laser pointer listening device. Roughly the size of a thick pen or marker, the range on this thing isn't as good as the types we sometimes use in the field when we have cover. But it's discreet and effective, which I need right now.

Once the device is powered on, I insert my earbuds and go room by room, simply aiming the laser at the window. As I listen, I start hacking the hotel's Wi-Fi network to get more intel.

Since it's the middle of the day, I'm not expecting to hear all that much. This place likely sees more criminal activity at night, but she's here now. If I can find her, I might get a clue about her intentions and why she's in town.

Is it possible her grandparents told her about her real father, and she's come to confront him? If so, I'll need to ensure he's ready for that news by taking as much off his plate as possible before he gets hit with the shock of his life.

Over the years, I've tried to tell him about her, but it's never been the right time. We created the company a little over six years ago, and it's been a never-ending grind since then. The company has grown ten times faster than we anticipated.

Unlike my father, Big Al is a good man. Honest, compassionate, hard when he has to be, gentle when he can be, and loyal beyond all else.

And, like me, he wears the weight of the company on his shoulders.

As soon as I can ease the load he bears, I'll tell him about his daughter. That'll give him the time to build a relationship with Violet.

Until then, I'll keep an eye on her.

I'm yanked from my mental justification when the microphone picks up something. I adjust the angle. Grunts and gasping breaths from room two twenty-four make my shoulders stiffen. Is that a fight?

A dainty moan joins in with the male's *gruffer* sounds.

Oh. Nope.

Not a fight.

I've been around enough people having sex to recognize it. My nerves over Violet's sudden arrival in Florida must have me out of sorts.

Shaking it off, I continue with simultaneous audio surveillance and hacking attempts. I detect a mixture of meaningless chatter, innocuous phone conversations, television shows, and the occasional snoring hotel guest.

Accessing the hotel's Wi-Fi proves to be child's play. In no time, I've downloaded an occupancy listing. Later, I'll use that to run background checks on all the guests near Violet and identify potential threats. With that saved in my system, I focus on finding her room number.

And there she is. Jackpot.

One thirty-six.

I point the laser mic at the right window. It was silent when I observed that room earlier, so I assumed it was empty. It's still quiet in there.

With nothing to listen to from her room, I double down on my efforts to access her phone or any device she may be using. Maybe the phones of those around her too.

Just to be safe.

As I work, I check my watch. Dammit. I've been gone for nearly an hour. I fire off a text to Klein to ensure there are no issues at work and let him know I'm held up. He responds with a simple thumbs-up.

Good.

A female voice sailing through my earbuds interrupts my Wi-Fi *massaging*.

I think that's her.

Adjusting the piece in my ear, I strain to focus on her words. With some interference coming through, I shift the microphone a half-inch to the right.

She's singing.

The corner of my mouth quirks as I listen.

Whoa. She has the voice of an angel.

My fingers hover over the laptop keys as her enchanting melody captures my focus. Sadness and hope shine through the vibrato in her upper register in equal measures.

I don't know the song's name. Can't place the melody. But I'm riveted all the same.

With a click of the space bar, my laptop begins recording.

When she gets to the chorus, I finally recognize the song — Elton John's "Someone Saved My Life Tonight."

Impressive how she can sing a song by a male and make it sound so ethereal. She's extremely talented. I wonder if Big Al can sing or if she got that from her mother.

Closing my eyes, I draw back on my recollection of her face from the various photos and camera footage I've seen of her over the last few years. Blond hair past her shoulders with a slight wave to it, fair skin, brilliant sapphire eyes, and full rosy lips.

In my mind's eye, I imagine what she'd look like as she spins around the room and swings her hips in time with the rhythm.

I'm shaken from the vision when a phone rings, stopping her singing mid-lyric.

Damn.

Wait... this is a good thing. It'll make getting into her phone a bit easier.

She groans in frustration, then must answer the call. "How many times are you gonna call before you give up?" Her words have a bite to them and a slight Southern twang.

I can't hear the response, which pisses me the fuck off.

She speaks again. "That's not going to happen. You might as well quit while you're behind. I'm gone, and I'm not

coming back.”

She pauses again.

Moving quickly through a series of screens, I locate her phone signal and hack it with only my third attempt at her password. Her grandfather’s birth date. Not wise for her, but helpful for me.

As soon as I’m in, I begin loading my spyware program to the back end of her device.

While I wait for that to process, she tosses a much snarkier retort to whoever is on the other end of the line. “Are you deaf, dense, or both? I done told ya three times already. We. Are. *Through.*”

Another pause, and my pulse spikes. Must be an ex. Is he the reason she’s here? Was she trying to get away from a guy? Did he hurt her?

“If you call again, I’m blocking your number. I left. Deal with it. I —” He must cut her off because her words stop abruptly.

As their conversation continues, I repeat the spyware loading process on her e-reader and laptop. No password at all on her e-reader, and the same one on her laptop but with an exclamation point at the end.

This girl is far too trusting.

The next words I hear make my blood boil. “I don’t care how long we dated. That doesn’t give you the right to force yourself on me. Ever. Period. You’re lucky I didn’t call the cops.”

Whoever she’s speaking to just made the MFKL — my fucking kill list.

A handful of minutes later, I’ve got everything I need to access all her devices, so I pack up and head back to HQ. Tonight, I’ll find out who she was talking to and make his life a living hell.

It’s what Boss would want me to do for his daughter.

CHAPTER 3

DON'T GO CHASIN' WATERFALLS

A week later

LETTIE

I nearly drop the phone as I screech, “Arrested?”

“Yes, girl. We’re talking orange jumpsuits. Group showers. Don’t drop the soap. The works.”

My heart slams so wildly in my chest I’m surprised I can’t see it thumping. “Hang on. I need to see your face for this. I can’t tell if you’re full of shit or not. I’m switching to a video call.”

With two taps on my phone, Stella’s rosy cheeks and big brown eyes fill my screen. Like always, she’s got her pet bearded dragon resting atop her shoulder. I can’t hold back a full-body shudder.

Fucking hate lizards.

“Stop that!” Stella points at me with her free hand and gives me the evil eye. “Don’t you dare act that way in Pumpkin’s presence. You know she’s sensitive. Are you trying to give her body dysmorphia?”

Turning from the phone, she mutters in baby talk to the reptile and kisses its scaly snout or nose or beak or whatever

the hell it is. Meanwhile, I mime vomiting, drawing a laugh from my best friend.

She's the only thing I miss about my microscopic hometown. And even if my first week here hasn't been as perfect as I'd hoped, I have no desire to go back there. It's beach town livin' for me from here on out.

"I can't believe you kiss that disgusting thing." I mockingly gag, sticking out my tongue and letting my eyes roll to the back of my skull. "This is probably why you don't have a lover who stays longer than one night."

She scrunches up her face. "Ew, Lettie. You mean some of them want to stay longer than one night? Now you're grossing me out. *Stop.*" She replicates my full-body shudder from a few seconds earlier.

Once we've stopped snickering, she gives the camera a wide grin and arches a brow. "Anyhow, yeah... so get this. Here's what I heard about Toby's arrest."

I plop down on the bed, crossing my legs and resting my back against the headboard. "Tell me everything."

"So, surely you recall that Joey Bowden finally got his dream job in Booking at the county jail."

No. I don't remember this at all. Despite living in a small town, I often kept my head down. Stella did enough business nosing for us both.

"Who is Joey again?"

Stella rolls her eyes overdramatically and huffs. "Joey is Jodi's cousin."

"Right, right." I crick my head to one side. "And who is Jodi?"

"Hell's bells, woman. Do I need to ship some ADHD meds down there or something?"

Perhaps she should. I'm running low and haven't found a new doctor in Florida yet. Or a job. I should probably get on that before what's left of my money runs out, leaving me evicted from this *lovely* establishment. Gag.

I narrow my eyes at her, but she just laughs and continues her explanation. “Jodi Zimmerli from Pork Rinds and Peach Pies Country Store. The one who sold us *Four Lokos* when we were in high school.”

“Oh, *that* Jodi. Yeah. I remember her. And her brother works at the jail? How do you know her brother and what his dream job is? That’s weird.”

“No, Joey’s her cousin.”

I blink three times. “It’s no less weird that you know her cousin.”

“Ignoring that because I know you mean it lovingly.”

“Obviously. Back to the point, please and thank ya kindly.”

“So it all started when Jodi asked Jenn Plummer how Joey could get his juvie record expunged so he was eligible for the job at Corrections. You see, Jenn works in the Clerk’s office, but she wasn’t keen on helping Joey because she’s still sour about the pie incident of 2010.”

The corner of my mouth quirks. “I remember the pie incident, but what did Joey do to get a record?”

“Remember when Rhonda Schwenner’s house was put up for sale when she was on that cruise?”

My jaw drops. “That was Joey? And he got arrested for it?”

She nods. “Well, Rhonda was the mayor at the time, and Joey definitely trespassed to get all the balloons on her roof and strung up all the signs.”

“Trespassing record? That’s all?”

“They upped it to theft since he used her electrical outlet to plug in the bouncy house and inflatable waving arm guy, thus stealing her power.”

“Fair. But it was a fun day.”

She snickers. “It was. Dawn Alioto puked so much that day.”

“Serves her right for getting tipsy and then jumpin’ for an hour straight in the bounce house.”

“Someone had to beat Candy Harbin’s bounce record.”

“I think we got off track. Back to the story. So Jodi asks about clearing Joey’s record. Then Jenn turns her down because of pie-related diarrhea. What happened next?”

“Jodi asked Liz Matzen since she’s in paralegal school. Liz ended up punting the request to Stephanie Keever at the State Attorney’s office, but she only handles prosecution. She likes to give the crooks records, not wipe them clean. From there, she pestered a whole mess of people from all over the legal system and law enforcement in town. Everyone from Deb Talavera to Ashley Branson to Sue Garland was talking about it.”

“Naturally,” I indulge her.

“Meanwhile, Joey’s wife, Linda, said she was gonna kick him out if he didn’t get a job. In the end, Lisa Proskin-Pierce, Esquire took Joey’s case pro bono. She got his record expunged. Joey stayed married, and now he works in Booking. And they all lived happily ever after. The end.”

My eye twitches.

“Stella, hang on a second while I wrap my brain around all that. You got me feelin’ half a brick short of a load.” I slide down in the bed to rest my head on the pillow, holding the phone over my head so now I’m looking up at my insane friend and her gross lizard.

“Take your time. I know it’s a lot since you’re out of the loop.”

“In the history of man, no one has ever been more *in* the loop than you.”

She grins and facetiously dusts her fingernails off on her shirt. “Thanks. It ain’t much, but it’s honest work.”

I can’t hold back a giggle. “What on earth does any of this have to do with my ex-douchebag getting arrested?”

“If you followed the TC, you’d be up on all this shit.”

“Wait a cotton-pickin’ minute. This was all on the *Town Crier*?”

My nutty hometown thinks they need their own social media site. And all the nosy townies use it. Like Stella.

“Well, *no*. Those details aren’t, but all the people are there. So you’d have had the necessary background.” She snorts a little laugh. “Sarah McDuffie posts the best memes. She’s totally obsessed with this one guy who does all these funny videos while he’s drinking coffee with a straw out of a big pot.”

My palm meets my forehead with a resounding smack. “Focus, Stella. Toby. Arrested. How did that happen?”

“Joey booked him.”

Smart-ass.

“Joey, the cousin of Four Lokos Jodi.”

“The one and only.”

“And how did you find out?”

“The arrest was posted on the TC yesterday. Sheriff Shapiro periodically brag posts about interesting busts. She’s up for reelection. It’s a PR thing.” Stella makes a tsking sound. “I still can’t believe *Topless Annette* is the Sheriff. This is the same gal who took off her shirt and ran through the car wash on the Fourth of July.” She snaps her fingers twice. “Oh and also went down to her bra at the bonfire the night of our graduation.”

I set the phone on the bed beside me and rollover to scream into my pillow. When I’ve let out my mock frustration, I pick up the phone and roll to my back once more.

Stella squints at the screen. “Your face is red, Lettie. Ya good, hun?”

“Yep. Fine. Just trying to figure out how we took a five-month trip around the moon to get to the corner store. I didn’t need to know the town’s history in order for you to say you saw the arrest on the TC.”

She shrugs and pets her Pumpkin. *Ick.*

Fucking lizards.

I'm about to press her to explain what the charges were and what happened with Toby when my phone slips out of my hand and falls onto my face.

Whack. Crunch.

“Ouch!” I scream, intense pain shooting through my entire face.

“Oh no, girl. Did you drop the phone on your face? Are you okay?”

Ignoring the phone for a moment where it lies, I cup my nose, trying to rub the pain away, which only makes it hurt worse.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck. That hurts.”

I shake my head and blink a few times, then try to suck in a deep breath, only to feel something funny in my nasal passages. It's wet, warm, and running down my face. Lots of it. Looking down at my shirt, I see it's quickly becoming covered with blood. My hands are too.

“Fucking hell. My nose is bleeding!”

“Calamity Lettie strikes again. You and Nicole Boedeker are too much for me to handle. Did you know she broke the same ankle again? That's the third time. The pair of you should wrap yourselves in bubble wrap and call it a day.”

Running to the bathroom, I try to catch the drops of blood. “Argh!”

Did I say drops? I meant rivulets. Streams. Rivers.

Nay. Waterfalls.

Yeah. That's more like it.

As if the stinging agony of my face isn't enough, the blood makes me queasy. Butter my biscuit, this is a lot of freaking blood.

My dad — err, grandpa — was right. The phone is the demise of my generation.

“Stella, I have to go,” I warble over my shoulder in the general direction of the phone on my bed. “I’ll call you back.”

“Do I need to call emergency services for you?” she teases.

“No, bitch. I’ll be okay. Just a bloody nose.”

“Okay, girl. Call me back or send proof of life. If I don’t hear from you in ten minutes, I’ll dust off the first draft of your obituary.”

I lean my face over the sink, watching the blood pour out of me like the freaking flume ride at Busch Gardens. It just keeps coming and coming.

Oh my gosh. It’s never going to stop.

I’m so glad they don’t have regular housekeeping here. If they did, I’d be arrested for sure. As the seconds tick on, it’s looking more like a murder scene.

And in this hotel? Homicide is a possibility.

But the downside of the lack of housekeeping is that I’m out of clean towels. Plus, they’re all white or were once upon a time. They’re white-adjacent now.

While frantically grasping for tissues or paper towels, I accidentally swat my toiletry bag, spilling cosmetics and face cream all over the counter. In my mad quest to stop the bag from dumping onto the floor, I send some of the items toppling into the sink. Now, my makeup brushes are floating in a pool of my nose blood.

I hate being a klutz.

Was my real mom a klutz? Or my dad? I guess no matter how much I want to know about them, I never will. That hurts almost as much as my nose.

My phone starts ringing.

It hasn’t been ten minutes. Stella can fuck off. She probably wants to see the blood. Sick lizard-loving goth queen.

Turning the water on, I rinse away some of the carnage. I toss some on my face to clean it off so I can see what the fuck is going on and make sure I still have the same number of holes on my face as I had before the brick fell on me.

Brick. Phone. Same difference.

With each handful of water I toss on my skin, my nose, mouth, and jaw come clean instantly, but before the water stops dripping, bright red fluid replaces the clear. Damn. Maybe my nose is broken. The only other time it bled this much was when I broke it.

The phone starts ringing again.

Son of a bitch.

I need to answer before she calls for an ambulance. Then she'll post about it on the TC, and everyone back home will know that my klutz streak lives on after leaving town.

Surveying the counter, I try to identify something I can use to stop the bleeding or at least catch it so I can get to my phone without staining the carpet.

Well, staining it worse than it already is. Let's be real. Mine is unlikely the first blood to splatter on these disgusting floors.

A contouring blending sponge catches my attention. Sponges are absorbent, right?

With the sponge in one hand, I use my other hand to cup more water and splash it on my face so I can see which side is bleeding.

Okay, so it's not both nostrils that are bleeding. Just the right side. Good.

One more splash of water, and I follow it up by quickly shoving the makeup sponge against the affected nostril.

Ouch!

Pain. So much freaking pain.

I can't hold back my scream. That fucker flies out of my mouth. "Jesus in the morning!"

No sponge. Bad sponge.

Oh that freaking hurt. Like stubbing your toe on the corner of the bed while simultaneously clanking your funny bone on the corner of the door. That's the kind of pain we're talking about here. My nose is definitely broken.

Both of those things I've done in the last twenty-four hours, by the way.

I feel funny.

I'm in a cold sweat. The room is spinning. Vision getting hazy.

Oh my farking gosh. I'm going to pass out.

Instead of falling to my death in this dirty hotel room, I stumble into the bathroom and lower to my knees before lying on the towel I left spread out on the floor after my shower.

Being a tad sloppy paid off. I can pass out on a semi-clean towel instead of this nauseating floor.

The phone rings again.

The throbbing of my nose slowly abates until I no longer feel like I'm on death's door.

Since I've already bled all over my floor towel, I might as well use it to sop up the blood so I can get my phone. I need to look up what to do to stop a bloody nose that's probably broken. Do I lean back or forward? Should I get ice? Heat? Do I need to touch my nose again? If I do, I'd rather die instead.

With the towel bunched up, I hold it lightly against my nose and crawl on my knees out of the bathroom, then use the sink to pull myself up. When I get to the phone, it's ringing again.

It's a private number. Odd.

Oh no. What if it's the paramedics? Or a reverse 911 thing or something? Stella probably called them when I didn't answer. I have no idea how long I was almost passed out on the bathroom floor after my sponge attacked me.

Tapping the green button, I answer the call. "Hello?"

A monotone male voice greets me. “Yes, ma’am. This is the front desk. We got a complaint of yelling coming from your room. A woman screaming. Is everything okay?”

“Imph firne.”

“What? I can’t understand you. Do you need an ambulance?” He sounds a touch panicked.

I juggle the towel around to catch the drips without blocking my voice so he can understand me. “Sorry. I had a towel over my face because it’s bleeding. I said I’m fine.”

“Your face is bleeding?”

“Just my nose. Sorry. I’m okay.”

“Are you sure? I can get an ambulance there in five minutes.”

“No, no. Don’t do that. Just a bloody nose. I dropped my phone on my face. I’m a bit of a klutz. Sorry for the noise. Pass on my apologies to anyone I disturbed.”

Because they are all *soooo* courteous to me at all hours of the night.

“Don’t worry about it. All that matters is that you’re okay.”

“Thank you.”

I’m about to hang up when he adds, “Violet, don’t lean your head back. You should stay sitting up and let the blood flow out of your nose so it doesn’t drain down your throat.” His voice has a certain velvety dominance that draws me to instant attention. “Ice pack over the bridge of your nose for fifteen minutes. Breathe through your mouth until the bleeding stops so you don’t choke. And if you need something for the pain before the bleeding stops, take acetaminophen. Ibuprofen will make the bleeding worse. If the bleeding doesn’t stop in twenty more minutes, it’s best to go to an urgent care or a hospital. Don’t drive yourself, though.”

“Okay.” Wow. This is such an unexpected call. “Thank you. What’s your name?”

“Tom— Thomas.”

“All right. Thanks, Tom Thomas,” I joke. “I’ll be sure to put your name down on my comment card for outstanding service.”

“That’s not necessary. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thank you. Have a good day.”

“You too, Lettie.”

I disconnect and return the towel to my nose. For a second, I lay down, almost forgetting Thomas’s expert advice. But as soon as my head hits the pillow, I pop back upright. Choking on blood does not sound like a fun way to go.

Like an obedient little mouth breather, I sit with the towel gently pressed against my nose while I fire off a picture to Stella so she has proof of life.

She replies with a gif of an anime character spraying blood from their nose. And follows that up with another gif of Donald Glover from *Community* that reads: *Your face. It’s bad.*

After getting some ice from down the hall, I return to the bed and send her a series of nose-related gifs.

And because Thomas told me to, I continue to breathe through my mouth like a cretin.

Nothing says Lettie Holt like breathing through my mouth while covered in blood in a dive hotel.

I have no idea what I’m doing in Florida.

Or with my life.

Wait. Did Thomas call me *Lettie*?

And double wait. Why did he call my cell instead of the hotel-provided land line phone sitting by the bed?

I’m about to call the front desk when my phone rings again. Stella. I answer immediately.

“Before you say anything else, tell me why Toby was arrested.”

CHAPTER 4

DADDY ISSUES

TOMER

Bang! The door slams, making a very loud noise. But I don't flinch. Five-year-olds are brave, so I'm not scared like I used to be.

The house is quiet now. It's calm.

Because it's empty.

Daddy must have gone to work, but he forgot to tell me again. It's just me and the ticking clock, all alone in my bedroom.

Tick, tick, tick, tick.

I like listening to that sound when I'm tired because it helps me fall asleep. Sometimes, I pretend the clock is a drum playing a song just for me. Other times, I pretend it's a friend living in the wall. He talks to me by tapping out a message. I'll tap back to him like it's our secret code.

But it's not time for that now. Instead, I hug my stuffie and kiss him on top of his fuzzy puppy head.

"That's a very good boy," I tell him quietly.

My tummy squeezes and makes a gurgling sound.

Oh no. I'm hungry.

Daddy forgot to give me my waffle before he left. Maybe he'll come back soon, and I can eat then.

I look at my stuffie and whisper, "I just need to be a good boy and wait."

Maybe I should play the memory game. All I have to do is close my eyes and picture everything around me to see how much I can remember.

"I'm really good at this game," I tell my furry friend. I wish he could talk back, but he's not a real dog.

I play the memory game a lot when I'm hungry. And alone.

Like now.

But I'm not scared. I'm very brave.

Yep. It's time to play the game.

"Here I go." I start by closing my eyes good and tight. "No peeking because that's cheating."

Cheating is like breaking the rules, and the rules are important.

If I don't follow the rules, Daddy will be angry. He might yell or even take away my toys. Or maybe he will be so mad that he doesn't give me any dinner again.

My tongue feels funny now. I think my mouth is hungrier than my belly.

I need to get back to my memory game. If Daddy isn't home when I'm done playing, I'll try to find a waffle on my own.

Uh-oh. There goes my belly again. I need to stop thinking about waffles.

With my eyes closed, I picture my room. I see my bed beside me, right over there. My pillow is on top of the covers. It smells gross, but at least it's soft. My gray sheet is also on the bed.

I remember when my dog used to lay on the bed with me. The real dog. Not the stuffed one I have now.

He was a good boy. My only friend.

But sometimes, he barked, and Daddy hates loud noises. It's better for Daddy if I'm silent. So I tried to teach the dog to be quiet like me.

My dog was soft and had black fur. I liked to rub his long ears between my fingers.

I miss him so much.

Daddy took him away because I was naughty.

I didn't mean to be bad. I always try to be a good boy. A brave boy for Daddy.

But I don't remember what I did wrong that day. Daddy was very, very mad at me. No dinner before bed, and I had to be very quiet all night. He said that if I talked, my dog would be gone in the morning.

I believed him too. He kicked my dog once. After that, he hid in my closet when Daddy was home. I went in there with him so he wouldn't be nervous.

So I promised Daddy I wouldn't talk that night. If I stayed quiet, I would protect my dog.

He needed me to take care of him. No one else could do it but me. I loved him so much, and he loved me too. I think, but I don't know.

Daddy says it's hard to love me. I don't know why.

Maybe I am a bad boy.

I must have been too loud that night or been naughty in another way. My dog was gone when I woke up.

I cried a lot that day.

Daddy spanked my bottom with his belt really hard. He said it was to make me a tougher boy. A brave boy who doesn't cry and whine. Especially about dogs.

So I'm very brave now.

If I was a better boy before, maybe my real live dog would still be with me.

But I didn't protect him good enough.

"I promise I'll protect you better," I whisper as I hug my stuffed doggy.

Wherever my real dog is now, I hope he isn't hurt or sad.

When I think about him, I wish Daddy would have let me give him a name before he took him away. He said dogs don't deserve names. That seems mean. He was such a good boy, and I think he deserved a good name. Maybe I would have called him Cuddles because he was good at giving me those.

Sometimes, he would let me lay my head on his furry belly. He would put his arm around me like a hug.

Mommy used to give me hugs. I don't know where she went, but I hope she comes back soon. I loved her hugs. She held my hand a lot too. No one holds my hand anymore. Or gives me hugs. She was sleeping on the floor the last time I saw her.

One day, I asked Daddy where she went, and he smacked my face so hard. I cried because of how much it hurt. Then Daddy got even madder because I was crying. He kept yelling that I needed to stop being a little baby and toughen up.

That's why I'm a big, strong boy now.

I only wish I could remember what I did wrong on the last night I had my dog because I never want to do that bad thing again. Next time, Daddy might take my stuffie.

I squeeze him tighter. "I'll remember what I did wrong so I can protect you. Practice makes perfect. That's what my teacher says. So I'll keep practicing at remembering until I figure it out."

Back to the game, and then I can get a waffle.

My wall next to the bed has a picture on it. I colored it at school the other day.

That was when Daddy's grown-up friend with the long black hair was taking care of me. I showed her my picture, and she hung it on the wall by my bed with tape. Now I can look at it when I listen to the clock as it puts me to sleep.

Sometimes, Daddy's friend is nice to me like that.

Other times, she ignores me. Usually, when she comes over, she and Daddy smoke a lot of stinky things. Not just cigarettes. I cough when she's here.

Daddy doesn't like it when I cough because it's too noisy. But I can't help it. The smoke makes the air smell funny and tickles my throat.

A bad tickle. Not the good kind like Mommy used to give me.

No one tickles me anymore.

If I follow Daddy's rules, he might like me better. Maybe then he will tickle or hug me.

When Daddy's black-haired friend was watching me, she didn't hug me or tickle me either.

She had a bruise on her face, and her lip looked like it had been bleeding. Daddy must have hit her for being too loud. That's what he did to make my lip bleed.

The night before she started watching me, she and Daddy fought. A policeman came. I saw the red and blue lights flashing. But I hid in my closet like Daddy told me. I always do what he says.

After a while, I fell asleep in there. The next morning, Daddy wasn't home, but his friend was. She said it was her fault Daddy was popped, so she would stay with me until he came back. I don't know what it means to be popped. It sounds bad.

For a few days, she stayed with me. I thought it would be better than being in my room alone. But it wasn't.

She had lots of people come here who I didn't know. They were loud and smelly like her. And I think they were sick

because they were poking each other with needles like at the doctor.

One time, Mommy took me to the doctor, and I got needles in my arm. She said they make it so I don't get sick. I had to be brave when I got poked with the needles.

And I'm very brave. She was very proud of me.

I wish I still lived with her instead of Daddy.

He got back from being popped a few days ago, and he was very tired. I needed to be extra quiet then. When he got home, his black-haired friend left. But they yelled a lot first. I don't think she's coming back. But that's okay. I won't miss her like I miss Mommy. And at least Daddy won't hit her for being loud anymore.

I've been in the same clothes since that day.

That's enough of the memory game. I can't think of more things anyway.

My whole body shivers. It's very cold in here now.

When I get up to look out my window, the sun is getting ready for bed.

My arms hurt from squeezing myself too tight. I try to hug my chest to make me warm. Daddy says I should put on more clothes if I'm cold. But there are no clothes in my drawer. I checked.

I like it when he's gone. But I also don't like it.

Maybe I can look for a blanket in the other room.

And get a waffle.

I walk to my bedroom door, pretending to be a little mouse. Small and quiet so no one will see me or hear me.

Leaning my ear against the door, I listen for Daddy to make sure he's still gone. If I go out there and he's here, I'll be in trouble.

He might take away my stuffed dog.

Maybe I should hide it under the bed to save him from Daddy.

When I get to the bed, I have to strain really hard to pick up the corner. I'm such a big boy. A strong boy like Daddy told me to be. I'm able to lift it enough to make room to hide my stuffie. Don't worry. He doesn't need air since he's only a toy.

There. I protected this dog from Daddy. Now that he's safe, I can look for something to make me warmer.

When I get back to my bedroom door, I lean against it again. It's still quiet.

So I walk like a mouse into the hallway. I look around but don't see him. That's good.

I'll still be quiet though. Just in case.

My stomach squeezes again, so I decide to get a waffle first.

I push a chair from the kitchen table over to the refrigerator. I push and tug to make it move. It scrapes across the floor. I'm glad Daddy isn't here. That's too loud.

Once the chair is close enough, I climb up and open the freezer. The yellow box is there. I'm extra cold now that the freezer is open, so I grab the box real fast and jump down.

I sit down on the floor with the box of waffles on my lap. I open the box. My stomach makes a bubbling sound as I look inside it.

Oh no. No. No. No.

There are no waffles left. What will make my belly stop bubbling with no waffles? It's hard to sleep when my belly hurts like this.

My eyes burn, and it gets hard to see. My face gets wet.

But I don't make a sound. I can't cry.

Brave boys don't cry.

My nose burns, and my face gets wetter.

But I stay quiet. Holding it in.

The door slams, but this time I flinch. It's louder than before. It's close. Too close to where I am sitting.

It's him.

He's going to be very mad at me for not being in my room. He looks angry already.

"What the hell are you doing out of your room, you little shit?" he yells at me.

He stomps over, but I don't cry.

I don't make a sound. I'm very brave.

His eyes are scary. I can't see the green that's usually in his eyes. Only black with white around the outside.

When he gets closer to me, he grabs my arm and yanks me up. It hurts. I don't yell like I want to.

Because I'm a good boy. A brave boy.

He drags me out of the kitchen. My feet dangle over the floor. My arms hurts so bad. It makes my face get wetter.

"You think I wanna see your dumb face when I get home, boy?"

I know he doesn't.

When we get to my bedroom door, he shoves me too hard into my room. I fall down, and my knees bang on the cold floor. A sound slips out of my mouth. I tried to hold it in. But it hurts too bad.

Now I'm crying, and I can't stop.

I crawl toward my bed to get away from him, but he's yelling. I made him very mad again.

"Keep your ass in here and be quiet. No crying. You hear me?"

I nod, wiping my face so he doesn't see my tears.

"Are you crying? I just told you not to cry!"

I shake my head no.

“That’s it. I’ll teach you to stop crying.” His heavy boots make loud noises as he moves around my room. He’s looking for something.

No. No.

He sees it. I didn’t protect him good enough.

He sees my stuffie’s tail. I didn’t hide him enough.

Now Daddy has him.

It’s my fault.

“Babies have dolls and stuffed animals. Are you a baby?” he screams and shakes my stuffie in front of my face.

I reach for it, but he yanks it away. “Does the little baby want his doll?”

My hands strain forward, trying to save it. “Yes. I want my dog! Please, Daddy!”

He gives it to me. But not in the good way.

Swinging his arm wildly, he bashes it into my face. Something hard on my stuffie bangs into my eye. It hurts worse than my knees.

And I cry and cry.

But Daddy laughs at me.

I can’t see through both eyes cause of the new pain. But with one eye, I see him leaving the room.

My stuffed dog is in his hand.

I JERK AWAKE, bolting upright. My fists are in front of my face as a shield. Every fiber of my body is on high alert. My head whips around, swiveling from side to side for signs of danger.

But I’m only in my room. In bed.

My ribs and shoulders heave with violent, racing breaths. Blood rushes through my veins, thrumming loudly behind my ears.

It’s okay. Everything is fine. I’m in my room.

I’m safe. He’s not here. It was only a nightmare.

Air zips past my gritted teeth, hissing in and out with my deliberate breaths.

Once normal sensation returns, I take inventory of my body. My hair is matted to my sweaty forehead, and the sheets are soaked with perspiration. My entire body is burning up.

Dammit all to hell.

Haven't had that dream in a while. A long while.

Fuck that psychiatrist for dredging up old shit that's better left buried. Right alongside my father's body. In a cold, dirty grave. No headstone. Not a single mourner.

And fuck Big Al for making me see the damn doctor in the first place.

Big Al insists that all the Redleg bodyguards see a psychiatrist annually for a readiness assessment. Although I'm usually at HQ, I have done a few shifts in the field when we're short. And since most of us are combat vets, having this requirement makes sense. Especially considering all the shit we saw and did over there. In theory, it's a good thing.

But in practice, I hate it.

At what point is he going to let up with this asinine annual requirement? Every fucking year it's the same damn thing. Same doctor. Same bullshit. And it *always* leads to the same nightmare.

I toss off the covers and get out of bed, giving the clock a quick check on my way to the bathroom. 0400.

Good a time as any to get going for the day. Tons of shit to do today. Redleg doesn't run itself.

Under the spray of a cold shower, a uncharacteristically vengeful thought hits me out of nowhere.

For a split second, I hope Big Al had a nightmare after his psych eval earlier this week. But that wouldn't make what I just relived any better. And I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Especially Big Al.

My ribs constrict, closing in on me.

I shake it off, acknowledging it as an errant thought. I'm still messed up from the dream. That psychiatrist he made me see likely put the thought in my head. Talking about transference or whatever.

Tomer, these unhealthy feelings about your father need to be addressed. It's no wonder you've formed such an attachment to this Big Al person. He's the father you always wanted. Caring, protective, supportive, and kind. Disciplined, but fair. Firm, but loving. All the things you didn't have when you needed them most in your formative years.

But you're just as likely to transfer that rage about your father onto Big Al at some point if you don't deal with what's going on inside you.

Not a chance.

I'd never turn on Big Al.

It's not that I think therapy is stupid or a waste of time. For most people, it provides a healthy outlet — a time and place to explore your feelings and process your emotions in a constructive environment with a well-trained professional to guide you through your healing journey.

Yeah. I read the brochure.

But that concept won't work for someone like me. I don't have rage toward my father. Unless I've been woken up before the sun from a damn nightmare. I feel nothing when I think of him.

I feel nothing when I think of most people.

It's an effective system, and it's served me well through the years.

If it's not logical, it doesn't affect me. And feelings, by nature, are illogical. Ergo, they don't matter.

So I damn sure don't need to take time away from work to process my emotions. They aren't there. Problem solved.

So what would I do in therapy for an hour twice a week? Talk about how the Tampa Bay Rays choked in yet another post-season? Who cares?

By the end of the shower, my mind is clear and refocused.

Today's mission is simple. Find out what the fuck Violet Holt is doing in Clearwater once and for all.

She's been in town for four weeks and hasn't attempted to contact Big Al. I'm beginning to think her arrival is innocent or perhaps a coincidence.

But it's a pretty damn big one.

Of all the places on earth, she ends up thirty minutes away from her birth father.

I don't buy it.

And that means I need to make contact with her to figure out her intentions. Something is off, and I don't like not knowing people's motives. It's one of my least favorite things. Second only to making small talk.

Let's hope today doesn't suck as much as that fucking dream did.

CHAPTER 5

NO TAKESIE-BACKSIE

TOMER

“**K**lein, since it’s a slow day, I’m going to head out.” Pressing away from my desk, I stretch my hands over my head. “I’ve got some personal shit to take care of. I’ll work from home later tonight. You good to hold down the fort?”

As he looks toward me, his mouth hangs agape, his eyes bulge, and he mumbles nonsense.

I get it. I get it. I’m not known for taking time off.

Whatever.

This is important. He doesn’t need to know the reason.

“Uh, yeah. I guess. You’ll have your cell in case I need you, right?”

In response, I pick up my phone and shake it a few inches in front of me.

A mischievous grin plasters itself to his face, and his eyes dance with mirth. Before saying anything else, he increases the music volume to annoyingly-loud levels and pushes from his seat.

And then he does the ridiculous Carlton dance from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* while Tom Jones's "It's Not Unusual" plays throughout the lair. He sings along too.

He's so annoying.

Most people are, though. But some of my Redleg brothers take the cake. And yet, I love them like family all the same.

I suppress a grin at his theatrics, shake my head, and leave without verbally addressing his insanity.

A few minutes later, I'm mobile and heading toward a blinking red dot on my screen.

Lettie is on the move.



THE MORE I watch this woman, the more obsessed I become.

At first, it was her singing that riveted me. And she's *always* using that damn intoxicating velvety voice of hers. In the car. The shower. Around the hotel room. I swear I could listen to her sing the Florida Statutes or the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and I'd probably get as hard as if I'd bound her in a diamond chest harness, accentuating her breasts or tied her to my bedposts spread eagle, exposing her center to me.

That's how fucking ethereal her voice is.

It wasn't just her beautiful singing that sucked me under her spell. It was also the melodic quality of her laugh, which usually comes out when she's talking to her friend Stella.

When I learned she was jogging in the evenings, I decided I needed to follow her to ensure her safety. But to do so, I needed to leave work early — something unheard of for me. And I did it without batting an eye.

That's when I knew she'd become a full-blown fixation.

Violet, or Lettie as she prefers, comes from a small town where I'm sure it's safe to exercise right before dark. Although the greater Tampa Bay area isn't the most dangerous city, there are threats lurking around every corner. Crime, gangs, drugs,

trafficking, and more. But she seems entirely oblivious to the risks around her.

So damn innocent.

And beautiful.

Each evening, as soon as Klein leaves for the day, I'm out the door no more than ten minutes later. It's something I've never done.

Until now.

It takes a lot to keep Redleg's infrastructure pumping, and I'm the only one who can do it. Long hours are part of this gig.

New clients need vetting. The guards in the field need intel to protect our clients. Systems need to be monitored and maintained. Our small IT support team needs oversight. And don't even get me started on what has to be done when we have a really big case in the works.

For instance, take what happened about a year ago. One of our best guards, Leo Mason, got a text threatening one of our past clients. Redleg went on high-alert. While Leo took her off the grid, the rest of the team worked around the clock to find out who was behind the threat. And when it all came to a head, I was running the mission from HQ — like I always do. It was a clusterfuck, but we did it. The bad guy is now in jail, Leo's in love with his client, and his sister Samantha is back from the grave. Long story.

The point is this. At Redleg, we protect our own. Full stop.

And that's why I'm watching over Lettie Holt.

Boss may not know he has a daughter, but that doesn't change the fact that she *is* Redleg family and entitled to our protection.

However, as the days pass, I've started to realize I'm lying to myself. That may have been what started my surveillance of her, but it's not what keeps me going.

I'm fucking infatuated.

It's unhealthy. But I can't seem to stop myself.

Just another fixation. I'm sure it'll run its course soon enough.

Today, according to the texts she sent her best friend, she's hunting for employment. The double black eyes from her broken nose mishap have faded, so she's comfortable showing her face around potential employers. So she's moving from online job searches to in-person.

Hidden in my car right outside the back of a chiropractor's office, I use the parabolic microphone to listen to her interaction. She applied to be a receptionist. From the sound of it, she's not getting the job.

"I'm a hard worker. Whatever I don't know, I can learn easily," she pleads with her interviewer.

The doctor replies, "I'm sure you could, but we have such a small staff as it is. I really need someone who can hit the ground running."

"What about a trial basis? I'll even work for free for the first day."

"We can't do that. It's unethical," he decrees. "Sorry, I won't be offering you the position."

"Well, thanks for your time."

"Good luck, Violet," he says dismissively. "It was nice meeting you."

Poor girl lacks real world experience. The job market is too competitive for people to take a chance on someone without the proper qualifications. She should lower the bar.

Then again, I don't want her working somewhere unsafe like a seedy nightclub. According to her web searches, that's what she's considering if she doesn't find something more reputable soon.

I'd bring her into Redleg in an administrative role, but putting her that close to Boss is unwise. It'd be like storing gasoline and a running space heater in the same cardboard box.

Since she's leaving the interview, I put away the microphone and quickly move my car to a location in the back of the main parking lot. I'll be able to see her but shouldn't be spotted.

A few moments later, she exits the building, looking dejected. Her head hangs low, and her shoulders are hunched. My chest stings. I much prefer it when she's smiling.

Her smile is everything.

It radiates the warmth of a hundred suns, and I can only imagine what it would feel like if she aimed it at me. Would it be enough to warm up the barren parts of my dark soul?

Shaking my head, I put the car in gear, preparing to follow her from a safe distance. However, she doesn't pull out right away. A check of my tablet reveals she's not on her phone either. Using the binoculars, I peer into her car for a better look.

Fuck. She's crying.

That sting in my chest intensifies to a burn.

Her face rests in her palms, and her shoulders shake with her sobs. This will never do.

I chastise myself, feeling responsible for her sadness for some reason.

Think, think, think, Tomer. Use that giant fucking brain for something helpful.

If she doesn't find work, she's going to leave town. What other choices will she have? Perhaps she'll go back to her hometown and live with her grandmother.

That's probably for the best.

She'll be safer, and there's less chance of her contacting Boss and throwing his world off its axis. He doesn't need that shit right now. He's got far too much weight on his shoulders as it is.

I've considered long and hard telling him about her. For five years, I've played out various scenarios of how that

conversation would go — and it never ends well.

Ultimately, I convinced myself that it's not my news to divulge. It makes more sense for me to keep an eye on her from afar. I can spare both of them from a major life upheaval. Why upset either of them when they're both content with their lives?

That's what I used to think.

Until recently, I had no indication that she was unhappy.

But now? She seems... sad. Ever since her grandfather passed away, she's lost. I don't know how I know that, but I suppose watching someone nearly around the clock for two weeks gives you a good grasp on their situation.

Plus, I've done a deep dive into her social media, email, and text message threads from the last few years in my downtime. Meaning: when I should be sleeping.

There was a definite shift in her tone and overall mood when her grandfather got sick. I know she loved him. And it's likely taking a toll on her.

But why did she move to another state after he died?

Was it to get away from that dirtbag Toby after he attempted to force himself on her?

He's behind bars for the foreseeable future since I arranged it so he couldn't make bond. What a sick fucker.

While I was investigating him, I found videos of his sexual *conquests* on his computer. It only took a little digging to uncover that not all of them were of legal age. And they weren't there consensually either.

And Lettie was going to be next.

The anonymous tip I sent to the authorities with some of the files I found — and a few more I planted on his machine for good measure — was just a taste of the damage I could cause for him if he ever attempts to contact Lettie again.

Suddenly, it dawns on me that my jaw is tight and achy. Guess I've been gritting my teeth while my mind spins

through all these heavy thoughts about this woman who's still sitting in her car.

Removing my smaller pen-size microphone, I listen to Lettie cry in her car. Not sure why I'm torturing myself like this, but I do it all the same.

In barely a whisper, she gives herself a little pep talk. "You can do this. It's okay. You got this. Plenty of jobs out there. This doesn't mean you've failed."

Once her sobs have ceased, she starts the ignition and pulls out of the lot. I follow from a few car lengths behind, tracking her location on the tablet.

She pulls into a gas station a few blocks from the dive hotel she lives in. I don't follow since it'd be obvious in such a small parking lot. Instead, I travel to the next street, do a U-turn, and drive back by the station.

Upon my second pass, she's still parked at the gas pump. Bent over with the car door wide open, she frantically digs through her purse in the driver's seat.

She's panicked.

The compulsion to help her hits me dead in the chest.

Welp, here we go.

I pull into the gas station, park on the opposite side of her pump, and exit.

"Crap, crap, crap," she mutters.

Making a show of getting gas for myself — because what the fuck else would I be doing here — I start the pump and click the nozzle so it'll keep filling without my hand on the trigger.

I peek my head around the side of the pump. "Is everything all right, miss?"

She sniffles, fighting back tears.

From her spot in the driver's seat, she gazes up at me, nearly knocking me off my feet. My breath hitches, chest constricts, and throat thickens.

Stunning.

Even sad, panicked, and frazzled, with red blotches on her fair skin and her nose stuffy from crying, she's the most breathtaking woman I've ever seen.

She's almost... otherworldly.

No fucking wonder I'm hung up on her.

Lettie smiles at me, but it's forced and tight. "I'm okay. Just having a little," she pauses, caressing her forehead, "crisis of the life variety, I guess you could say."

Don't be creepy. Don't be creepy.

"Anything I can do to help?"

I force myself to smile, which doesn't come naturally to me.

"I don't... I don't know. Gosh, this is embarrassing. Just ignore me."

Unable to resist, I take two steps closer as a desperation to comfort her overtakes me. "No need to be embarrassed. What's going on?"

Was that creepy? Fuck. I wish I knew how to act around people.

Well *that's* a thought I've never had before. I don't give a damn what people think of me or if they think of me at all. Why bother? Whatever it is, it probably isn't good. So who cares?

But her? I want her to think of me. Often. And warmly.

Like I think of her.

She mashes her puffy pink lips together and glances over her shoulder toward the store entrance, then meets my eyes again. "I only intended to get twenty bucks worth of gas, which would have left me a few dollars in my checking account to get something to eat. I only needed a little something to hold me over until my next paycheck. But I lost track of what I was doing while I was pumping and put thirty in, which is going to overdraw my account and leave me with

nothing for food. So I was digging through my car to find some cash so I could go in and have them reverse the debit card charge to spare my bank account, but I can't find enough."

She sighs before hastily adding, "I'm not always this broke. It's been a rough few weeks." Her cheeks fill with air, and she sputters a shaky breath, quickly deflating them.

Lettie Holt is adorable and sexy at the same time.

Flawless complexion and dazzling blue eyes you can get lost in. Curves for days and flowing blond hair caressing her shoulders.

The pump fueling my car clicks, signaling the tank is full. It was only a top off anyhow.

"Hang on for one second." I step back behind the gas pump to deal with the nozzle and put the cap back on my gas tank.

After wiping my hands on my jeans, I take a deep breath and return to her side. Lettie's digging through her purse again, her head shaking as she searches. Taking a quick moment, I let my gaze sweep up and down her body, loving the look of her shapely thighs and toned calves, not to mention her smooth shoulders exposed by the straps of her sundress. I would love to see that dress pooled on the floor by my bed.

Shaking off that errant thought, I reach for my wallet. "I got you. Here." I thumb through my wallet, but only have four twenties. She needs more than that. Son of a bitch. Need to hit an ATM. I bet they have one inside. I wonder if she'd wait. I'm probably weirding her out, so she'll drive off as soon as I turn my back.

She looks up and catches me frowning at my wallet. "Oh no. I can't accept a handout. I'll be fine. It's my problem, not yours."

I fold the bills and hand them to her. "I don't mind. Here."

Her eyes dance from the cash to my face a few times while she chews her lower lip. Fucking hell. I want to bite that lip.

What is wrong with me?

I can't have these thoughts about her anymore. She's Big Al's daughter. Even if he doesn't know it. Plus, she's twelve years younger than me.

Off. Limits.

She still hasn't grabbed the money from me by the time I've chastised myself thoroughly. So I take another step in her direction, holding the money closer.

Three times, she opens and closes her fists. She obviously wants to take it but doesn't want the handout. Either that, or she's trying to figure out how to get away from me without hurting my feelings. Entirely possible.

"That's too much," she finally says. "I can't accept all that."

I'm growing frustrated with her pride. She clearly needs help. "Just take it."

Her face and body stiffen incrementally at my harsh tone. The average person wouldn't have noticed the difference, but I'm not average.

Dammit, man. Be gentle with her. She's delicate.

Forcing a smile, I soften my voice and try again. "Honestly, it's no problem. I'm happy to help you out. We've all fallen on tough times. It's not much. I'd give you more if I had it on me."

Her frame relaxes once more. I notice her take in my body from my knees up. There's a tiny bob in her throat when she meets my eyes again. Reflexively, I swallow too.

"If you insist, I'll take *one* of these."

She takes the bills from me, removes one of the twenties, and tries to return the other three.

My wallet is already back in my pocket, and I raise my hands near my ears in a silent dismissal. "No takesie-backsie."

Did I really say that? Who the fuck am I right now?

She's scrambling my mind like an egg in a frying pan.

Her answering giggle makes my knees buckle. She tucks a few loose strands of blond hair behind her ears, stopping it from blowing in the breeze. A growing part of me longs to untuck it so I can watch it whip around her heart-shaped face.

After glancing over her shoulder, she cants her head to one side and narrows her eyes at me. "Well, how can I pay you back?"

Oh, off the top of my head, I can think of four hundred and seventeen ways. But none of them will ever happen. And certainly never in exchange for money.

"Have coffee with me," I blurt out, the words bypassing my brain and all logical thought, bolting right out of my mouth.

The grin splaying across her face causes my instant regret over my filter failure to dissipate. "Now?"

My shoulders raise and fall in a quick shrug. "I'm free now."

"I probably shouldn't go off with someone I just met." She pauses, eyeing me cautiously. "But I'm tempted."

"You drive in your car, and I'll drive in mine. We'll be in a public place. Just a quick coffee, a chat, and perhaps a sandwich."

She swallows, the visible bob of her throat catching my attention. Another nibble on that sumptuous lip, and she finally decides. "Okay. But it's my treat."

CHAPTER 6

UP AGAINST THE WALL

LETTIE

“Pick up! Pick up!” I babble frantically while praying Stella breaks our number one rule and actually picks up the call without the requisite five-minute text warning.

Voicemail.

Because of course.

A quick glance in my rearview shows the handsome stranger is still there, trailing at a respectable distance.

I can’t believe I didn’t get his name. While keeping one eye on the road, I quickly try Stella again.

This time, instead of letting it roll to voicemail, she must *send* me there because it only rings twice.

“Bitch.”

A text comes through a second later.

STELLA

How dare you? We have rules for a reason.

<gif of Greta Thunberg yelling: How dare you!>

DESPITE THE PANIC racing through my veins, I chuckle. Trying to be responsible, I ask my phone's voice assistant to reply. My hands are too shaky to type anyhow.

ME

This is a 911 call

I CHANGE lanes and reduce my speed, trying to lengthen the short trip to the coffee shop.

Thankfully, Stella returns my call, and I pick up in a rush without any pleasantries. "Stella! You aren't going to believe this."

"Are you okay?"

"Physically, yes. Emotionally? That's yet to be seen."

She sighs, hinting at relief or irritation. Probably both. "I'm glad you're safe. You had me worried. What's going on? Didn't get the job?"

"I didn't get the job, but this isn't about that. I met a guy. Wait. Strike that. He's a *man*. A tall, blond man with gorgeous, intelligent eyes. I'm going out for coffee with him. He's in his car behind me. I'm freaking out."

"Lettie, are you fucking kidding me? You broke the cardinal rule of phone etiquette for a middle-of-the-day coffee date? That rule is the bedrock of our friendship. I realize you're not all that experienced in matters of the heart or vagina, but this seems a bit excessive. Even for you."

Her words are terse, but her tone is playful. The familiar teasing gives me a speck of comfort, which is precisely why I called her.

Either that, or I called so she'd talk me out of this madness.

“But I *just* met him at the gas station. I have no idea why I said yes to an insta-date. How stupid is this?”

“Coffee is never stupid. Men on the other hand? Often stupid.”

My heart threatens to revolt, and my palms get sweaty, making my grip on the wheel questionable. “Turning into the coffee shop parking lot now. Am I staying or driving away in haste? I need you to make this decision for me.”

Stella clears her throat. “Haste? Have you been reading Regency Romance again? Gross. I’ve said it a hundred times. People back then didn’t shower enough for it to be sexy. And as for your situation, you’re staying. But give me his license plate number and a physical description before you disconnect. A picture is even better.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s not like that. He seems perfectly safe. I’m just nervous because I don’t do reckless shit like this. But something about him made me feel safe.”

“Oh, you don’t do reckless shit? The hell you say.”

“Excuse me?”

She adds some extra twang to her voice. “Well, well, well. If it isn’t *little miss let me pick up and move to another state because I feel like it.*”

My shoulders shake with a combination of nervous and justified laughter. “You make a solid point. I’ve been a bit adventurous lately.”

Pulling into an open space, I take a cleansing breath and shift into park.

“Right. So go in there, get the most expensive coffee, make him pay, and find out his credit score and other pertinent facts. Remember that you’re a badass bitch who deserves a good man for a change. If he’s nice enough, perhaps consider touching his ding-a-ling and forking over the key to your chastity belt.”

“Oh my gosh, Stella. *Stop.* I’m hanging up now. I love you. I’ll call you when I’m done.”

“Text first, or this friendship will be put on probation.”

“Yes, my dear,” I indulge her but roll my eyes.

“Oh! Pro tip. Don’t forget to ask about his relationship with his mother or any sisters. That’s the secret to how he treats important women in his life.”

“Bye, crazy pants.”

I met Stella in high school, and through the years, we’ve spent so much time together that it’s almost like we merged into one person. Her quirks became my quirks, and vice versa. We share a phone call aversion. It’s bizarre, but it’s who we are, and we’ve come to embrace it. The fact that I called her instead of texting shows how dire my panic was. Or is? Nah. It *was*. I’m good now. I got this shit. It’s just coffee.

I grab my purse and exit the car. The wind whips through my hair as soon as my head pops up from the protection of the open car door. I can’t help but turn my face into the breeze, reveling in it briefly. The sea breeze calms me. That’s why I picked this town. My family visited here when I was in elementary school. It was the vacation to end all vacations. I’ve dreamed of living here ever since.

When I turn back, my impromptu date strolls toward me on the sidewalk. I take a moment to study him from behind the safety of my sunglasses.

He’s several inches taller than me, well over six feet. His hair is cut short, slightly darker at the roots. His nose has the slightest curve to it, giving him character. There’s a certain stiffness to how he carries himself, but I don’t feel put off by it. It makes him seem sturdy, which I know sounds odd, but he exudes steadiness and strength.

It’s comforting.

“Hey,” he says in a slightly awkward greeting once he stops in front of me.

Oh good. He’s just as nervous as me.

Well, Lettie, you wanted to have new experiences. Have at it.

“Hi.”

I’m known for my verbosity.

He waves his open palm toward the coffee shop. “Shall we?”

Yes, I’ve been reading Regency Romance again, and the way he did that gives me butterflies.

With a quick nod, I join him on the sidewalk. Remembering the advice my papa gave me, I raise my chin and meet his eyes. *If you project confidence, you’ll eventually feel confident. Fake it ‘til you make it.*

“We weren’t properly introduced. I’m Violet. You can call me Lettie.”

One side of his mouth curves, but it’s infinitesimal, almost as if he doesn’t want to smile. Or he doesn’t know how.

“I’m James. It’s lovely to meet you, Lettie.”

More butterflies. I like the sound of my name falling from his lips.

We stand stalk-still with only the whoosh of passing cars and squawking seagulls in the distance filling the silence.

The moment stretches a bit too long, eviscerating that confidence I thought I gained.

When he doesn’t say anything else, I reach for the door, but he moves quickly to open it for me.

I suppress a grin. “Thank you.”

Toby was never chivalrous. I took it as a favorable character trait at the time, assuming he was a feminist and saw us as equal partners. But soon, I realized it was because he was a jerkoff.

He’s in jail now, which fills me with far too much giddiness. The grin I held back at James’s manners blooms into a big smile by the time I reach the counter.

We place our drink orders, both opting for iced coffee. He grabs a boxed snack kit. Meanwhile, I’m locked in a moment

of decision paralysis. My eyes fix on the cooler, trying to make a selection.

Salad? Fruit and cheese? Protein bar? Chicken wrap? They all look delicious.

My stomach growls. I missed supper last night and breakfast this morning since my funds are so low. I was planning on hitting the store to get a loaf of bread, peanut butter, and jelly with my last ten dollars. I figured that would last a few days as long as I didn't pig out.

And then what?

No fucking clue.

Another well-thought-out plan by yours truly, burning to the ground in a spectacular blaze of glory.

I paid the hotel up for the next month, but other than that, I'm flat broke.

Papa wasn't a wealthy man, so my inheritance was next to nothing. I used almost all of it to buy a used car since my old beater was on its last leg. I thought I had enough money leftover for at least three months down here before I ran into trouble. But it didn't last that long. And I never thought I'd struggle this much in finding a job.

The idea of calling Mama isn't appealing, but it will probably come to that. I know she won't let me starve, but it'll be one more way I've failed her. I'm nothing but a disappointment.

Just like the woman who gave birth to me.

My open hand hovers over a sandwich as I calculate how long I can make eighty dollars last. At the last second, I swipe the fruit and cheese snack pack since it's cheaper.

"Get the sandwich too," he suggests, pointing his chin at the cooler.

I'm tempted to downplay my situation, insisting I'm not very hungry. Yet he already knows that's not true given my pathetic episode at the gas pump. Speaking of which, I blame

my breakdown on my gnawing hunger. I wasn't quite *hangry*, but more like *sangry* — sad hungry.

When I don't respond to his suggestion, he grabs the sandwich I was eyeing, along with a large handful of protein bars from on top of the cooler. He sets it on the counter and pushes it toward the cash register.

When the barista returns with our drinks, he asks her, "Do you have any hot food?"

"All I can do is a grilled cheese or oatmeal."

James looks at me, his brows raised in question. For a moment, I lose myself in the brilliance of his blue-green eyes. The color reminds me of pictures of the Caribbean Sea I've seen in magazines and on computer screen savers.

Struck mute, all I can do is blink. He blinks back.

Not commenting on my frozen state, he faces the woman behind the counter. "Can you put all this in a bag? And we'll take two grilled cheese sandwiches with chips and," he reaches across the counter to a fruit basket, "two apples."

Eighty bucks says he's not going to let me pay for this.

Oh. That's a savvy way to double my money. Betting on a sure thing like that.

The cashier rings up the order, but I'm ready to pounce as soon as she spits out the total, having dug into my purse.

"Forty-nine eighteen."

I thrust the eighty dollars at her, not wasting the time it would take to separate the bills. With lightning-fast reflexes, he grabs my wrist, stopping me halfway.

Our eyes meet.

The feel of his skin on mine lights me up from the inside, and a soft gasp passes my lips.

Of course I knew he was going to stop me from paying. I was prepared for that. But I *wasn't* prepared for how good his touch would feel.

Nor was I ready for the intensity in those ocean eyes as he casts a disapproving glare at me. So serious but a hint of compassion hidden behind the tight mask.

The skin over the bridge of his nose crinkles. “Lettie, did you honestly think I was letting you pay?”

Earlier, his tone was flat and somewhat robotic, but now it’s richer. There’s an underlying warmth to his voice, wrapping me up like expensive cashmere.

“Thank you. I’ll pay you back for everything,” I force out, feeling a myriad of emotions I can’t process, so I simply lower my eyes to the ground and try to collect myself while he pays with his card.

The butterflies in my stomach have officially flown up my chest and camped out in my throat.

He’s taking care of me.

And the touch of his skin. Oof.

I haven’t felt human touch for over a month. Not since I hugged Stella goodbye before leaving Georgia. Guess I missed it more than I realized.

His warm voice shakes me from my momentary melancholy. “Go ahead and take a seat. I’ll be right there.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“Thank you for thanking me,” he quips. “That’s the third time in the same number of minutes. Message received.”

A gentle laugh bubbles up. Grabbing our iced coffees, I pick out a table in the corner. From my seat, I study his movements. He’s saying something quietly to the barista. A tiny flare of jealousy catches me off guard.

Stupid, Lettie.

The woman at the register passes him something, and I try not to stare.

But I’m compelled to study their interaction. I guess my small-town upbringing embedded nosiness in me after all. It’s

the town motto to always be in everyone's business. It's written on the *Welcome to Climax* sign at the edge of town.

Kidding.

It says *Welcome to Climax — If you leave, you'll want to come again.*

A few moments later, he approaches the table. There's more of that stiffness in his gait. "Uh, would you mind switching seats with me?"

"Oookay," I drawl as my eyes sweep around the room.

He paid for all this food and donated eighty dollars to my pathetic personal charity. He can have whatever seat he wants.

"I like to keep my back to the wall where I can see the entrance and exits," he explains.

"Oh, I see."

At least he has a reason, and it's not just some psychosis. So far, no major red flags coming from him. They're all coming from me.

Once he's in his *preferred* seat, I notice the bag is missing. "Where's the food?"

As if on cue, a hungry growl comes from my tummy. My cheeks warm. I hope to hell he didn't hear that.

"She's going to bring the sandwiches when they're ready."

"And the bag?"

"I had her put it in the cooler until we're ready to leave so it stays fresh for you."

For me.

Yep. He's making sure I leave with more to eat. So damn sweet.

"Oh. That's very considerate. Thank you."

"That's number four. You must be the most grateful woman I've ever met."

I laugh, but he doesn't join me. Wasn't that a teasing joke? His brows draw in tight, making me feel bad. I hope he doesn't think I was poking fun at him by laughing.

You are fucking up this date, girl.

Wait. Maybe it's not a date. It's just a pity meal.

Duh.

A good deed meal makes much more sense than this strikingly handsome man being so taken with me in all my basket case crying glory that he was compelled to ask me on a date. I am a charity case, after all.

Shaking off my disappointment, I address his point. "Well, I was raised with good Southern manners. If someone does you a kindness, you should show them your appreciation."

He pops a straw into his cup. "Okay."

I should cut the poor guy loose and free him of his guilt. Good deed done. He doesn't need to suffer in my pathetic presence.

"Look, James, I know you're only being nice and making sure I eat. I appreciate it. You've been incredibly kind." After a deep breath, I add, "But you don't have to stay if you don't want to."

The way he studies me is slightly disconcerting. The longer our interaction goes on, the more it seems everything I do irritates him. Maybe all those feelings of safety I got about him earlier were wrong.

Suddenly, he reaches over the table and puts his hands on mine. My fumbling fingers freeze. I didn't realize I was fidgeting until he stopped me.

"Do I make you nervous, Lettie?"

Creepy. Fucking. Question.

"A little."

Oops. That slipped out.

That's what she said.

Backpedaling quickly, I ramble, “It’s only because you don’t seem especially happy to be here. Or maybe you don’t like me.”

“Why do you think that?”

“You’re not smiling, laughing, or saying much. Meanwhile, I’m clearly saying all the wrong things. And now I’m rambling, and I think you’re cute and was stupid enough to think this was a date. *Oh my gosh*; I said that out loud.”

His laugh cuts off my words because a smile accompanies it.

A real one.

His teeth are perfectly straight and bright white. The way his lips pull tight hits me with a powerful shot of lust.

Good lord. He should not be smiling. That’s dangerous.

Once his laughter fades, he grows instantly serious again. It’s like flipping a switch.

“Lettie, I don’t think you’re saying all the wrong things. There are no right or wrong things to say. Just relax. I’m enjoying your company.”

“You are?”

That sounded a bit higher pitched than I intended.

He nods. “I am.”

That’s it. That’s all he’s going to give me.

Frowning, I give him a stern look of doubt. The one my dad used to give me when I was bullshitting him. “I’m calling BS.”

“You’re calling BS on what?” He looks amused now, which is an improvement from... well, from the nothing he’s been giving me outside of that laugh and panty-dampening smile.

“On you enjoying my company.”

His tongue dabs at his lower lip, catching my attention. I have to force a lump down my throat. It’s suddenly hard to

swallow.

“I’ve been told I’m not overly emotional,” he admits with a hint of shyness crossing his features. “And I don’t usually talk unless it’s something worth saying. But I’m honest.” His eyes shift away from mine. “You can believe me when I say I’m enjoying your company.”

My reply is cut off as our grilled cheese sandwiches appear.

Yummy. My mouth waters.

“Thank you so much,” I tell her with a genuine smile.

“There it is again,” James teases me after giving the woman a congenial head nod of appreciation.

“Mama raised a woman with manners,” I retort, letting my twang have free reign.

Except Mama was actually my *grandmama*, but I don’t want to think about that right now.

“I like your voice. That accent. It reminds me of back home.”

“Where’s home?”

While I await his answer, I dig into my sandwich, taking a polite, ladylike bite.

Kidding.

I jumped in, my mouth wide as can be.

I’m fucking starving.

“Mmm,” I moan softly around the delicate, buttery bread that’s all warm and toasty.

When I look up, I realize he’s staring at my mouth. I grab a napkin from the dispenser and wipe my face, remembering the manners I’ve been professing to have.

“Sorry. It’s so good it makes my tongue wanna slap my brains out.”

His shoulders shake with silent laughter. “Don’t apologize. I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

I take another bite while he opens his bag of chips. After one more nibble, I restate my earlier question. “So where are you from that my accent reminds you of?”

“All over. But I was raised in South Carolina.”

“Nice. I’m from Georgia, but I’ve never lived anywhere else until now.”

He tosses a chip in his mouth while eying me carefully. I’m quickly growing accustomed to how he studies me. It should probably feel unnerving like I’m under a microscope. Especially since he’s a stranger.

But oddly enough, it doesn’t bother me.

After he munches on another handful of chips, he asks, “Have you been here long?”

“I came to town a few weeks ago.”

He sets down the chips, leans back in his chair, and steepled his fingers in front of his chest. My eyes catch on his corded forearms. No tattoos or anything to mar his smooth, taut skin.

“What brings you to Clearwater, Lettie?”

Having already polished off half of my sandwich, I wash it down with some coffee while deciding how to respond. But the flavors don’t mesh well.

“Want some water?” he asks out of the blue.

“What?”

“Water? I can get you some.”

My eyes search the table, wondering if he’s reading my mind.

“Yes, please.”

“I’ll be right back.”

He rises swiftly and returns a few moments later with a clear plastic cup of ice water. One for himself too.

“Thank you.”

“I knew you were going to say that. Perhaps I’m a mind reader.”

His smile is back, and there goes my lower half, getting all kinds of silly ideas.

“I was just thinking you were reading my mind.”

He cricks his head to the side in silent question.

“About the water,” I explain.

“Oh, it wasn’t that hard to figure out. Your mouth was likely dry from the bread, and sweetened coffee doesn’t go with —”

“Buttery bread.”

He smiles again. “Exactly.”

He finishes his chips before restarting the conversation. “You never answered me before. What brings you to town?”

“Oh, sorry. I was distracted by your mind reading. But uh... let’s see. Why am I here? That’s a fantastic question. A bit loaded, though.”

“How so?”

He cleans the apple with his napkin, buffing and polishing it to a shine. Again, my gaze falls to his hands. I like his hands. Too much.

“Lettie,” he prods.

I shake off the visions of his hands on my skin. “Oh, sorry. It’s a loaded question because I honestly have no idea why I’m here. Life’s been messy lately.”

“You must have some reason, or you wouldn’t be here.”

Stalling a bit more, I take another bite of the other half of the sandwich. Then another. I’m so dang hungry.

Another moan escapes me. “Mmm.”

Stop singing to your food, Lettie. He’s going to think you’re crazy.

He can’t find that out until at least the third date.

His face is a mask of tension when I get the gumption to look at him again. Probably because I still haven't answered him. It's like this is my first day having a conversation.

"It's complicated," I confess, dropping the sandwich. Regrettably.

"I'm a smart guy. I'm sure I can follow."

"You're kind of intense. Do you know that?"

He shifts forward and rests his forearms on the table. "Yes."

"Touché."

He squints with one eye, wrinkling the side of his face. "Not quite the right use of the word, but that's okay."

"What are you? The grammar police?"

"Yeah. I'm going to have to arrest you. Up against the wall."

Oh dear baby Jesus in the manger. If he says that again, I'll be a puddle.

I gulp my water, trying to stop my mind from imagining him pushing me up against the wall, pressing his chest against my back, and grinding his erection into my ass.

I think all the years of denying my physical needs have finally caught up to me. Not only do I want to hand this man my V-card, but I want him to rip it to bits in front of me.

He's older than me, but I don't know how much so. Stella said older men have more experience pleasing a woman. I bet James would make it good. He'd take care of me. Sexually. Not like he's taking care of my belly now.

Before fantasizing further, I blurt out the answer to the question he's repeatedly asked. "My father died a few weeks ago, and I decided to leave Georgia. It felt like the right time to strike out on my own."

"Why Clearwater? Did you come straight here or stop somewhere else?"

Interrogation much?

“I like the beach. I’m a water sign and was drawn here.”

Skepticism washes over his face. His brows raise and lips press tight. “Drawn here?”

“Yeah. Haven’t you ever been drawn to something before?”

His eyes narrow with more of that intense scrutiny. “Only recently.”

“Well, that’s what it was like for me. I’m a firm believer in trusting my gut. I don’t know how or why, but something tells me I’m supposed to be here. There’s nothing left for me back home.”

“What about your mother? Friends? Boyfriend?”

“Are you writing a report on me?” I hedge.

“Just curious about you.”

“Why?”

He taps one of his long fingers over his lips. He hasn’t touched his sandwich, which is a crime against cheese. If it sits too long, it won’t be all melty. With that thought, I grab mine and finish it in two bites. If he wants cold cheese in his sandwich, that’s on him.

To draw out an answer from him, I pin him with one of those serious expressions he’s been throwing at me for the last half hour.

“I see what you’re doing.”

Through a smirk, I toss, “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’re looking at me like I’m looking at you, trying to get me to open up. In the process, you’re avoiding answering about yourself.”

“Is it working?”

“A little bit.”

Damn. He's so freaking cute. The uptight, slightly dorky thing he's got going on is making me melt like the cheese on my sandwich.

I hold silent, waiting for him to talk.

He rolls his eyes. "I suppose I'm curious about you because I want to know why a woman drives to another state without a proper place to live, a job, or a savings account to support the trek."

My nostrils flare. "Who said I don't have a job or a proper place to stay?"

His face is impassive. "Do you, Lettie?"

"I don't have a job." I raise one finger. "*Yet*. But I do have lodging."

We trade intense looks, both sharpening our focus on the other. It's a stare down to see who breaks first.

He wins because I suck at staring contests. I blame my ADHD.

"*Fine*. It's a shitty place, okay? A grungy dive hotel. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

He shrugs. "If it's the truth."

"It is."

Dejected, I swipe the bag off the table, rip it open, and shove chips in my mouth like a glutton.

Chips. Making depression marginally better since... I don't know when. For a long time. Likely since the dawn of fried potatoes.

"So why did you come down here with no job, money, or place to live? And I assume you're all alone. Right?"

"It just so happens I have a very large, slobbery attack dog."

He scoffs. "No, you don't."

"What are you? The fact police?"

"Up against the wall," he grits out.

As hot as the joke was the first time, it's equally as silly the second. A deep guffaw rattles my chest. This time, he joins in.

As he sobers, he pushes his basket over to me slyly. My eyes meet his.

“Eat,” he orders.

My nipples sharpen to stiff peaks at his sudden intensity.

“Did anyone ever tell you that you're mighty bossy?”

I pick up the sandwich while holding his eye contact. His face softens minutely, causing a feeling of warmth to spread under my rib cage.

“Not often. But in certain circumstances, I've been called dominant.”

“Oo la la.” I wink at him. “And in what situations might *Dominant James* be present? When rescuing hopeless drifters he finds at gas stations having a meltdown?”

“No. Can't say I've ever been in this situation before.”

“That's not an answer.”

Another half of my sandwich is gone by the time he responds. “There's a place.”

My eyes shift from side to side. “A place?”

“Where I go when I want...” He raises his brows at me like he's trying to convey something. But it sails over my head.

Leaning forward, I whisper conspiratorially, “A place where you go when you want what, James?”

His frame stiffens. “Forget it.”

Mirroring his words from earlier at the cash register, I quip, “Do you really think I'm going to let you get off that easy?”

“Lettie, Lettie, Lettie.” He shakes his head, part dismissively and part indulgently. “Why do I feel like you're going to get me in trouble?”

“Sometimes trouble finds us no matter how far we run from it.”

CHAPTER 7

**TOMORROW TOMER
WILL FIGURE THAT OUT**

TOMER

Fascinated. Enraptured. And utterly infatuated.
That's how I feel in her presence.

At least, that's what I suspect I'm feeling. Never had this reaction to someone before, so I can't be certain how to label these emotions.

Additionally, I'm aroused. That's an easy one since I've felt it many times before.

That's probably why I hinted at my bedroom proclivities. I suppose I was feeling her out, trying to see if she's familiar with what I'm into, sexually speaking. Unless I read her wrong, she's clueless.

That's unfortunate.

Yet at the same time, it's for the best. I shouldn't be entertaining such an absurd notion.

Focus on the task at hand, and find out why she's here.

So far, she's only said she's *drawn* here.

That's illogical.

Some of her answers are evasive, and she seems to be deflecting. She's holding back; that much is clear. But is it because she's concealing her true motives or does she simply not want to talk about the topic?

I'll need to gain her trust to get her to come clean. The question is... how much time will it take to build that trust? We're off on the right foot, even if I did fuck up a few times initially.

I blame my infatuation with her. There's a stirring of confusing sensations in my lower abdomen that's distracting.

"If you're not going to tell me more about this mysterious place, then how about something easier. What do you do for a living, James?"

And on that note, it's time to go. I'd prefer not to lie, but I can't very well tell her where I work. Not until I find out if she knows her birth father owns Redleg.

Raising one finger, I buy myself a little time. "Hold on a second."

I check my phone as tension spreads from the back of my neck to my shoulders. I've only been gone from HQ for two hours, but anything could go wrong in that time. If I'm going to continue interacting with her to get the intel, I'll need to figure out a better way to manage my work responsibilities.

Scanning my email inbox, a sense of relief cascades over me. No urgent communications. Just standard shit that can wait. No texts from Klein either. He'd message or call if something went wrong.

Perhaps I've taught him enough that I can take some time off.

"Do you need to call someone? I don't mind if you need to step out for a moment."

Her candy-coated smile reveals a genuine sweetness that calls to something deep inside me. Although I've never had much of a sweet tooth, I'd make an exception to taste her lips and suckle her nectar.

Suddenly, my pants are tighter in the crotch. *Fucking hell.*

I clear my throat and adjust myself. “Actually, I need to return to work. Emails are piling up.”

Little white lie. But leaving means I can avoid telling bigger lies.

Her expression shifts, and her shoulders sag. “Oh, okay. I see.”

I don’t like how she said that.

It sounds *off*. Wrong.

“What do you see?”

Her eyes flash with something I can’t understand.

But dammit. *I want to understand.*

Another new experience for me. I’m wracking them up around Violet.

She casts her eyes downward. “That you need to leave.”

“Oh. Can I see you again?”

Her head pops back, eyes widening in surprise. “Okay, so I guess I *didn’t* see.”

“What does that mean?”

With renewed confidence, her slightly pointed chin raises as she meets my gaze. “Initially, I thought you were blowing me off with the bullshit email excuse, but now you’re asking to see me again. Is this a brush-off or not?”

The urge to growl sparks somewhere deep inside, but I shake it away because I’m not one of my barbaric Redleg brothers.

“Lettie, a minute ago, you said you understood I needed to leave. But now it seems that wasn’t true. Am I confusing you somehow?”

The apples of her cheeks tint slowly as she holds my gaze. With one brow raised, she fights back a smile. “Nothing gets by you, does it?”

“Actually, more than you’d realize. Case in point, whatever is happening now.”

She tilts her head to one side as her face softens.

“I’m a straightforward man. I don’t always get...” I wave my open palm back and forth between us.

How do I put this without sounding like a dumbass? She hasn’t agreed to see me again, and I’m blowing it.

Yet again.

This is why I prefer my interactions with women at the club. None of this social bullshit and guessing motives. The only thing I need to communicate with my subs are their limits and kinks. It’s simple and direct. No chance for misinterpretation.

She reaches across the table and steadies my twitching with her hand on mine. It’s the same thing I did to calm her jitters earlier.

Her expression warms as she lowers her forehead. “It’s okay. I don’t always get people either.”

I could swear my pulse skips a beat.

That’s new. I’m in trouble.

Off-limits, Tomer. Abort. Abort. Don’t lead her on. You can’t even tell her your real name.

“I’d like to see you again too,” she offers from behind a demure smile.

Shit.

I already asked to see her again, so I can’t backtrack without hurting her feelings. Her day is going bad enough. Last thing I want to do is make it worse by making her think I’m not interested.

Inhale, exhale.

I can figure this out. I’ve solved far bigger problems without batting an eye. I’ll have to adjust fire to come up with

a new approach. Before I see her again, I'll get my head right and focus on my mission and not her.

But *she* is the mission, my conscience reminds me.

Damn. That's a problem for *Tomorrow Tomer*.

"Well, I need to go." As I prepare to stand, I push away from the table. My hand slips from her grasp. "So you've got the cash if something comes up. You refueled your vehicle today and have some food to take back to the hotel with you. Is there anything else you need before I leave?"

"James, you've done enough. You're not responsible for me. I'm already indebted to you as it is."

Indebted? Does she think that?

"Is that why you're agreeing to see me again? Because you think you owe me something?"

The idea of her owing me anything sits heavy against my midsection like a medicine ball tossed at my gut.

She scrunches her full lips over to one side. "Let me answer that by asking you a question."

My eyes flitter to the ceiling before falling back to hers. "That's not how answering questions works, but go ahead."

Her answering laugh has a melodic quality, reminding me of her singing voice.

"James, are you asking to see me again so you can make sure I have food?"

That I can answer honestly. "No. Not at all. I want to see you."

Now, whether or not I *should* want to see her is a different story.

She shoots me a toothy smile. "Then same here."

I hate not knowing if she's lying. As much as I've been trained to read people, I'm shitty at it. The simplest things go right over my head despite years of being a people watcher. When you're always on the outside, there's often nothing else

to do besides study others. But that doesn't mean I understand them.

And when I'm forced to deal with people, like I am with Lettie, there's far too much to think about to decipher their probable intentions. Things like... *don't be creepy. Be sure not to stare. Pay attention. Be ready to respond. And again, don't be creepy.*

I try to banish that thought at least five hundred times a day, but it's always there in the back of my mind and occasionally front and center.

And it always sounds like my father's disappointed voice.

Stand up straight, boy.

Look at me when I'm talking to you, or I'll tan your hide.

Why can't you be a normal kid?

Are you a damn robot?

Stop staring like that, you little freak.

Don't be so damn creepy.

With a shake of my head, I bring myself to my feet and begin clearing the table. Lettie rises and assists me.

She polished off both sandwiches in short order, which leaves me with a mix of emotions to sort out later. I hate that she was hungry, but I loved being able to care for her.

"Let me get your bag of snacks from the cooler. I'll be right back."

"Thanks, James."

Although I go by that name when I'm at the club to protect my anonymity, I don't want her to call me that. It sounds wrong, leaving me feeling unsettled.

More to unpack later.

In fact, there's a whole file named *Violet Holt* in my HDD — Human Hard Drive — that needs processing.

When I get to the counter, the barista wears a big grin. "Ready for the bag?"

“Yes, please.”

As she passes it to me, she answers my earlier question. “I called my manager, and he said we’re not hiring. Sorry.”

“I appreciate you checking.”

“Wish her luck from me.”

I offer a nod and return to Lettie. She gathers her purse and finishes her coffee. I pull the gift card from my back pocket that I purchased earlier.

“Here, I got this for you. Just in case the money runs out before I see you again.”

“James.” The fake name drips from her mouth like honey, complete with a hint of Georgia twang.

I’d love to hear her say my real name.

Guess that’s not in the cards for us.

She doesn’t make a move to take the gift card, so I slip it into her purse’s outer pocket as I attempt to walk by.

She grabs me by the forearm, halting me in my tracks. “Wait. Stop.”

My heart accelerates, beating more forcefully as I’m sucked deeper into her orbit.

If I’m but a particle swirling aimlessly in the darkness of space, then she’s the sun.

“Why are you doing this for me?”

Her eyes sparkle with more than the reflection of the muted lighting of the coffee shop. The tears threaten to spill down her cheeks.

How the fuck can I answer that without perjuring myself further?

“You need help right now with food and money, and that’s something I’m in a position to provide.”

“But you don’t even know me.”

“I know enough. You’re a good person. You already told me your father died recently, so I’m sure you’re going through some stuff. It’s no big deal to help you out.”

“But it *is* a big deal.”

Her tears overflow, but she wipes them away before submissively dropping her gaze to the floor.

Unable to stop myself, I lift her chin with one finger, letting it linger a second or two longer than needed. “I know it can be scary to be in a new place on your own. Let me help you.”

“I don’t know when I’ll be able to pay you back. All my career prospects have shriveled up.”

“No payback needed.”

I don’t know how long we stand in silence, but I know my world shifts a few inches.

It’s going to be hard to let her go.

And she’s not even mine.

How could she ever be?

She’s a stunning work of art. And I’m anything but that.

My body is strong and fit from the extra time I put in at the gym. But I’m not striking like her. Everything about her is flawless.

We’re not a match.

And that doesn’t take into account who she is, her age, and the innocence permeating the air around her.

Definitely not a match.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket, shaking me from the trance she’s pulled me under. With a tip of my head toward the door, I begin moving us along. “I’ll walk you out.”

When she’s seated in her car with the bag of snacks on the passenger seat, she asks for my number.

After she’s typed my personal cell number into her phone, she fires off a text so I have her number too. Entirely

unnecessary, but she doesn't know that.

Instead of checking the text, I spend the last few seconds taking in her beauty before she drives away.

I can't have her, but there's nothing stopping me from wanting her.

And I do.

I fucking want her.

As she reverses from the parking space, it dawns on me that I'm waiting for the moment when I'll catch her laughing at me. Or maybe mocking me for daring to think I'd have a shot with a woman like her. Once she no longer needs my assistance, she'll likely move on.

But what if she finds another asshole like that fucker Toby? She could get hurt because she's too damn innocent and trusting. I'll need to keep an eye on her.

For her protection.

A solution pierces my consciousness almost instantly.

Maybe she can work the reception desk at the club. All the Doms will look after her if I ask them to. They're protective of the staff and treat the subs with the utmost respect. The only place she'd be safer is at Redleg, but that's out of the question for obvious reasons.

And I'll be there to keep an eye on her, ensuring she doesn't get mixed up with any undesirables. Maybe one of the other girls needs a roommate, and we can get her out of that shitty hotel. Whoever ends up rooming with her can keep an eye on her for me outside the club.

This is perfect.

Then again... is a BDSM club the best place for someone as innocent as her?

There's only one way to find out.

As I head to my car, there's a slight pep to my step that I normally don't have. Once I'm inside my vehicle, I check the

text she sent. My chest tightens, and my lower lip makes its way between my teeth as I read it.

LETTIE

I've saved you in my phone as Dominant James with the Big Heart. So it's only fair you tell me what name you save me under in your contacts

I SAVE her as Off-Limits as a reminder to keep my heart and dick in check. But my reply isn't exactly truthful. At least my dishonesty is consistent.

ME

I'm considering making you Sugar Bear with the Southern Twang.

CHAPTER 8

AIN'T NOTHING LIKE THE REAL THING, BABY

LETTIE

The scent of stale smoke greets me as I enter my hotel room and toss my purse on the top of the dresser. Ugh. I hate that smell.

I've wiped down the walls and every available surface with lemon-scented disinfectant wipes, but it does nothing to get rid of the funk. The grungy carpets don't help either.

That odor is part of this place. Perhaps it's the walls.

But it's home for the rest of the month. If I get a little extra cash, I'm considering renting a carpet shampooer and doing these floors. That might help. Some fresh new bedding would be nice too.

But I have to use what I got from James for more pressing needs.

James.

Swoon.

I open up my notes app, creating a note to track how much I owe him.

An icky feeling still lingers at the thought of taking handouts, but it's not like I have other options. I damn sure ain't asking Stella or Mama for money. Not that Mama would give it to me anyhow. She's so cheap she squeezes the quarter tight enough to make the eagle scream.

Oh Stella. I owe her a recap of our date. And the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced it was an actual date. It may have started because of pity, but when he said goodbye and stood by my car, the look in his eyes was pretty damn convincing. He sees me as more than a charity case. I can feel it in my bones.

And my vagina.

After placing the snacks he bought me in the small refrigerator in the corner of the room, I kick off my shoes and slide on my slippers. No bare feet in here. Ever. Period. Not even in the shower. That's what flip-flops are for.

Lying on the bed, I grab my phone and scroll through my playlists to find the perfect music to suit my mood. Upbeat country comes sailing out of my Bluetooth speaker in the corner a few seconds later.

I find myself grinning and humming along as I type out my text update.

ME

I'm still alive. The date is over. It was a little bit awkward at first, but it ended nicely.

STELLA

Are you seeing him again?

ME

Yes.

STELLA

Did he ask to see you again, or did you ask him?
Details, please.

ME

He asked. It was sweet.

STELLA

Did you pick a time and day?

ME

No, but we exchanged numbers.

STELLA

Where is the photo I requested so I can do a
background screening on him?

ME

Stop that. Don't be a stalker. I'm not going to invade
his privacy. He's really nice.

STELLA

Nice? Not sexy or exciting or funny? Just... nice?
Sounds boring. Is he boring? Tell me more.

ME

Should we just... you know?

STELLA

Don't say it.

ME

I mean, I can text, but it'd be easier to call. There's a lot to say.

STELLA

Give me a few minutes, and I'll call you. I miss you anyhow. But if you break your nose again, I won't be held responsible.

ME

Speaking of which, I haven't injured myself in the last four days.

STELLA

Wow. A new record. Okay, gonna use the potty. I'll call you in a minute.

ME

You didn't have to be so honest. I'd have preferred a lie in this case.

STELLA

It's only number one. Not number two.

ME

You're my most mature friend.

STELLA

Aw, thanks. Okay. I'm ready now. You calling me, or am I calling you? Video or voice call?

ME

Wait. Did you pee while talking to me?

STELLA

No. I peed while texting you. That's different.

ME

The most mature friend.

AFTER MUTING THE MUSIC, I tap my screen to place a video call. I miss her and want to see her face anyhow.

She answers, looking just as gorgeous as always. Black eyeliner, thick and winged out on each side. The aqua streaks in her jet black hair are tucked behind her ears, and her nose ring shimmers at me like it's waving.

"Hey, lover," she teases, flashing a wink.

"No Pumpkin tonight?"

“She’s not feeling so good, so she’s under her heat lamp.”

“Oh no.” As much as I’d love to never see the reptile again, I don’t like it when Stella is sad. She loves the creature for unknown reasons.

“It happens every now and again. Upset stomach. Ate some bad bugs, maybe.” She plops down on a bean bag in her room and props her phone up in front of her. “Okay, so tell me about this dude. Name. Age. Height. Hair color. Address. Salary. I need all the details.”

She pulls out a notebook, flips it open, and hovers a pen over the page.

“You are not going to take notes about him.”

She tilts her head to one side, shooting me a scornful look with pursed lips and raised brows. “Have we met?”

Shaking my head, I start in with a recap, modifying it slightly to avoid my lack of money meltdown. If she finds out, she’ll insist on sending me a loan or making me go back home. She’s saving every penny for her own business endeavor. She’s worked so hard and is too close to have a setback now.

As for moving back to Climax, I’d have to live with her since I broke the lease on my apartment. And that’s out because I’d rather die than live with a lizard. So obviously, I can’t tell her about my bank account woes.

“Okay, so what happened when you got to the coffee shop? Did he pay?”

“Stella, why the focus on money? We both know that you don’t care about that shit.”

Honestly. She’s the salt of the earth.

“I’m not saying you should dump him if he’s cheap or broke. I’m just trying to get a feel for how the date went. Was he being a gentleman? How into you is he? I need to know the whole story without missing any details. I can’t ask around about him since I’m not there. Who will protect you?”

I smack my lips. “*Oh lawd*. You make it sound like I just popped up out of the cornfield. I’ll have you know that I *can*

protect myself.”

“You once walked into traffic. If I hadn’t been there to pull you back, you’d be a black spot on the highway right now.”

I laugh at the memory she’s triggered. “*Pshaw!* That was only once, and it wasn’t a highway. It was Peachtree Avenue. No one drives down that road.”

“Lies!” She points her pen at the screen. “Adrienne Bird was zooming past. She almost hit you.”

“Does not count. She was riding that damn two-person bicycle with the life-sized Buddy the Elf blow-up doll strapped to the other seat. She was bound to hit someone, especially since she put Buddy on the front seat and had to look around him to steer.”

Stella shakes her head at me. “I stand by my assertion that I saved your life that day. I’m a hero. You need me. Let me know when you get a real place so I can come squat on your couch.”

The idea of her coming here makes me feel warm and fuzzy. She’s mentioned it before, but her whole life is in Climax. Unlike me, she’s not on the outs with her mama. She has a brother back home and more friends than I ever did. And I’m not sure her business plan would jive here.

“Back to the date,” she prods.

“Yes, he bought. We had coffee and grilled cheese sandwiches.”

Scribbling on her notepad, she mutters, “Coffee. Grilled cheese. Got it.” She stops writing and looks at me. “What did you talk about? How long was the date?”

When I resume speaking, her pen flies across the page. I have no idea if she’s really taking notes or making out a shopping list, but I keep talking.

“At first, I sort of thought he was annoyed by me,” I confess.

Her lips shift to a pout. “Why would anyone be annoyed by you?”

“I guess he wasn’t, but I thought he was. He wasn’t smiling much and didn’t laugh when I did. The conversation was a bit stilted.”

“Not good. But you said *at first* it felt that way. When did it change?”

“Well, at one point, I told him he was free to go and under no obligation to stay if he didn’t want to.”

She bobs her head like she’s impressed. “Bold strategy. What did he say?”

My eyes search the ceiling, landing on a brown water stain in the corner. Gross. “I can’t recall exactly, but he made it clear that he was enjoying my company. And we kept talking. He said some funny things and the awkwardness sort of...” I shrug as I search for the words to describe the way the vibe shifted. “I guess the tension more or less melted away. And then we started clicking.”

“Funny things.” She’s writing again, nodding along as she goes. “Tension melted. Clicking. Got it.”

With my phone propped up on the nightstand, I roll onto my side and tuck my hands under my cheek as I watch my friend pretend to take notes on my date. I’m starting to think she’s drafting her business plan out for her future company rather than writing notes on my slightly awkward date.

“Okay, now that we covered what happened. Tell me how you feel.”

“Are you my therapist now?”

“What do you mean *now*? That’s what I’ve been going on ten years now. Next, we’ll discuss your childhood. We’re not done unearthing that pesky religious trauma.”

“Hush your mouth, woman,” I mumble with a chuckle.

She sets the notebook and pen beside her on the floor and smiles at me. “You look happy.”

“I feel happy. I mean, the morning was shitty, not gonna lie. Passed over for yet another job and —” I cut myself

off before I let it slip that I was so broke and hungry I couldn't think straight.

“And what?”

I opt for a partial truth. “And I was starting to feel like I made a mistake by coming here. Ever since I found out about my parents, I've been a mess. Especially after losing Papa. I thought it would get better when I got here. But I've been circling the drain.” I tug in a deep breath. “Meeting James feels like turning a corner. Better things are on the horizon.” I close my eyes, covering my face with my palms. “Sorry. It's cheesy, and I know what you're going to say.”

“What am I going to say, Lettie baby?” Her voice drips with sincerity. She knows I'm struggling down here. Even if I try to hide it. She knows.

“You're going to say I shouldn't let a man define my happiness.”

She reaches behind her, grabs a big red novelty button, and smacks it. A shrill buzzing sound fills the space. We laugh together.

“So you weren't going to tell me that?” I ask.

“Not this time You need this win. I'm gonna let you have it.”

“So it's okay to be happy strictly because I might like a guy?”

She quirks a brow and lowers her voice to a sultry purr. “I thought you said he was a man, not a guy.”

I mock fanning my face. “Oh yes. He certainly was.”

“Hot?”

“Yes. Short blond hair. Blue-green eyes that you could get lost in. He's tall, lean, and fit. He definitely works out. His forearms were drool-worthy.” I sigh like a swooning teenager. “But it was more than that. There was this quiet, stillness about him that I found so comforting. He was steady. I'm not sure why, but it made him all the more attractive.”

“Steady and still? Not sure how that equates to attractiveness, but what do I know? I pick my lovers based on kink compatibility.”

“I can’t explain it. There was just something about him that made me feel protected. I felt like he could just take away all my worries with a wave of his hand.”

Her brows dance. “A thrust of his cock, you mean. A wave of his hand over your clit.”

A robust laugh escapes her, and I join in, nearly snorting. “I mean... I don’t think I’d be opposed.”

We laugh again, giggling it up like we’re at one of our sleepovers from years past.

“Well, I’ve got to jet. I need to hit the bank before it closes, and then I’m going to the gym to pretend to work out.”

I finish her standing joke for her. “But secretly, you’ll be watching Mike Blackwater do squats.”

“Guilty as charged. You know how I love leg day.”

“Oh! Before you go. That reminds me of something James said.”

“What?”

“At one point, I was teasing him and said, ‘What are you, the fact police?’ And the man lowered his voice into this sexy, deep register and was all like, ‘Yep. Now up against the wall.’ Girl, I almost melted into a puddle! Holy fuck.”

“Wow. Lettie Holt. All hot and bothered. This is a first.”

My cheeks heat at the memory.

“All I could think about was how sexy it would be if he pressed me against the wall.”

“Now I’m getting hot. I might skip the bank so I can watch Mike do dead lifts and leg curls too.”

“Maybe he’ll need a spotter.”

“A girl can dream. And if Rosie Lambson is on the leg spreader machine, I’ll orgasm on the spot.”

“It must be nice to be bi. Double the options to drool over.”

“No complaints here. Except the burning in hell for all eternity thing.” She rolls her eyes.

“Okay. Have fun at the gym. I’m fixin’ to go for a jog.”

“Love you, Lettie. Talk later.”

“I love you too.”

After I hang up, I roll onto my back and close my eyes as that fantasy of James pressing me against the wall traipses across my mind like a movie scene. I wonder what it would be like to feel his hard body flat against mine. Would he be gentle with me? Rough? Both? Could he make me come?

I’ve never had an orgasm with a man before. Hell, I’ve never let one touch me down there. I’ve had some try to rub me over my clothes, but the idea of it has always felt too intimate.

I don’t like being vulnerable, and is there anything more vulnerable than that? Mama’s voice is always in the back of my mind, reminding me about the dangers of promiscuity and eternal damnation.

But something about James makes me think that perhaps it’s time to try new things.

With him.

So I let the fantasy unfold a little further in my mind’s eye. My hands begin moving over my body of their own volition. I start with my fingertips running across my chin, then trail them lower over my neck before they travel along the valley between my breasts. My other hand joins in, cupping my C-cups over the fabric of my sundress.

A slight moan escapes me as I imagine my hands are his. Those long fingers would be so nimble and skilled. I bet he could work me up in no time.

My fantasy pulls me back to the coffee shop, but this time, no one is there except the two of us. He looks at me with that

intense stare, opens his mouth enough for his tongue to swipe at his lower lip, leaving it glistening.

“Get up against the wall, Lettie.”

And I do. I obey him without hesitation.

He prowls over, a hunter stalking his prey. *“Hands against the wall.”*

The fantasy plays out, but my hands aren't against a wall like they are in my mind. In reality, they're sinking down into my panties. My pussy is soaked and needy. I find my clit and swirl my fingertips around it, slowly at first.

“I'm up against the wall. Now what?”

“I'm going to search you.”

“For what?”

My hips buck into my hand as I tease myself, not wanting to come too fast.

“After I search your body from head to toe, I'll let you know what I find.”

His warm hands wrap over my shoulders, and he scoops my hair to one side. I feel the heat coming off his body as he skims the exposed flesh of my upper arms. He works his way back up, then slips one strap of my dress down. The other follows a second later, and my dress begins to slip down my body.

His breath caresses the sensitive skin of my nape, and I break out in goose flesh. As his hands work lower, he tugs my dress the rest of the way down until it's in a pile on the floor.

“Spread your legs.”

I do, and not just in my fantasy. My flattened hand runs over my core, stroking up and down. I press my palm against my needy clit and buck up, chasing my climax.

In my mind, James sinks to his knees behind me and drags his hands over my thighs. Without warning, he spreads me wide open and cups my pussy roughly.

“Are you hiding something in here?”

“No,” I whimper.

“I better check.”

He rips my panties clean off my body. They disintegrate with his touch. And then he’s there, exploring my soaking wet flesh and diving his long fingers in and out of my pussy.

I long to simulate what it’d feel like, but I’m too shame-filled to thrust my fingers in and out like I imagine he would.

My body heats at the thought of him working me closer to climax. I feel the coil of pleasure deep in my belly. I can’t stop my moans. I hope they can’t hear me in the room next door. Not that they show me the same courtesy.

Fuck it.

I moan louder, pretending James has ordered me to do it.

“Let me hear you. Don’t hold back.”

I don’t dare disobey him.

Before I know it, that spiral of pleasure has spread throughout my whole body. I slam my thighs closed and rock into my hand as I come unraveled.

“Oh, shit, shit. Yes,” I yell, unashamed of touching myself.

For once.

I let the pleasure rock through me as I ride out my climax, moaning and keening into the quiet stillness of my room. My breasts heave with my deep breaths as I start to come down from the high.

“And that was just a fantasy. Imagine if it was the real thing,” I mutter to myself.

After my heart rate returns to normal, I remove my hand from my panties and feel the familiar bout of shame. It wraps its arms around me like a scratchy wool blanket.

Dammit.

So much for freeing myself.

Better luck next orgasm.

CHAPTER 9

BASK

TOMER

W*ell, fuck me.* The sound of Lettie coming is forever branded into my mind.

Didn't expect to see her touching herself when I accessed her phone's camera and microphone, but I can't say I regret it. It was so tempting to keep watching.

So fucking tempting.

However, I wasn't going to whack my dick while spying on her like a fucking creepy pervert. And if I kept watching, jacking off was going to be a necessity. No matter what my father called me, I'm not *that* big of a creep.

My dick is standing at attention and will likely stay that way until I release the tension.

Fucking hell.

I turned off the camera immediately and lowered the volume until I could barely hear her soft moans, whimpers, and gasps.

Although I have watched her through her phone camera before without her knowledge, observing her masturbating

isn't something I'll do. Not without her consent.

I've never watched anyone do something intimate without their consent, and I won't start now.

No matter how badly I wanted to.

With the volume low in the background — just in case something happened in that shitty hotel — I attempted to focus on other tasks. And each time my mouse hovered over the video button, I forced it away.

Not without her permission.

After coffee with Lettie, I rushed home and cleared out my email while monitoring her text messages with her friend. I was curious to hear what she thought about me, hoping she didn't really want to see me again. I was waiting for that old, familiar moment when the girl I've got a crush on turns out to be disgusted by me.

At the same time, the thought raked my insides.

I missed the beginning of her video call while distracted with work shit, but I listened to the last few minutes. Just long enough to know she's interested in me.

A growing part of me wishes she wasn't. My infatuation would be easier to ignore if she saw me as nothing but a friend. Hell, I'd take her seeing me as merely a checkbook to get her through rough times over knowing she wasn't turned off by me like most people are.

Knowing she's happier having met me, I'm not sure I can walk away as easily as I'd like to.

Like I *should* do.

I'll have to work three times as hard to convince myself to leave her alone now that I've heard her delicate moans of pleasure.

Who am I kidding? I can't leave her alone.

For one, she needs protection. Even Stella thinks Lettie's too trusting to be left to her own devices. And she's known her far longer than I have.

I also can't walk away from Lettie until I uncover what she knows about Big Al.

But it's not only that.

Lettie needs help I can provide. More than protection or a job. She needs a friend. One who lives here. If a simple coffee date made her *that* happy, imagine how good I can make her feel in all the other ways I want to.

Dammit. My dick stiffens even harder.

I need to get to the club tonight. Although, the thought of a random sub doesn't feel right.

Shaking it off, I scan my laptop for any other important tasks. Before tomorrow, I need to run diagnostics on the Redleg payroll system. I got an email from Boss's secretary, Peggy, complaining about error messages she gets when running reports. I'll work on that later.

Using my tablet, I check on Lettie. I can't see her because her phone is positioned beside her bed, but I hear fabric rustling.

The corner of the screen picks up movement. She's sitting on the edge of her bed, slipping on her sneakers. Time for a jog already?

I check my watch. She's early tonight.

Wasting no time, I change my clothes so I can jog behind her at a reasonable distance. I haven't done cardio in a few days. Normally, I follow her in my car, driving a few blocks at a time. Since she knows what my car looks like now, that's too risky.

I'll throw on sunglasses and a hat. If I stay far enough away, she won't recognize me. Easier to dive in and out of the trees along the edge of the path she takes when I'm on my feet.

Five minutes later, I'm out the door, driving quickly across town. She didn't take her car, so I have to track her via her phone.

I need to figure out how to tag her sneakers without her knowing. She's not safe out there. What if she goes for a run without her phone when I'm stuck at work? Or worse, what if whoever harms her disables her phone? If something happened, I'd never be able to find her. I can't risk that. She's defenseless.

Vulnerable.

And what the fuck would I tell Big Al then?

When I approach the area near her hotel, my head moves on a swivel as I try to locate her. Wish I had a drone with me. Next time.

With a few taps of my screen while stopped at a traffic light, I gain access to her phone's GPS location. I drive a few blocks farther until I see her in the distance. Her long blond hair is tied in a ponytail, swinging from side to side as she runs down the sidewalk.

Terrible area for running.

I should take her to some other areas around town. There are better places to get fresh air and exercise. That could be a nice date. I think.

Not as if I'd know. I've never dated anyone in the traditional sense.

After parking in an out-of-the-way spot behind a dollar store, I double-time it to catch up with her, slowing my pace when I regain visual.

While I jog behind her, I call the club owner to put my plan in motion. "Hey, Dante. I'm coming in tonight. I need to talk to you about something. While I'm there, I can work the floor for a while if needed."

"Sure, James. I'd appreciate that. I've got a ton of paperwork to deal with. We've got several new applicants for the platinum-level membership. Can you help me screen them again?"

"Absolutely. I'll get the files from you tonight. See you around nine or ten."

“Sounds good.”



A FEW HOURS after ensuring Lettie made it back safely to her hotel room, I’m all cleaned up and walking into a kink club called *Bask*.

A familiar face greets me at the door. “Evening, James. It’s been a while.”

“Hey, Tim.” I nod at the bouncer but don’t comment on his musing. It wasn’t a question.

At the front desk, Freya takes her lollipop out of her mouth and beams at me. “Hi, James. We’ve missed you. Are you taking over floor duty tonight?”

“Yes. After I talk to Dante. Is he in his office?”

“He’s already on the floor. The evening monitor called in sick.”

“Okay. I’ll find him.”

She presses her arms together, accentuating her cleavage. “If you have time later, I’d love to do a scene with you.”

“Not sure if I’ll be partaking tonight. But I’ll find you if I have time.”

I won’t.

Freya doesn’t appeal to me tonight. After hearing Lettie make herself come, I don’t expect I’ll be able to do a scene with anyone for quite a while.

But that’s fine. That’s not why I come here.

I come here to feel normal. Like I belong.

When I’m at *Bask*, no one expects me to be anything but who I am. Here, it’s okay to be quiet. It’s okay to watch people. It’s okay to be a little awkward, intense, or serious.

I can control the situation without judgment. If I want to engage with someone, I know how to go about it. If I want to keep to myself, I’m allowed to do it without anyone teasing or poking fun at me for being the Nofunfuck.

Here, it's okay to be me.

Whether I take part in a scene, do a shibari demonstration, or simply walk the floor to ensure everyone is following the rules and being safe, I feel at home. I know what's expected of me and others. There's order here. Very few surprises.

It's the welcome distraction I need from my humdrum and stressful life. It gives me balance.

As I open the door to the main room, the lights are dimmed. Soft music fills the air over the din of nondescript conversations. It's too early to be busy. The peak time is 2200 to 0100. Another hour until the place is vibrating.

The main room is expansive, with couches and seating areas spread around the space. There's a small stage at one end that we use for demonstrations or classes like the mandatory orientation for new members. A few times a week, we also use that area to cover various topics to allow people to explore their kinks while keeping safety at the forefront.

I've taught a few classes over the years but don't particularly care for it. I'm not a fan of public speaking.

I spot Dante in the corner, talking to his current sub, Sherry. She's wearing a black, sheer, thigh-length robe over her bra and panties and keeping her eyes downcast, as I'd expect. He's dressed in his usual attire — crisp black jeans and a freshly-pressed dress shirt. Somehow, he manages to pull off classy and casual simultaneously.

There's no dress code here. Anything goes. Whether that be business clothes, jeans, or lingerie and leathers.

Before approaching Dante, I turn down the first hallway on the left and drop off my things in my locker.

Returning to the main floor, I pass a couple going at it on a large couch along the wall. I glance at them, giving them just enough attention to ensure it's consensual, then move along.

Weaving between the couches, coffee tables, and sitting areas, I nod in silent greeting to a few members.

When I approach Dante, we shake hands in greeting. After exchanging meaningless pleasantries with him, I address his sub politely.

Dante smacks her on the ass. “Sherry, go walk the room.”

She nods demurely and leaves without hesitating. Sherry’s a good sub. I’ve topped her on occasion, but not since Dante took interest in her. I expect he’ll collar her soon. All the Doms know she’s officially off-limits. I have no qualms about it, and neither do the others. Everyone looks out for the subs — male and female alike. That’s part of why I want Lettie here. I know my peers will have my back.

“What’s up, James? I can see the wheels spinning in that big head of yours.”

Cutting to the chase, I explain, “There’s a young woman who needs a job. I was hoping you could find work for her at the reception.”

“Is she pretty?”

I scoff. “Does that matter?”

“In general, for club employment, no. But at the reception? I’d prefer it. This is an upscale club, and we need to make a good impression. The first person the members see should have a certain... look to them.”

Not sure how I feel about that, but I guess it makes sense.

“Yes, she’s beautiful.”

Like a goddess come to life.

“How old?”

“Twenty-four.”

He whistles and shakes his head. “Pretty young.”

“She’s legal.”

“True. Is she responsible? Trustworthy? Did you do a check on her already?”

“Background is clear. She’s smart, friendly, and I think she’d do a great job.”

He crosses his arms and eyes me carefully. “How long has she been part of the lifestyle?”

“That’s the thing. She hasn’t. It’d be new to her.”

“James, come on. Does she even know what we do here?”

“I haven’t told her about this place yet. I wanted to talk to you first.”

He makes a tscking sound and sweeps his gaze across the room. “What aren’t you telling me, buddy?”

“What do you mean?”

He doesn’t answer right away. I let my gaze follow his, landing on a woman getting quite vocal as two men fuck her to an almost violent orgasm — one underneath her and another behind her, taking her ass. A third man hovers his dick near her mouth, but she’s too close to exploding to care.

That type of scene happens here occasionally, but this area is more often for socializing. People talk about their kinks and limits, setting up scenes. Once it gets heated, most people take it to a back room where absolutely anything goes. The vibe is often a bit more relaxed up here.

As soon as Dante’s attention is back on me, I ask, “So do you have room for her in reception or not?”

“Are you vouching for her?”

He raises his brows at me and waits for a response. I know what he’s implying.

“I wouldn’t be asking if I wasn’t.”

He nods thoughtfully. “Bring her in so I can meet her first. And you’re responsible for her. It’ll be up to you to teach her the ropes, ensuring she’s up on the lifestyle. I can’t have her freaking out when I send her to the back room, and she sees someone getting caned. This is a judgment-free establishment, and I won’t stand for members being made to feel shame or guilt for their proclivities because a newbie can’t act the part.”

“It won’t be a problem. I’ll make sure she’s on board before I bring her here.”

“Fine. Let me know when she’s coming in.”

Relief hits me dead in the chest, and my shoulders and neck release waves of tension, one after the other. “Great. Thanks.”

“Are you good to take the room?”

I nod.

“Good. There’s a pressing matter I need to attend to.” His grin flashes to something almost sinister as he locks his sights on Sherry.

“I thought you had paperwork to do. Business owner shit.”

He shrugs, grinning like the devil. “It can wait. But my dick, on the other hand, cannot.”

I pat him on the back as I walk away. “Have fun.”

When I’m a few feet away, he finally answers, “I always do.”

As I circle the room for the next hour, the excitement I feel at finding safe employment for Lettie is slowly replaced by looming dread. What if she’s as pure as I feared and flips out?

I’ve never been one to back away from a challenge, though. Best to meet it head-on.

No way to find out if she can handle it other than to talk to her about it.

What could go wrong?

CHAPTER 10

AN INDECENT
PROPOSAL

LETTIE

E^w. Someone is calling me.

When I glance at the screen, my heart rate picks up.

It's him.

Giddiness mingles low in my belly with the customary dread evoked by an incoming call.

Grabbing my cell with shaky hands, I tap the screen and bring it to my ear. As if a sudden case of the shakes possesses my hand, the phone immediately slips from my grasp and clatters to the dirty carpet of my hotel room.

“Son of a monkey’s uncle. Hold on!” I yell, hoping he doesn’t hang up.

“Lettie?” His voice is crisp and clear when I finally get a hold of the phone again.

“Hi, James. I’m here.”

“Are you okay?”

Oh. He sounds worried. That’s sweet.

“Yep. I’m fine. I dropped the phone.” I clear my throat.
“Uh. How-hi-um. How are you?”

I’m just as smooth as I am graceful.

“Good.”

A moment of silence extends a bit longer than I’d expect, especially since he called me. You’d think he had something he planned to say or wanted to talk about. Isn’t that why people call other people? I’m no expert by any means, but that seems like how it works.

Eventually, I speak before it gets awkward. “So what’s going on? I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon.”

“Why not?”

Uh.

“Normally, guys don’t call two days after a date.” I cringe, my eyes squinting hard at the words I just said. “Not that it was a date. I mean, it was just coffee. Can we forget I said that, please?”

He utters a subdued chuckle. I can practically see him in my mind, trying to suppress his laugh like he did a few times at the coffee shop.

“I don’t know if I can forget, but if you want, I can pretend it didn’t happen.”

“Thanks. You’re a peach.” My twang sneaks out.

The line crackles with his heavy exhale. My heart stutters as I wonder if he’s about to drop a bomb on me.

“I wanted to talk to you about something.”

My ass meets the edge of the bed. I should sit for this. He sounds serious.

I inject some positivity into my response. “Sure. What’s up?”

“I have a proposition for you.”

A nervous bubble of laughter erupts from my chest. It’s not just the words but his delivery. So somber, like he’s about to

ask me to help him steal the Declaration of Independence.

“Something funny?” he asks, his monotone voice in full effect.

Not sure why, but that straightlaced tone is really doing it for me. But I need to focus.

“The way you said that makes me think it’s going to be something over the top. Plus, I think it’s a direct quote from *Fifty Shades of Grey*.”

Why did I say that?

“Huh. I guess you’re right.”

“Did you see the movie or read the book?”

“The movie.”

A small gasp gets stuck in my throat, making it hard to reply.

“Anyway, so the phrasing I used wasn’t intentional, but it is fitting given the topic of my proposition.”

My core tightens. Why is that fitting? Is he a billionaire? Does he want to make me his weekend sexy... um... what is it called? I think it was something like sub. But sub of what? Like a hoagie? A sexual substitute? Wait. No. That *can't* be right. Why are words so hard?

Fuck you, ADHD.

Oh! Got it. Submissive. That’s what it is.

Nailed it.

As I was wondering before my train of thought careened off the tracks... does he want me to be his sexual submissive?

Not sure I’d be all that opposed after the multiple naughty fantasies I’ve had since meeting him.

Attempting to play it cool, I joke, “Oh boy. Should I be afraid?”

“Not at all. I think it’s a good thing. But I’m often wrong about people.”

“Okay. I’m seated and ready to hear your proposition. Hit me.”

“I have a potential employment offer for you.”

I jump to my feet, excitement pulsing through me. “What? Really?”

“Yeah. But it’s a bit unusual.”

My excitement wanes a tad. “How so?”

“Well, it’s not something everyone is comfortable with.”

“You’re killing me here. Just spill it already.”

“Can I meet you tonight to explain? It’s probably better to do this in person.”

“Yes, I’d love to see you. But as long as it’s legal, pays real money, and doesn’t involve selling an organ, I’m likely going to say yes.”

“I hope so. But curb your excitement. I mean it when I say it’s not for everyone. I don’t know where you fall on the spectrum of openness regarding this topic.”

“What’s the topic?”

This time, his powerful sigh is accompanied by a sexy rumbly groan. “What do you know about BDSM?”

My phone plummets to the ground again. I’m frozen. A statue of disbelief.

Doth my ears deceive me?

Where for art thou, oxygen? Have I been sucked into the vacuum of space? And why am I quoting Shakespeare?

Did he say BDSM? As in sexy, kinky stuff?

Oh my freaking hell. This *is* like *Fifty Shades*. He wants to pay me to be his submissive. He’s Christian Grey, and I’m Anastasia, V-card and all. It’s perfect since that’s my middle name. This must be fate.

My phone rings from between my socked feet, saving me from almost havin’ a come-apart at the seams moment.

James is calling me back. He must have hung up when I didn't answer, thinking the line was dead. Or that *I* was dead.

I might be. It's entirely possible his words shocked the soul right out of my body.

As soon as I tap the answer button, his voice is loud and clear. "Lettie, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

His concern for me is on brand, considering he's my gas pump, lunch-buying savior. And now he's going to be my sex savior too.

If I'm lucky.

"I'm here. I just dropped the phone. No injury to report."

"Oh. Okay. You sure?"

I grin and nod as if he can see me. "Yes. I'm sure. So tonight, we'll talk about your offer, then?"

"Uh. Yes. If you're still interested."

"*Oh* I'm still interested." My voice sounds all jacked-up, like I sucked on a helium balloon.

Settle down, silly pants.

He clears his throat. "That's... uh. Well, that's great."

Given I'm too dumbstruck to carry on the conversation, he moves it along. Thank goodness he's in control here. Clearly, I'm not.

Control.

Like he wants to have over my body.

Shudders ripple through me. The good kind.

"Should I pick you up, or do you want to meet somewhere?"

"That depends. What did you have in mind for our," *don't say date, don't say date*, "our meeting?"

"How about I drive you to dinner?"

A fissure of disappointment hits me. Anastasia got a helicopter ride and a private night at Christian's penthouse.

“Dinner sounds good.” Oh maybe it’s a *sexy* dinner. “How should I dress?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Boo! Hiss! jeers my conscience.

“Okay. I guess you can come and get me. What time should I be ready?”

And more importantly, do I have time to play with my clit before we meet so I don’t attack you the moment you show up at my disgusting temporary home?

“Is eight too late for you? I have work to catch up on. I’m behind on some cases.”

“Cases? What kind of cases? Are you a cop?”

That would explain the whole *up-against-the-wall* thing — damn, that was hot — and his choice of seat positioning.

“No. Not a cop. I’m in IT and software.”

“Well, I look forward to hearing more about it later. Eight is perfect. I’ll text you the address so you know where to pick me up.”

“Great.”

Awkward silence.

I’m starting to get used to that where James is concerned.

“Great indeed,” I offer with a hint of playfulness.

That was a dumb thing to say. I’m dorking out. Did Anastasia dork out when she was talking to Mr. Grey? I think she did. Maybe this will work out for me. I’ll embrace my inner nervous dork. “Well, I look forward to seeing you at eight tonight.”

“Okay.”

And then he hangs up, leaving me staring at the phone and trying to figure out if I fell and hit my head. This could all be a concussion-based illusion.

Once again, I’m left wondering if he hates me, likes me, or is annoyed by my general state of being.

But he's got a *proposition* for me. That's got to be a good thing.

Before I drop my phone again — odds of it happening are good — I open up my text threads, intending to message Stella. Instead of finding her name in my text list, my eyes are drawn elsewhere.

Without thinking, I open the one I've been avoiding the last few days and re-read the most recent message. The same one I've nearly replied to no less than seventeen times.

MAMA

Hey, darling. Just checking in. Is there anything you need? I'd love to hear how things in Florida are going. I miss you.

SHE SOUNDS SO SWEET, but I know the real her under the fluff.

I *should* reply. She knows I read the message. But it's not unusual for several days to pass before I respond.

She used to guilt trip me for not replying immediately. For a while, she'd start calling if I waited more than a day and wouldn't stop until I answered.

Once my ADHD was officially diagnosed and I started learning about the condition, I realized I wasn't necessarily a bad person for involuntarily ghosting people. It's part of my executive dysfunction. Forgetfulness, procrastination, and being easily distracted are my best friends. Proper phone usage is not.

One time, she saw how many little red icons were on my home screen and blew a gasket. Her chances of a brain aneurysm increased by a factor roughly equivalent to the number of unread notifications I had.

Eventually, she learned to accept that I'd get to things in my own time.

Well, *accept* might be too generous of a phrase. But at least she stopped going into full hissy fit mode when I went

off the grid for a few days. In time, she came to see it as one of my many faults.

And I blame that last thought for what I type in my overdue reply.

ME

Hey, Mama. I'm doing great in Florida. I've got a fantastic new job. I should be starting in the next few days. I'm loving my rental. All is well here.

A METAPHORICAL GUILT monster kicks in my hotel room door, pops open a can of Natty Light, and unbuckles his pants before letting out a belch.

I don't have to wait long for her reply.

MAMA

That's wonderful. I'm glad to hear it. What's the job? Tell me everything.

No. Not happening.

ME

Actually, I have to run. My friend just showed up. We're going to supper. I'll catch up with you later.

SHE MAY or may not reply, but I can't see it through the wall of lies I've just erected.

I glance at the clock, seeing I have three more hours until I need to start getting ready for my supper date slash proposition with my very own slightly awkward Mr. Grey. I guess now is as good a time as any to do some research into BDSM so I don't come off like a total virgin when he tells me all his sordid fantasies and shows me his red room.

Gulp.

I wonder what my fantasies are. Beyond actually letting a man touch me below the waist without feeling like a whore, slut, pile of trash, sinner who's hopping an express shuttle to the fiery pits of hell.

Thanks for that, Mama.

Where to begin my research? I'm too terrified to search my phone for this without guidance. Stella will help.

ME

Hypothetically, if someone was curious about BDSM, what would you tell them to read?

MY PHONE RINGS three seconds later.

It's her. *No way.*

I answer in a haughty tone. "Well, if it isn't little miss hypocrite breaking the phone call rule no more than two days after guilt-tripping the shit out of me. That really dills my pickle."

Stella ignores my jab entirely. "Why do you want to learn about BDSM?"

"I didn't say it was me. If you refer to the transcript of our conversation, you'll see that it was a hypothetical inquiry."

"You're a terrible liar." She tsks at me, clicking her tongue four times in rapid succession. "Tell me why you want to know about kink. You've never wanted to talk about it before."

I clear my throat while contemplating my best course of action. Tell the truth and cause her to worry? Or fib a little and have the guilt?

Fucking guilt. I can't take much more. I'm full to the brim.

"So I got a call from James a few minutes ago."

I pause for dramatic effect because she deserves it after calling me.

On. The. Phone.

“Fuck. While we’re still young, Lettie. I’m going to start plucking gray hairs if you don’t speed it the hell up.”

I chuckle, then spit it out. “He said he had a job for me. Actually, scratch that. He said he had a *proposition* for me. An employment opportunity.”

“And?”

“He’s coming to pick me up at eight tonight for supper, and he’ll explain everything then.”

When she speaks again, she sounds annoyed and overdramatic, which is exactly how I prefer her. “I’m starting to fear you ain’t got the good sense God gave the goose. Poor dolt.”

My phone alerts a second later with her attempt to switch to a video call.

When I accept, she’s shaking her head at me. “Do you have any idea how dating works, Lettie? Or general human interaction?”

Her words draw an involuntary response from me. I raise my straight-edged hand to the side of my forehead in a salute. “General human interaction, reporting for duty.”

“Walked into that one,” she jokes. “But do you know how people work at all? Do words comprehend for you?”

“Not really, no,” I tease back.

“Just because he’s taking you to eat and has a lead on a job, it doesn’t mean he’s into BDSM. Why would you even think that? Have you switched from clean Regency to a tawdrier genre like the shit I read? Do I need to monitor the activity on your e-reader? Don’t tempt me.”

By the time she’s done with her little rant, we’re all out laughing together.

I wish she had moved here with me. But I couldn’t ask her to leave her whole life just because I needed to go. Part of my reason for moving is to prove I can do it on my own. So my little heartsick musings about my friend will have to kick rocks.

“I promise you, Stella. I’m not imagining this. After he said he had an opportunity for me, I asked for more details.”

“So far, you’re making sense. Get to the point where you jump to kinky conclusions,” she interjects.

“Get this. He said it was better to talk about it in person. Then he asked me what I knew about BDSM.”

I let that detonate.

And it does.

Boom.

With vehemence and an Oscar-worthy amount of drama, she chops out, “What. In. The. Himalayan. Alps. Have. You. Gotten. Yourself. Into?”

“Nothing yet.”

“Ah-ha. *Yet.* You said yet!” A grumbling sound meets my ears as she pours on the dramatics.

Hysterics is more like it.

“Calm down, Stella. I didn’t agree to anything yet.”

“You said *yet* again. Stop saying yet. It’s not helping your case.”

“Why are you so mad at me?”

“Lettie, Lettie, Lettie,” she starts, reminding me of how James shook his head at me toward the end of our coffee date. A butterfly swirls around my insides at the thought of him.

Gah. I’m a straight-up mess.

“Don’t Lettie to the third power me,” I snap, but with absolutely no heat.

“Sweetie, listen to me.” Oh boy. Her tone has shifted. She’s in serious friend mode. Not a great sign. “I know you went down there to find yourself and carve out your own path in life. Sadly, this is *not* the best way to do it.”

“But —”

She cuts off my objection instantly. Damn her. “But nothing, Lettie bear. I want you to be happy. I want you to have all the things, including an exciting sex life. You deserve the world after everything you’ve gone through in the last year. But getting involved in the kink community is too much for you. *For now.*”

Involuntarily, my lips roll into a pout. “Why?”

“You need to experience normal shit first. That’s like learning to swim in the open ocean with no land in sight and no life preserver. Maybe you can swim the English Channel one day, but not your first time in the water.”

“You’re a dream crusher.”

“Perhaps. But also the voice of reason. For a change.”

“Maybe this is my act of rebellion. You had yours. Now I want mine. As for this particular path, it wasn’t what I planned, but I’m curious. And I *like* him.”

“You’ve known him for two days,” she contends.

“Totally fair. And this is a transition period in my life, which likely isn’t the best timing. But I feel like this could turn into something good.”

“You’re not a fortune teller, Lettie. We stopped asking the Magic 8-ball our futures a long time ago.”

When I don’t respond, she continues her cold-blooded hope homicide. “As much as you want James to be your Prince Charming, he’s more likely to be the bad influence sent to tempt you. He’s the apple.”

“Stop with the religious shit. We don’t do that anymore, remember?”

A rock settles in my gut, and I grind my teeth.

My religious trauma is far too painful for me to deal with in casual conversation. An occasional joke now and then is fine, but when it comes up in serious talk like now, I get twitchy.

“I know, but in this case, it’s true. I’m sorry, but I think he’s the forbidden fruit, and you’re going to get kicked out of the Garden of Eden if you take a bite.”

Stella and I were raised by Evangelical Christians, and we’ve bonded about our experiences on many occasions. Of course, there’s the typical shit that many other religions stand against, like murder, lying, extra-marital affairs, and so forth. Obviously, I’m good with those beliefs and live my life accordingly.

But it was the other beliefs they forced down our throats that drove me away once I was old enough to think for myself.

No sex outside the bonds of marriage.

No lustful thoughts.

No denying your husband. He is the head of the household.

No using birth control. It’s for whores, and God commanded us to multiply and replenish the earth.

No masturbating. It’s a perversion of the sacred act of making love.

Marriage is between a man and a woman only. Anything else is an abomination.

No alcohol. It’s the demon’s drink.

No tattoos or piercings. They’re decorations of the devil.

In other words, how dare you be a woman or an individual?

Ironically, Mama was fine lying to me my entire life, and apparently, it was a-okay to get a divorce, even though those are sins too. She told the church that Papa had become a non-believer who’d abandoned her, leaving her alone in her faith. It was the loophole she needed to save face and stay in good grace with the other zealots.

Papa agreed because he wanted her gone at that point. What started as him indulging her in her religious beliefs, even though he didn’t necessarily agree, turned into an ongoing nightmare that he and I both suffered through.

My eyes search the dingy navy blue carpet, cream-colored-ish walls, and stained ceiling.

This place is no Eden.

“Stella, listen. Let me go on this date and get the info before I decide. A job is a job is a job.”

“First of all, you don’t need my permission to do anything, including this. Second, are you hurting for money? I can send you —”

Now it’s my turn to interrupt. “No, no, *hell no*. No ma’am. I ain’t taking handouts from you. I’ll be fine.”

She huffs. “Whatever. But don’t take the first job that comes along just to avoid asking me or your grandmama-mama for help. Fuck your pride. If you need money, ask me. You hearin’ me, ma’am?”

“I got you.” I nod a few times, ready to announce my decision. “So I’m going tonight. I owe it to myself to at least get the details. But I won’t decide until I talk to you.”

“Please be careful. Sometimes, you’re so easily manipulated.”

“Excuse me. That was your outside voice.”

My offended retort isn’t an act. That freaking hurts.

“I’m sorry. I just worry about you. This isn’t the Lettie I know. I want you to be true to yourself.”

No longer able to hold back, I unload all my shit on her like a dump truck at the landfill up on Porter Road.

“Well, maybe I’m not supposed to be me anymore. I don’t even know who I am. Did you forget my entire world crumbled this year? My parents lied to me for my entire life. My birth parents are dead, and I’ll never know them. My boyfriend tried to assault me because I wouldn’t give him sex. The only father I’ve known died after a drawn-out battle with cancer right before my eyes. And the icing on the cake was quitting college because I couldn’t cut it.”

When I pause for a shaky breath, she quietly consoles me. “Don’t say it like that. You quit because taking care of your father put too much on your plate, not because you couldn’t cut it. You made a brave choice to prioritize him in his final months.” She pauses and gives her head a shake. “You’ll find your way back if a degree is in your path. Stop beating yourself up for that, or so help me, I’m coming down there to put you over my knee.”

The image she paints makes me think of James. The barest hint of happiness tries to bloom inside me. I might not know much about BDSM, but I know spanking is involved.

“Stella, I know you think I’m insane for up and movin’ to a town I only visited once. And now you think I’m certifiable to entertain James’s BDSM-related proposition considering my *limited experience* and that I just met him. And maybe I am crazy. But what if fate led me here for a reason? I’ll never know what path to take if I’m afraid to go for a stroll.”

Stella’s silent for a bit, likely thinking of how she’s going to burst my bubble. Probably removing her nose ring to jab my hope balloon with the pointy tip.

“I get it. And no, you’re not crazy. You’re brave.”

She didn’t pop it.

Tears pool in my eyes. “Thanks for saying that. Even if I don’t feel it most of the time.”

“Well, have fun tonight. No rush decisions. Remember, not everyone is what they seem. Trust should be earned.”

“I will be cautious, and I won’t commit to anything tonight. I promise.”

“Okay, baby. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

She sighs heavily, then does a mood about-face. “Is your e-reader charged?”

My lips quirk at both corners. “Yes. Why?”

“Per your text request, I’m sending you books. For research.”

“Like *how-to* manuals?”

“Fuck no. It’s smut. But none of that old-fashioned shit you like. This is modern smut.”

“And these books will teach me about BDSM?”

Honestly, I was expecting websites and reputable sources, not fiction.

“No. I’ll text you some links after I’ve vetted them first. *Those* will teach you about kink.”

“Then what are the books for?”

“I’m hoping to scare you away from this terrible idea.”

“I read *Fifty Shades*, you know. That was my first dirty book.”

“Dirty book. *Gah*. I hate that fucking term. Like it’s covered in mud because cock, balls, and vaginas are included. Don’t be so judgmental. You sound like your bitchy mama.”

“Fair point. I shall no longer call them dirty books.”

“And read a review once in a while, will ya? Everyone knows that *Fifty Shades* was not a fact-based look at BDSM.”

“And what you’re sending me will be fact-based?”

“More so than what you’ve already read. But consider my smut a building block. We’re laying the foundation here. There’s a method to my madness.”

With a hint of smugness, I say, “And that’s why I asked you and only you about this.”

“Okay, I have some work to do to get you indoctrinated. Just remember to make James earn your trust. I know you’re thinking he’s your Christian Grey, but he’s more likely to be your Zade Meadows.”

Who the hell is that?

“Should I Google that name?”

“Oh fuck no. You’re nowhere near ready for Daddy Zade. By the end of the week, I’ll have you ready for Emerson Grant, and that’s only if you’re still interested in learning more after your date slash indecent proposal tonight.”

“Thanks, Stella. You’re the best.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just don’t get yourself attached to a Saint Andrew’s Cross tonight or collared. Sending you some books now. I know a few that were written by authors experienced with the lifestyle. Give me a few minutes for links to reputable kink sites. And for the love of God, text me when you get back from your uh... interview.”

Bringing my flattened hand to the side of my forehead, I give her another mock salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

Note to self: Google Zade Meadows, Emerson Grant, and Saint Andrew’s Cross.

CHAPTER II
SEE ME

TOMER

This is a bad idea.

Quite possibly the worst idea I've had in my life.

To be fair, I haven't had many bad ideas since I'm cautious by nature. But a few terrible decisions have been made in my thirty-six years.

This one makes them all pale in comparison.

I see the train coming down the tracks, but I'm too damn stubborn to get out of the way. I'm determined to fight the locomotive with nothing but my willpower.

But it's a freaking train. Ten thousand tons of steel barreling toward me at fifty miles per hour.

And here I am, willingly driving across town to lie across the tracks.

I talked myself out of seeing her no less than thirteen times today — yes, I counted. And each time, I convinced myself it would be fine. Best idea ever.

Sometimes, wanting something to be true is all the ammunition you need to take a shot. Humans are weak-minded. A fault of our design.

We can convince ourselves of anything given the right motivation. And the way I'm craving more time with Lettie is all the motivation I need to toss all my good sense into the toilet and flush.

I'm nine minutes away from Lettie's hotel when my phone rings. I take a quick glance at the display on my console, and my throat tightens.

"Hey, Boss. What's up?"

"You're unusually chipper tonight. I swung by your office, but you weren't there."

"Sorry. I have something to take care of. Is there an emergency?"

"Not an emergency. But an opportunity."

"Go on."

"Remember the Amos stalker job?"

"Sadly, yes."

Millie Fucking Amos and the birth of Chuck Nofunfuck.
Grr.

"I had a meeting with the Langley siblings late today."

"And?"

Come on, Boss. Get to the fucking point. I have a date with your daughter.

"They asked for a consult on a security system for their new foundation."

"An existing system?"

"No. They're looking for a custom design. I have some introductory specs from them, but they'll need to have a sit down with you."

I'm not spiritual or into signs or fate. Those things aren't logical.

But right now? I'm starting to wonder if some mystical guardian angel of good sense is intervening to stop me from making this monumental fuck up with Lettie. If I have to go back to work, that's gotta be a sign.

"Tonight?"

"Nope. They have kids and shit, so they're done for the day. I'm just giving you a heads-up. I expected you to be in the office, but I'm glad you aren't. You need some time off. Especially with all the shit going wrong lately."

I shake my head, giving my eyes a roll. "HQ doesn't run itself, Boss. You know that."

"Yeah. That's why I'm still here." His exhale crackles the line. "Well, I'll catch up with you tomorrow. Enjoy your night."

"You too."

So maybe it wasn't some mystical divine intervention as much as it was a reminder to keep my hands, dick, and rope to myself. Because Boss is her fucking father.

By the time I pull into a parking space a few spots down from Lettie's car, I've got my head on straight. Tonight is about helping her get a safe job. I'll explain the opportunity to her and let her make a decision.

Nothing less. Nothing more.

All business.

If she wants more from me, I'll tell her I'm only willing to be her friend. Although friendship is new for me, I'd attempt to be that for her if it's what she needs.

Her tanned legs, exposed below the hem of a flowery sundress, catch my immediate attention when I shift into park. *Fuck*. She's standing with her back to the brick side of the hotel building, her attention on her phone. Her hair is down, hanging in long waves that do nothing to conceal the exposed skin of her shoulders.

I say again, *fuck*.

Not another sundress.

I'm her friend. Mentor. Sponsor at Bask.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

And while I'm giving myself a pep talk, I add the customary reminder not to be creepy.

Lettie must hear the frenzied pounding of my heart because she looks up and smiles, bold and bright.

She probably heard the car, but whatever.

After pressing off the wall, she shoots me a half wave, then tucks her hair behind her ear on one side.

I want to run my fingers through those glossy strands, twist them around my wrist, and give her head a nice tug, exposing the column of her throat to me so I can run my tongue over her flesh and watch her shiver.

So much for having my head on straight. One look at her and I'm fantasizing about all the things I could do to her curvy, heavenly body.

Aphro-fucking-dite, have mercy on me.

Shaking off the fog of bad ideas with three quick blinks, I exit my car and join her on the sidewalk. "Hey, Violet."

She wrinkles her perfect, slender nose and narrows her sapphire eyes at me. "I thought I asked you to call me Lettie. Did you forget already?"

I cup my mouth, hiding a grin at her sassy tone. "No, I remember."

Hell, I remember everything about our time together the other day. Not to mention all the moments I've watched over her during the last month.

And the way she sounded when she came.

That's an auditory memory that'll never leave me.

Neither will the guilt over listening.

But she'll never know, so no harm, no foul, right?

And once again, I'm attempting to believe my own bullshit rationalization simply because I want it to be true. Pathetic.

Consent is important to me. I won't let myself forget that again.

"Okay, *Lettie*," I start, emphasizing her nickname. "Are you ready to go?" I wave my open palm toward the passenger side of my car.

She lifts one shoulder and lowers her chin. "Promise you're not going to kidnap me?"

"I promise. But I might tie you up."

Shit. Shit. *Shit*.

Given what I said on the phone to her, she might not realize that was a joke.

Way to *not* be creepy.

Her laugh lilts melodically. It wasn't the same laugh she has with her friend, but it's still a pleasing sound. "Well, you did mention BDSM, so I suppose that's an appropriate joke." I open the door for her, but she puts one palm solidly on the doorjamb, stopping her entry into the vehicle. "You *were* joking, right?"

"Yes. That was a joke."

Her cheeks redden. "Okay, good."

My vision catches on her thighs as she slides into the car and tucks her skirt underneath her. I force my eyes away and close her door.

Friend. Mentor. Sponsor.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

The first few moments of our drive are quiet. I don't mind silence, but it doesn't feel right for *this* moment. There's so much I need to say. But I don't know where to begin.

This isn't a topic I've discussed with someone outside the lifestyle. My mind begins sorting through potential

conversation openers. Ultimately, I decide to wait until we get to our destination before bringing it up.

So that leaves small talk. One of the worst inventions of humankind.

“Am I dressed okay for where we’re going?” she asks, giving me a slight reprieve.

“Yeah. That’s nice.” I force down a tight swallow.

Nice? I can do better than that.

“You look lovely,” I add softly, a pathetic tremble in my voice.

“Thank you. But I wasn’t fishin’.”

I crook my head in her direction. “Huh?”

“I wasn’t fishin’ for a compliment.”

That Southern accent sends blood rushing to my dick, but I act unaffected. “Oh. I see.”

Her gaze burns into the side of my face.

“So where are we going, James?”

Fucking hate that she’s calling me that name, but I guess it’s for the best since it’s my club alias. Perhaps in the back of my mind, when I spit that name out, I already knew what would happen.

That is... *if* she agrees and doesn’t freak out on me.

“There’s a nice park in Pass-a-Grille. I brought food for a picnic.”

“Pass a what now?”

“Oh that’s right. You’re not from here. Pass-a-Grille. It’s a quiet little beach area. Less tourists than the rest of Clearwater.”

“Fun.” Her shoulders bob a few times. “My first locals’ spot. I feel so special.”

No comment because she has no idea how special she truly is. At least to me and Big Al.

And after listening to her call with Stella this afternoon, I fully believe she has no idea he's her father. For the life of me, I can't figure out why she'd lie to her best friend about something like that. It leaves me accepting it as fact. I've found no evidence proving otherwise. Based on said call, she recently found out her parents are her grandparents. But other than that? She seems clueless.

Even still, I find myself curious to learn more about what sent her on this path.

"So, Lettie, the other day, we broached this topic. But I still have to wonder why you came to Clearwater out of all the other places on earth. What drove you here? And don't say your car."

Instead of looking at her, I keep my eyes trained on the road. But in my periphery, I catch her gentle head tilt, accompanied by her hands fidgeting in her lap.

"My home life has been," she sighs and shakes her head, "chaotic recently."

"How so?"

Her head sags, and her eyes cast to the floorboard. "Family drama. You don't want to hear it."

"Don't be so sure. I'm very curious about you."

I let the statement hang between us.

She tosses her hair over her shoulder while gazing out the window. Without warning, she shifts her frame to angle toward me. "I found out that the people who raised me were essentially pretending to be my parents." Her voice is shaky when she adds, "My real parents died when I was a newborn, and my grandparents raised me as if I was their own."

Although I already knew this information, hearing the sadness in her voice grates at the inside of my chest. She's had it rough recently. And having it rough is sort of my specialty in life.

"Did you run away after your father died — err, grandfather? At the coffee shop, you said something along

those lines.”

“Not exactly running away.” When I glance at her, she’s pressing her lips tightly together. “Well, I guess you might call it that. It left me feeling lost. A few other things happened this past year. I wanted to get away from all those memories. I don’t want to be reminded of all the bad shit every time I open my eyes.”

My stomach sours.

But she still didn’t tell me what I need to know.

“Why Clearwater? You said you were drawn to it. I’m not sure I believe in that mystical shit. No offense.”

“I’m not surprised you don’t.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You seem very logical. Straightforward. Analytical. And that doesn’t jive with my recently acquired woo woo vibe.”

“Woo woo vibe? Recently acquired?”

I’m starting to love listening to her ramblings. Even if she didn’t answer my question yet. Normally, that type of evasion would aggravate me. But with her... I’m willing to journey down whatever rabbit hole she tumbles into.

“I was raised in a strict, overzealous, religious home. When I was little, I didn’t know any better. I believed whatever hooley they threw at me.”

My shoulders shake with silent laughter. “Hooley. That’s a word I haven’t heard for a while.”

“Since back home in South Carolina?”

“Yeah. My gram said that.”

“Mine too. Only I thought she was my mama.”

She doesn’t know it, but she’s given me an opening, and I take it. “What do you know about your birth parents?”

“Not much.”

Play it cool, T.

“But you know some?”

“My mother wasn’t married when she got pregnant with me. Apparently, she also had a desire to rebel against her church upbringing. Papa said she was,” Lettie puts up air quotes, “runnin’ around with a soldier and got knocked up.”

And enter Big Al, the aforementioned soldier.

“And then?”

“My mother died about a week after giving birth to me. Something about a blood clot and eclampsia, something or rather. He didn’t have all the details, being the man and all. Birthing babies is women’s business.”

“Well, scientifically speaking, he’s right.”

She cuts a glare at me, and I face her briefly to catch it. When she sees the mirth in my expression, she breaks out into a wide smile.

Beautiful.

A hundred suns? That’s what her smile reminded me of when I was watching her on camera. But it’s more than that in person. A million, maybe.

“You’re teasing me, aren’t you?”

The smile I’m suppressing gets increasingly harder to contain. “Me? A tease? Nah.”

“Oh I *know* you’re a big tease. Take today, for example.”

“Explain.

She crooks her head and gives me a side-long glare. “The little bomb you dropped on the phone and refused to elaborate on.”

“Bomb?” Then it hits me. “Oh right. The kink thing.”

“Yes. *That*. You tease.”

I throw it back to something I said on the phone with her earlier. “It wasn’t intentional. But fitting. Once again.”

“So are you going to continue teasing me the entire...” She shakes her head, but it’s subtle like she doesn’t know what to

call our time together. I don't either.

A date? A meeting?

"The entire... dinner?" I lead.

"Yes. Dinner. That's what I was going to say. I was *not* going to say date." She cups her face with her hands. "I swear, the way I blurt out things I shouldn't say in front of you is getting out of hand."

"I like your honesty."

"I don't. But I'm a bad liar." She laughs to herself.

My forehead crinkles. "That's a good thing. Isn't it? Being a good liar is dangerous. Why the laugh?"

"Agree. But the laugh was because 'Bad Liar' is one of my favorite songs."

My mind races, trying to place the song. I come up with nothing. "Who's the singer?"

"Imagine Dragons. Do you like them?"

"I'm not sure I can place them or that song. Can you sing it for me?"

I'm such a shit. A pathetic shit who's desperate to hear her sing in person. I've been wondering how I could bring it up without her knowing I've heard her heavenly voice, and once again, she gave me the perfect opening.

She clears her throat, surprising me. I was expecting an objection to my request. When she opens her mouth and her silky tone fills the car, something tightens in my chest. It pinches uncomfortably, and my stomach flip-flops.

A few lines into the chorus, she pauses and looks at me expectantly. "Well?"

"Lettie, that was..." Not sure there are words to describe how that made me feel, so my sentence dies on my tongue.

After a heavy pause, she meekly asks, "Do you know the song?"

"Yes. I recognize it now."

It's my new favorite song.

When I pull off Gulf Way into the beach parking lot, her body language changes. By the time I find a spot and shift into park, she's nibbling on her lip and wringing her hands, seeming uncomfortable.

That old familiar feeling hits me. The one where I know I fucked up, but I don't know how.

This is why I don't put myself in situations like this. I always say or do the wrong thing. And people I care about get hurt when they assume I meant something that I didn't intend.

"Lettie, are you okay? Did I do something to upset you?"

She shakes her head, her eyes and lips pinching to slits. "Nope. I'm fine."

She's right. She *is* a bad liar.

"Listen, sometimes my thoughts or actions come off incorrectly. It's not intentional. I don't know what I did this time, but clearly, I upset you. When I do something like this, can you tell me what I did so I don't do it again? Don't lie to spare my feelings."

I barely have any at this point.

Her shoulders rise and fall in a tense shrug. My gaze lingers on the exposed skin on her shoulder. Unable to stop, I trail my fingers over the spot that's captured my attention, gently caressing her soft, smooth skin.

I detect a bob in her throat when she turns and meets my eyes. Her face softens, her expression growing warmer again. My grip on her shoulder grows more insistent until my entire palm rests on her warm skin.

I'm greedy to feel more of her.

"I'm feeling awkward and embarrassed because I decided to turn this into a Lettie Holt concert that you didn't ask for and obviously didn't want. And then you looked like you hated my voice, which has me feeling all kinds of ways. For some reason, I wanted you to be... I don't know... impressed or something. It's stupid." She hides her eyes behind one hand,

but I pull it away so I can try to understand her better. “I’m fucking this up already. My nerves are shot from just a car ride with you.”

“I love your singing voice,” I toss, hoping to ease her worries.

Her expression turns skeptical, brows drawn tight. “You don’t have to say that to make me feel better. I know the country twang is hard to contain when I sing. But you know the song, and that was the whole point. Let’s just slip this whole interaction into the *pretend it never happened* file and move on.”

I don’t know what to say, but I know I *should* say something. I don’t like seeing her upset. And to be honest, I have no fucking idea what I did to make her think I was anything other than enraptured by her voice.

Just like I am by her entire presence. Lettie Holt has captured every ounce of my focus since she rolled into Florida.

Perhaps even before that.

She reaches for the door handle. “Let’s find a spot to have our picnic before the sun goes down.”

My tone comes out husky when I halt her retreat. “Wait.”

I want to make her happy again. Fuck that. I *need* to make her happy. But I don’t know how to fix it with words. They always make things worse, anyhow.

When words fail me, there’s one thing I *know* I’m good at. Aside from hacking.

Letting my hand glide from her shoulder to the side of her neck and chin, I lean in while pulling her close.

Her eyes flash wide at my sudden movement, but as soon as she realizes my intentions, they flutter closed. She raises her chin, offering her lips to me.

And I gladly take them, claiming her mouth.

Fire ignites in my veins, warming me and reaching into places long since frozen.

Her lips are as soft as they looked. Perhaps even more so.

Our kiss isn't panicked or forceful. Something tells me to be gentle, and in matters like these, I trust my instincts. It's always served me well.

She's delicate. But not in a fragile way.

More like she's priceless. A treasure.

As I tenderly move my lips over hers, her feminine scent engulfs me. It's like walking through a garden in bloom. It's subtle and understated, which is the opposite of her beauty.

Somehow, her arms have worked their way over my shoulders, and her hands rest at the nape of my neck, pulling me closer. I respond by tightening my grip on her and shifting my positioning until our upper bodies are as close as the vehicle console will allow.

The softest whimper escapes her. If I were a weaker man, it would have been my undoing, and I'd pull her on my lap and show her how that sound affected me.

But I manage to stay in control. Instead of ravishing her, I gingerly coax her lips open with mine. Our tongues caress, swirling and teasing. She lets me guide the kiss, following my direction perfectly. It's as if she's eager to please me.

Fuck. She'd be a perfect sub.

But she can't be that.

And I need to stop this madness. Immediately.

With great reluctance, I break the kiss, retreating with an aching slowness. When my eyes open, hers remain closed. Like me, she didn't want the kiss to end.

But it must.

She gradually withdraws, her grip on my neck weakening. Unable to look away from her beauty at this distance, I view her with rapt attention. Her lashes flutter, and her eyes open with an innocent tentativeness. She licks her lips, savoring the taste of our kiss the same way I am.

Her eyes lock on mine with a profound recognition shining back at me. My chest constricts, and my breath catches. It's the first time I've ever thought someone might actually see me. Not just my eye color or expression. Not the emotionless persona I show to the world.

But *me* — the man inside.

I can't explain it, but Lettie might be the only person who can see beyond my mask. Or maybe she's merely capable of doing that.

Yet... I can't let her in like I want to. I need to shut her out like I do everyone else.

Before I retreat behind my walls, I commit everything about this moment to memory. I never want to forget how she looks right now.

Despite not being able to have her the way I want her, I'll always have this.

CHAPTER 12

TALK ME DOWN OR TIE
ME UP

LETTIE

Is love at first kiss a thing? I know there's a saying about it happening at first sight. So I suppose it could be possible. Weirder things have happened, right?

I've never been kissed like that before. Hell, I didn't know kisses like that were possible.

I swear I felt every bit of that ever-present stillness that always surrounds him. It radiated from him and penetrated my chest, calming and comforting me. Every shred of resistance he held onto was present in each move he made. His self-control was palpable.

Considering my emotions and scattered thoughts are always racing out of control, his steadiness is so damn enticing. His kiss quieted the constant rattle of my thoughts and silenced every nagging fear. And for those blissful few seconds, there was no shame brewing in me.

As we linger in our post-kiss cloud, the way he studies me sparks an all-consuming desire to dive back in and take more.

I'm a split-second from pulling his mouth back to mine when his face waxes over. His features harden, and his gaze falls from my face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

My heart splinters, and words tumble from my mouth before I think better of them. "Why not? I liked it."

"It'll only give you the wrong idea about this."

No, no, no, no.

"What's the wrong idea?" My head kicks back, and I add, "Hell, what's the right idea?"

"We shouldn't be... like that."

"That?"

"Physical. It's not a great idea."

I beg to differ, but since he's squarely back in his seat and physically retreating from me, I don't argue. He doesn't seem to want to hear my side. He didn't ask, so he must not care.

My tone sharpens, matching the daggers I must be throwing from my eyes. "Why did you kiss me then? If we shouldn't be physical, as you say, why did you do that?"

"Because I wanted to make you happy again." His tone is flat and emotionless. "I like you better when you're happy and smiling. I made you sad, and I wanted to fix it. But I had no idea what I did wrong, so I didn't have the words to remedy it."

He likes me *better*? As if to say he only wants me to smile, be quiet, and look pretty?

Suddenly, I'm back in church, listening to the pastor preach about the woman's role in the household. Anger and shame war it out in my chest.

The anger makes sense, but why the shame?

For not being good enough as I am? For behaving improperly? Being a woman? Did my sadness inconvenience him?

The old Lettie would apologize and put on a mask of happiness to smooth things over.

But the new me isn't going to stand for it.

Job opportunity or not. Stupid crush on him or not. Most amazing kiss or not. None of that matters.

I'd rather starve or call Mama for money before I fall into a trap where I'm nothing but something pretty to look at. I don't want to suppress my feelings anymore. Not around him or anyone.

If my emotions are too much to handle, then *I'm* too much to handle.

And I deserve someone who can treat me the way I can them — with strength, compassion, loyalty, and understanding.

That's what I bring to the table, and I'll accept nothing less in return.

"You can take me home, James." Remembering my manners because they've been drilled into me along with all this shame and guilt, I automatically add, "Please."

He shakes his head vehemently, drawing my attention away from the front windshield. "No, Lettie, please don't be mad."

With heaps of sarcasm, I drawl, "Oh excuse me, sir. I'm *sooo* sorry for having unpleasant emotions in your presence. Take me home, and it'll never happen again."

"Shit. I did it again." The back of his head hits the headrest when his posture all but collapses.

Did what again? Is he talking about some other woman in front of me? Does he make a habit of saving broke girls from gas pumps, making them feel special for a hot minute, before kissing them for the simple purpose of making them sit still and look pretty?

He may be a bit on the socially awkward side — hey, me too — but he should know better than to talk about another woman a minute after kissing me like that.

And to think I almost kissed him again. Let alone fantasized about giving him my V-card.

Bon voyage to that ship as it sails off in the sunset.

My arms curl around my midsection, and I inhale to steady myself.

“Lettie, don’t you remember what I said a few minutes ago?”

“When you said you only like me when I’m happy? Yeah. Hard to forget.”

“No. Not that. And hey, I didn’t say that.”

“Same difference.”

“What I meant was... remember when I said that I sometimes do or say shit wrong, and if I upset you, please tell me why so I can fix it?”

Oh. Shit. Is that what he meant by *I did it again*?

Remorse clogs my throat, making my response choppy. “Yes. I recall that.”

“This is precisely what I meant. I didn’t intend to cause this reaction. I don’t want to upset you. I like you and only want to make you happy. Now, please tell me how I made you this upset.”

My head cants to one side as I force my scowl to recede. “You really have no idea why I’m upset?”

He shakes his head dismissively but not at me. It’s directed at himself.

My stupid, soft, pathetic heart thumps erratically, and guilt over my reaction sprouts to life.

I overreacted. In typical Lettie fashion.

At least I’m consistent.

Not only can I kiss whatever this job opportunity is goodbye, but more importantly, my chance at him wanting to get to know me better has caught the express train out of town. No return ticket.

Calmly this time, I attempt to explain. “James, I’m upset for two reasons.”

“What’s the first?”

“Because you said you like me better when I’m smiling and happy.”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s true.”

He seems intelligent. But I’m quite sure his IQ doesn’t extend to interpersonal relations.

“Okay, but what’s the alternative to that?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you say you like me better when I’m smiling and happy, that implies it’s not acceptable for me to be upset. It makes me feel as if you don’t like me any other way. Or that my value is diminished when I’m not shiny happy.”

“That’s not what I... Oh. I think I see now.”

He puts his head down and picks at the denim covering his upper thighs. A nervous tic. Glad to know it’s not just me that’s feeling fidgety right now.

“I’m sorry, Lettie. I didn’t mean it that way.” He takes a cleansing breath. “What’s the second thing that upset you?”

“Why would you say it’s a mistake to kiss me? Don’t you like me?” My voice quakes, revealing the true crux of my issue. I want him to *want* to kiss me the way I want to kiss him. And it hurts like hell that he doesn’t.

Instead of answering, he stares at his lap, his jaw clenching tight.

“James, why are we on a date if you don’t want to explore our,” my open palm sways between us, “connection or chemistry? I want to get to know you, and if that includes kissing, I’m all for it.” Snarky Lettie enters the chat. “Or at least I did until a few minutes ago.”

“The reason it’s a mistake isn’t something I can easily explain.”

I flap my hands out, letting them collapse onto my lap. “Well, either try to explain or take me home. The choice is yours. I’m not gonna sit here and beg you for scraps.”

He makes a sound that’s a cross between a groan, a grumble, and a sigh. And I wish that didn’t make me want to smile, but it fucking does.

“I’m not... in a position... where I can pursue a... physical relationship... with you.”

Wow. Did that cause him actual pain? The way he tripped over those words and still made it to the end of his sentence would be impressive if it didn’t make me want to punch him.

But here we are.

“Why not?”

“I just can’t.”

“And you’re not going to tell me why?”

He drags his palm over his face, frustration seeping from him. And then he shakes his head, refusing to answer me.

“Seriously?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“James, answer me this.” A flinch rolls across his face. I almost missed it, but something definitely bothered him. Perhaps it was the way I ordered him instead of asking.

Oh my freaking hell. Will you listen to me?

I can’t stand myself for thinking that. Why am I blaming myself for this? He kissed me first, then immediately shot me down. I couldn’t possibly be the cause of this drama. And the sooner I get that through my thick skull, the better.

“What, Lettie?”

“Do you like me?”

“Yes.”

“Is this a friendly kind of like or something more?”

He narrows his eyes, tightly furrowing his brows.

I clarify my question. “To be perfectly clear, does the *something more* involve kissing and other things, or is it strictly platonic?”

He looks down again, unable to meet my eyes. “Something more.”

The confusion inside me grows, swirling around like a vortex. It would make more sense if he just liked me as a friend. The kiss would truly have been an accident because he didn’t know what to say and just acted. In that case, I could understand his point about not wanting to lead me on.

But he didn’t say that.

Then why the sudden shift? I don’t get it.

“Is it my age?”

He seems to give it some real thought, scrunching his lips and glancing at the roof of the car for a beat. “That’s only a small part of it.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-six.”

I gulp. That’s a bit older than he looks.

“I’m twenty-four. So yeah, I guess that’s a bit of a gap.” I inhale briskly, pushing it out in a rush. “But our age difference doesn’t bother me.”

“Well, you *are* a consenting adult.”

Is that agreement?

Hope peeks its head from the corner of my heart, looking for an opening. “Yes, I am. Very much. And I consented to you kissing me. So what’s the problem? You said the age was only a small part of why we shouldn’t be physical.”

“It’s also about the job.”

“I don’t even know what the job is yet. And I haven’t agreed to pursue it. So how is that relevant?”

“Are you hungry?”

Talk about a topic change. Whiplash much?

If my stomach growls right now, I'm going to eat nothing but spicy frozen burritos for a month to punish it.

Do not betray me, stomach, or vengeance will be mine.

“I don't want to eat until we settle this. You can't give me the most toe-curling kiss of my life and then avoid explaining your retreat.”

For the first time since I've known him — so three days — an air of smugness drapes over him. He likes that I called it toe-curling. His eyes twinkle with mirth, and one side of his mouth curls. But he attempts to squash his reaction.

Too late. I saw it.

He clears his throat. “Okay. I told you before that I'm a straightforward man, so here it comes.”

I square my shoulders with him, ready to hear this super important reason.

“Yes, I'm incredibly attracted to you. Not only physically but something else I can't explain. And when you fucking sang, it was all I could do to resist throwing the car in park, dragging you outside, bending you over the hood, wrapping your hair around my wrist, and slamming into you. I wouldn't have even cared who saw us. That's how badly I want you.”

My thighs push together so tightly I'll lose circulation any moment.

Words fail me. My breath stops. My brain short-circuits. My heartbeat ceases.

My pussy, however, has taken over *all* bodily functions. It's clenching, twitching, aching to be filled, and flooding with arousal.

He saves me from having to attempt a response with his continued rumbling rant. “But I can't do that. It's not your age; it's other things. And, um,” he licks his lips, “and if you take this job at the club —”

Some of the puzzle pieces fall into place. I interrupt to stop him from tripping over the words. “Is the job at a BDSM club?”

“Yes.”

Bummer. Guess he doesn't want me to be his paid sex servant. Not that I'm qualified for that position.

“And you can't have a relationship with me because you're a client?”

“No. I work there. Well, when I have time. It's not my primary job. It's more of an extra-curricular.”

My hand has found its way to my throat and has begun a leisurely trek down between the valley of my breasts. This is the same thing I find my hands doing when it's a steamy part of one of my books.

The idea of him working at a place like that — or at least what I think it's like based on my fantasies — is almost too hot to handle. “What do you do there?”

“I'm a monitor. I walk the floor and keep an eye on the private rooms to make sure nothing goes wrong.”

“Like a safety monitor?”

“Yes.”

All the anger from earlier vanishes, a heat coiling low in my belly replacing it. “And is there more than that?”

“More?”

“More that you do there?”

“Sometimes.”

I bite my lip. “Do you uh... partake?”

“Yes.”

“And that would make you a...?” I raise my brows, inviting him to finish my sentence. I don't want to say it wrong or sound stupid.

“I'm a dungeon master and a Dom... if that's what you're asking. I'm also a shibari rigger.”

“What's shibari?”

“Japanese-inspired rope bondage.”

“And what does a rigger do?”

“I’m the one who does the tying. It’s also called a rope top.”

“You tie up women?”

The fact that the windows haven’t fogged up is baffling. My breaths are coming faster and warmer as this conversation continues.

“Yes.”

“And you like doing it?”

His formerly impassive expression has given way to a deepening grin. “Yes. A lot.”

“Does it bring you sexual pleasure?”

“Lettie, are you sure you want to talk about this right now?”

I nod with an eagerness I couldn’t hold back if I tried. And I’m not trying. “Yes. Does it?”

“Sometimes.”

I’m shocked at the boldness of my questions. It’s like another woman has taken over my tongue, determined to satiate my curiosity.

“And the women you tie up? Do they get sexual pleasure from it?”

“Some do. Others do it for meditation purposes or for the simple pleasure of submitting and trusting another person.”

Trusting another person to tie them up? As curious as I am, that’s far too vulnerable.

“Do you tie up men?”

One of his eyebrows arches to a point. “I have before, but that was just for training. If someone is going to be a rope top, they should know how it feels to receive.”

“That makes sense. Does it lead to sex?”

“Not with men. Not for me, at least.”

“What about with women? Does it lead to sex?”

“It can, depending on the people involved.”

“Have you... um... have you had sex with someone you’ve tied up?”

“Yes.”

“While they were tied up?”

“Mm-hmm.”

I swallow so loudly the sound carries around the confined space. Need to adjust the topic before I orgasm at the mere thought of all this.

Related: would that count as a man giving me an orgasm?

“What’s the job opportunity for me? Is it related to the tying up thing?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Why is that disappointing? It shouldn’t be. Yet here we are.

“Let’s get out of the car now, Lettie.”

“Why?”

“If we stay in here, I can’t promise I won’t kiss you again. And I really can’t do that.”

“You mean you really can’t, or you really won’t?”

He flashes a panty-obliterating grin. “What are you? The semantics police?”

Casting what I hope is a heated gaze at him, I order, “Up against the wall, mister.”

“Touché.” He tips his head toward the beach. “Come on. Have dinner with me.”

“Okay.”

This man talked me down from my *take me home* tantrum.

Maybe he *can* handle me and all my emotions.

And the idea of him *handling* me, coupled with the images of him tying me up, cause another deluge of arousal. My panties are so wet it's borderline uncomfortable.

"Thank you," he says as he presses a few strands of my hair behind my ear. His hand lingers on my cheek before it falls away.

"For what?"

"For not insisting I take you home and for giving me a chance to explain. I really didn't mean to hurt, confuse, or upset you."

"I believe you. Although, I don't understand why we can't explore this thing between us since I don't work there yet. But it seems you have your reasons. And I'll respect your boundaries."

He presses his lips together.

"And that just makes me want you more."

"Sorry."

A tiny dimple appears on his lower cheek as a genuine smile snaps into place. Butter my biscuit. His smile is breathtaking. Wish he did it more often.

"Don't apologize for being irresistible, Lettie Holt."

CHAPTER 13

SUNSET HAS NOTHING
ON YOU

TOMER

After finding a picnic table, we work together, spreading out the dinner I packed. Neither of us speaks, which suits me fine.

I've already fucked up the entire night. The more I talk, the worse I'll make things. When it comes to me and people, it's best I keep quiet.

I should have known better than to engage with her the way I did. It would have been safer to simply meet her somewhere, and as soon as she sat down, I could have told her about the position. Boom. Done. Nothing else.

Hell, a phone call might have been even smarter.

Not sure why I decided to make this seem like a date. I pride myself on my unwavering self-control. But with Lettie, I'm a walking, talking, deceiving disaster. I'm paper, and she's an origami master. One touch and she makes me fold.

Once we've filled our plates with fried chicken, potato salad, and buttermilk biscuits with honey, she attempts to return us to friendly conversation.

Here's to hoping I don't fuck it up. Or worse, kiss her again.

Fuck. I want to kiss her again.

She smiles as she looks over her full plate. "This looks delicious. Thank you."

"No problem. I figured that you might like this type of food. Since you're from the south and all."

Her nose twitches, suggesting she's trying to hold back a smile. "I do like it. The food is one of the good memories of home."

I strongly dislike how she keeps dropping hints that she wasn't happy back in Georgia. It makes me wonder if I made the right call in keeping her a secret from Big Al over the last few years. Would he have made a difference in her life? Would she be happier?

While I ponder the many mistakes I've made with Violet, she redirects us to why we're here. "So what's the job opportunity?"

I drop the chicken breast and wipe my hands on a paper towel. "As I mentioned earlier, I'm a member of a kink club. And we need a reliable person to work in the reception area."

When I pause for a sip of water, she asks, "What are the duties?"

"When members arrive, you'll greet them and check their club identification. Do some scheduling and administrative tasks." Her tentative nods turn more exuberant as I continue. "Answer phones and reply to emails to give prospective members information. That sort of thing."

"Yeah. That sounds great. I can definitely do that."

"The club isn't open in the mornings, so you'd be working late. Would that be an issue?"

"Not at all. And I know beggars can't be choosers, but how's the pay?"

“I didn’t ask how much, but I’m sure it’d be enough to get you out of that hotel. And you’d be offered medical benefits after ninety days.”

“It’s full-time?”

I nod.

“Wow. A sex club that offers benefits. Crazy.” She grabs her water bottle and takes a quick sip, seeming to need to collect her thoughts.

I keep a close eye on her face, shoulders, and hands, tracking her movement to gauge her reaction. I need to know if she’s unsure or questioning this before I get ahead of myself any more than I already have.

“It seems too good to be true. What’s the catch?”

My knee bounces, and I inhale sharply to force calmness. “The club’s owner, Dante, is particular about the staff. He fosters an inclusive environment, free of judgment.”

“Well, that’s a good thing.”

“Because of that, he typically only hires people who are experienced with the lifestyle and active in the kink community.”

Her face blanches, shoulders rolling a touch. “Oh.”

“He wants everyone to be comfortable. The staff and the guests.”

Her eyes search the table as she breaks off a piece of her biscuit, chewing it slowly. After another sip of water, she nods solemnly. “So he probably won’t hire me because I’m not experienced. Is that why you asked if I was familiar with it?”

I glance at the beach as I massage the back of my neck. “No, not at all. I was asking because I needed to know your baseline knowledge and was trying to get a feel for your thoughts on it. If it’s repulsive to you, you obviously won’t be a good fit. But if you’re open to —”

Her eyes widen, and she cuts me off. “I’m open to it.”

The eagerness painted on her features does things to me, but I bat away my reaction, remembering to stay focused. I take another bite of chicken while contemplating where to go with this discussion.

She jumps in before I can ask my next question. “So the no dating rule at the club...” Her voice trails off, and I clench my jaw.

Are there rules about that? No.

But it would be easier if she thinks that is the case. Until I figure out what to do about her father, I can’t risk getting any closer to her than I already am.

“Yes?”

She globs some honey on her biscuit. “Is this an all-staff rule or because you’re a monitor?”

Without knowing it, she’s given me a plausible explanation, and I pounce on it.

“I’m held to a different standard than the rest of the staff.”

It’s not a total lie. There *are* expectations. But since consent is the bedrock of what goes on at Bask, there isn’t a risk of harassment. Precautions are in place to prevent that sort of thing. When the nature of the business is sexual, it’s hard to expect staff to behave like they’re in an office environment.

“Right. So if I take the job, we can’t... you know.”

I raise my chin, owning the lie. “Correct.”

“That makes the decision harder.”

“It shouldn’t. You need a good job. And you’d be safe there.”

She pops her lips out, casting a doubtful glare at me. “In a sex club?”

“I can only think of one other place where you’d be safer.”

At Redleg, where her dad and I would be able to watch over her.

“Really?” She shakes her head, still radiating disbelief. “How is a sex club super safe?”

“The Doms are protective over the subs and the staff. They won’t stand for anything out of line. You’d be protected at all times while there.”

“Doms like you, right?”

“Yes.”

“I guess I have a lot to think about.”

“Before I tell you more, where is your head at with this so far?”

Her laugh surprises me. Almost everything about her is unexpected. I never know what her reaction is going to be. But I’m starting to like it.

“You can’t tell where my head is?”

She takes a big bite of her biscuit. A few drops of honey smudge over her lips. What I wouldn’t give to clean that off with my tongue.

Ignoring my sudden food fantasy, I shrug. “No. Not at all. But you seem unsettled.”

“I’m conflicted.”

Her lips squish to one side. She’s so damn cute.

“What about? Ask me anything.”

“I don’t think I need to hear more. What happens at the club isn’t what has me conflicted.”

“Then what’s worrying you?”

She looks away, her cheeks reddening. “Because if I got the job, you and I could only be friends.”

As soon as the words are out, she takes her first bite of potato salad. When her lips seal over the fork tines, she moans delicately and closes her eyes.

Pointing her fork at her plate, she licks her lips. “Mmm. That is so damn good it makes me wanna smack my dog. Where did you get it?”

I chuckle. “Entenmann’s.”

“Like the donut company?”

“No. It’s owned by a sweet old lady from Mississippi named Miss Kathy Entenmann. She makes the best Southern food I’ve ever had. And her smile lights up the room. She always comes out of the kitchen to give me a hug when I pick up my order. Her entire family works with her. Husband, kids, grandkids. All of them. Her sister bakes the desserts.”

“Aww, that’s so sweet. We should all be so lucky one day, right?” She digs her fork into the potato salad. “My compliments to Miss Kathy.”

She opens wide, unabashedly savoring another big bite. My cock twitches as I watch her enjoying herself. Taking care of her soothes something inside of me I didn’t know needed relief.

After I enjoy a bite of my own, I ask, “What’s your food situation at the hotel?”

Her head kicks back, and her lips pucker. “Um. It’s fine. I have some of the food from the coffee shop leftover.”

“Still?”

“Yes.”

“We’re going to the store when we’re done here. I won’t stand for you rationing cheese and crackers.”

“James,” she protests, making my alias sound like a scolding.

“Don’t —” I choke off the rest of that sentence. I almost told her not to call me that.

Son of a bitch.

Focus, man.

She puts her hands on her hips, which looks odd considering she’s seated. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t fight me on this. I’m taking you grocery shopping. End of story. Eat your dinner.”

“Awfully bossy of you.” A sultry grin spreads across her lips. “Is that Dominant James coming out?”

With a shake of my head, I roll my eyes. “No. It’s a concerned friend coming out.”

“Fine. We can talk about the trip to the store later. Back to the club thing. I have questions.”

“Shoot.”

“If I’m in the reception area, what kind of things can I expect to see?”

“While you’re up there, not all that much. When members enter, they’re fully clothed. It’ll feel like any other reception-type job, I’d imagine. Just more relaxed.”

“And when I’m not in the lobby area?”

“You’ll see lots of things.”

“Like?”

“Depends on the parts of the club you’re in.”

“What parts are there?”

“The main room is sort of a casual area. Then there are aftercare rooms, locker rooms, and showers. There are areas for specific kinks like water stuff or littles play. And about a dozen private rooms.”

She nods, taking it all in like a sponge. “What’s the main room like?”

“Mostly, members mingle and talk in there. What they wear or don’t wear runs the gamut. Some have sex, but nothing too extreme in terms of kink. Some people stay in that room during their entire visit. But for others, it’s a chance to find someone with similar interests and agree to a more intense or personalized scene.”

Her brilliant blue eyes sparkle, and she licks her lower lip. “A scene?”

Fuck. She’s so green.

“That’s whatever type of situation — sexual or otherwise — they want to take part in.”

“Can you give me some examples?”

She’s killing me here.

“Well, there are all kinds of kinks, so the scenes depend on what they’re into. Some are into bondage or voyeurism and exhibitionism. Some like public humiliation. Others might want a group experience or the incorporation of mechanical implements. You’ve got wax, blood play, water sports, and electrical impulses. Some want pain or impact play, and with that, there are tons of options.”

Try as I might to stop, I visualize myself doing everything to her as the explanation continues. All of it. Even the shit I’m not into.

She jumps in, eagerly asking, “Spankings, whips, and stuff like that?”

“Among other things.”

Her breath seems to pick up, judging by the movement of her breasts. Up and down. Up and down.

Fucking hell.

I drag my palm over my face, forcing away my arousal. It would be easier to control this if she wasn’t hungry for information. A part of me hoped she would be immediately turned off. It would’ve proved she’s not a good fit for me.

Sadly, that’s not happening.

“And people just do all these things with whoever is in there able to see them?”

“Not all those things. The main room is usually a bit tamer.”

After another bite, she offers a recap to check her understanding. “So in the first room, people talk, get to know each other, and do the lighter things. Right?”

“Yes.”

“Then they go into the other rooms for the more intense stuff.”

“Yes.”

“Anything else?”

I gulp and lick my lips. “There’s another room.”

My favorite room.

“And what’s in there?”

“It’s for those who *really* enjoy voyeurism and exhibitionism. It looks like a private room but with a two-sided mirror.”

“They watch?”

I clear my throat, forcing away the tight lump. “Yes.”

“Why not just watch in the main room?”

Her fucking fingertips are rubbing the skin at the base of her neck, turning it pink. It might be an innocent gesture, but it’s getting me hard as hell.

“For those on display, the draw is in not knowing who is on the other side of the glass. And for those watching, there’s a forbidden element that heightens the excitement. It’s a bit like watching someone who doesn’t know you’re there.”

Realization hits me. That’s what I’ve been doing with Violet. Maybe that’s why I’m so drawn to her. I inadvertently tapped into my kink. Fuck. I need to stop watching her so much. I’m breaking my rules of consent.

It started as surveillance for protection and intel gathering — my specialty in my work life. But it’s beginning to cross into my kink life.

Dammit.

“What else happens in that room?”

I shift on the bench, adjusting myself. “A lot.”

“You don’t want to tell me, do you? Are you embarrassed?”

“No. It’s not that.” My eyes fall to the table before flicking back up. “You never know what you’ll see in that room. But on the bright side, you won’t be going back there.”

Her breasts are outright heaving when she asks, “Have you done a scene in that room?”

“Yes. But sometimes, I’m a spectator on the other side of the glass.”

“You like to watch people... um... have sex?”

In a split-second decision, I decide to be as honest with her as possible. I’m not sure if I’m testing her or not. And if I am, is it for the job or for myself?

“Yes. I like it quite a bit. It’s in my top two.”

Her eyes widen, and her jaw lowers. “It’s one of your favorites?”

“Yes.”

“And the other favorite? Is it the rope stuff?”

“Yes.”

My confession sits between us. As I wait for her response, I’m hit with a looming sense of fear.

Because I want her to be okay with it.

I need her to accept me the way I am.

But it shouldn’t matter. I can’t have her.

I’m certainly not going to tie her up. I won’t be watching her have sex, that’s for damn sure. And I can’t let her watch me with another woman, knowing she’s interested in me beyond friendship. So my kinks shouldn’t matter. They won’t affect our friendship.

I’m simply telling her about this so she knows what to expect if she takes the job. She needs to have a full understanding of the lifestyle to make an informed decision. That’s all.

So why the fuck am I waiting for her judgment like it’s the most important thing in the world?

When she finally speaks, her answer is simple and succinct. “Okay. If you think Dante would consider me for the job despite my lack of experience, I’d like to go check it out. Is that possible?”

She’s not turned off by what happens in the club. At least, not what I told her so far. There’s more — loads more. But the basics are out in the open. The rest might be easier for her to see for herself. She needs to hear the sounds. Smell the smells. And feel the thrum of sexually charged energy.

The only way to know if she can handle it is to experience it for herself.

The sooner I get her this job and a safe place to stay, the sooner I can resurrect the boundaries of my relationship with her. And, more importantly, stop watching her.

“I can take you there. Before we go, I think you should do some reading on the subject. It’ll give you a better idea of what to expect. When I show you the club, I don’t want you to be shocked or surprised by what you see and hear. It wouldn’t look good for me or you if you’re walking around in a state of panic.”

“For you?”

“Yes. Your behavior will reflect on me. I’m the one recommending you. I promised Dante you wouldn’t be disrespectful or cast shame on the members.”

“So no clutching my pearls. Got it.”

My lips pull in a growing smile that matches hers, but I don’t respond. There was no question.

“Well, it’s funny you mention reading about it. My friend from back home sent me some e-books.”

I already know that from screening her calls and texts. “Oh really? What kind of books?”

“Romance novels with BDSM.”

“That’s all well and good for small glimpses, but I can’t imagine they’re entirely accurate.”

“I understand. She’s into kink, so she sent me realistic-*ish* books. And it’s just to dip my toes in the water. Only enough to get me wet.”

My eyes double in size.

She jerks her hands to cover her mouth, and in the process, she spills her water all over the concrete picnic table. “Oh shoot!”

As the water drips onto her lap, she leaps upward but must lose her balance. As if in slow motion, she topples over the back of the bench onto the grass. Her legs go flying in the process, flashing me a glimpse of her exposed lower body.

I jump up and circle the table as my muscles tense to prepare me for action.

She’s flat on her back, in the process of rolling to one side. A groan leaves her, and her face pinches tight. Not from embarrassment but from pain.

She’s hurt. Shit, shit, shit.

I kneel, skimming my hands about an inch over her frame, afraid to touch her or hurt her worse. “Lettie, where’s the pain? Did you hit your head?”

“No. Not my head. It’s my foot.”

She bends her leg toward her chest, reaching for her right foot while hissing through her teeth.

“Shh. It’s okay, sweetness. Let me see. Roll onto your back for me.”

She complies but then attempts to sit up.

I put one hand on her shoulder, subtly holding her down. “Stay on your back until I see how badly you’re hurt.”

Exhaling a soft sigh, Lettie lets her head flop backward slowly, fixing her eyes on me. “Are you magic?”

While running my hands softly over her foot, I inspect it for injury. “What? No.”

“Then why do I instantly follow your orders? I’m impulsively stubborn to a fault. But not with you. I think you’re employing a mystical Vampire or Warlock compulsion on me.”

Grinning subtly, I shake my head and adjust my positioning to see the other side of her foot. “It’s not me. It’s you.”

“How so?”

“Because deep down, you’re a good girl.”

Did I have to say that? No.

Should I have said that? Absolutely not. And certainly not as gravelly-sounding as I did.

But am I enjoying the flush on her cheeks at my praise and innuendo? Fuck yes.

“Told you that you’re a tease.”

“Nah. I’m just trying to distract you from the pain.” I suspect she broke two toes. “Does this hurt?” I run my fingertips over the bumps on her second and third toes.

She jerks her foot away from my hands. “Yes. Don’t touch it. Argh!”

“Lettie, I think you broke these two toes.”

She presses her palm into her forehead. “Of course I did. Classic Lettie.”

I shift my positioning so I’m closer to her midsection, kneeling beside her. It only has a little to do with the need to get away from the tempting view up her skirt I have from down by her feet. I didn’t mean to look, but her panties are purple.

That’s my new favorite color.

“Do you have any other pain? Your back? Tailbone? Head?”

“No, I didn’t hit the ground very hard. Don’t worry. I’ve had worse. It was just the toes when my foot flipped and hit

the underside of the table.”

My eyes scan the area. “We should have sat on the beach and had our picnic there.”

She waves her hand at me with a flick of her wrist. “I probably would have been bit by a crab.”

A laugh shakes my chest. “Unlucky?”

She presses the heels of her palms against her eyes. “And klutzy. It’s a miracle I’m still alive.”

While she’s not looking at me, I allow myself a brief indulgence, letting my gaze rake over her frame. I wonder what it would feel like to be on top of her, letting my body rest against hers. To feel her soft curves cushion me and then settle between her warm thighs.

I need to get us off the ground before I convince myself it’s okay to find out. Not sure I’ve ever wanted to believe something as much as being allowed to claim this woman. And to give myself to her in return.

I’m moments away from believing my own lies.

Shaking it off, I stand. “I’ll help you up.” She pushes up on her elbows, and I bend down to assist her. “Rest your right foot on your heel so you don’t put any pressure on your toes.”

“Okay.” She groans softly. “This is so embarrassing.”

Gripping her under the arms, I tug her upward. When she’s about halfway up, a big gust of wind skates past us, flipping her dress up to her waist.

Thank you, coastal breeze.

Purple with black lace across the top.

My *two* new favorite colors.

She lets go of my forearms to push it back down. “Oh shit!” I maintain my hold and keep lifting her.

“I didn’t see anything.”

“You’re a liar,” she says with a chuckle.

If only she knew how true that was, she wouldn't find it funny at all.

Once she's upright, I guide and lower her to the bench. Her hair is askew, blowing wildly in the wind. Taking the opportunity to live out another one of my little fantasies, I run my hands through it in a combing motion and tuck a bundle of soft strands behind her ears.

She inhales crisply, holding her breath for a moment before easing it out in a lingering stream. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Edging away, I straighten my posture and scan the area. I need a minute to separate myself from her. If I don't clear my head, I'm not sure what I'll do. I might confess every secret I've kept from her and beg her to forgive me. Or I might hoist her up onto the picnic table and make a meal out of what I'm sure is a heavenly pussy.

She shakes me back to the present. "The sunset is beautiful here."

I don't answer. She didn't ask me anything.

Tracking her line of sight, my vision sweeps beyond the dunes, catching on the white spume of the cresting waves. What remains of the sunset shimmers off the ocean. The orange glow blending into purple and blue hues easily transcends the majesty that any artist could bring to a canvas.

Drawn closer, I take the seat on her left. Our backs rest against the table, and our legs stretch toward the water.

For several minutes, we sit in silence, taking in the beauty of the sun slipping below the horizon.

"You know, I think... I think this is why I came here." Her words are wispy and low as if carried by the breeze.

"The beach? Sunset?"

She nods, keeping her eyes trained on the waves and darkening night sky. "Yes to both. I remember this when I was a little girl. We came here on vacation. I think we stayed in a rental on the beach. Or it might have been a hotel. I'm not

sure. A lot of the details are fuzzy. But I vividly remember playing in the sand until the sunset, often staring into the ocean. I was waiting for a mermaid to pop up.” Her smile spreads, molding her face into pure joy and radiance. “Mama and Papa kept trying to get me off the beach, but I wanted to stay. For hours, I’d run back and forth into the surf to fill up my bucket with water to make my castle bigger.” She sighs wistfully. “It was the happiest time of my entire life.”

“That’s a nice memory.”

Her hair comes loose again, wildly streaming in the wind. When she turns to face me, the pinks and purples of the evening sky behind her surround her silhouette, enhancing her already striking beauty.

She pats her hand twice on my thigh, just above my knee. “This is a nice memory too. Minus the probably-broken toes.”

I tear my gaze from her, my eyes searching for something as captivating as her.

There’s nothing even close.

Even at the most picturesque time of the day, with a perfect sunset over one of the most beautiful beaches in the world, there’s nothing as breathtaking as Lettie.

“James?”

My jaw pinches tight as I prepare to look at her again. “Yes?”

“Since I don’t work at the club yet, would you kiss me? Just once more. If I’d have known it was all I was gonna get, I’d have savored it more.”

She’s fucking killing me.

My head sags to one side, and I warn, “Lettie.”

“Please. Just one more time, and I’ll never ask again.”

Instead of answering, I oblige her request with a simple nod as I move in close. Her eyes close, and her chin tilts upward again. Same as last time.

Right before I kiss her, I whisper, “Just this once.”

The reminder is as much for me as it is for her.

Giving in, I claim her mouth. As our lips connect, another surge of warmth ripples through my body. Time stands still, allowing me to lose myself in her sweetness.

Her soft whimpers and delicate gasps seep into my memory, where they'll keep me company when I let her go.

As much as I wish I didn't have to, I know I *must* let her go.

Before I end the kiss, I gently tug her lips between mine as if I could hold her there forever. Greedily, I take two seconds more, then another to savor her.

And then I let go.

Just like after our first kiss, I pull back slowly while studying the way she flickers her eyes open and licks her lips to indulge longer in the taste of our kiss.

Although it's the same motion she did before, it feels different this time. Knowing I'll never see her like this again has made it more meaningful.

When our eyes lock, my heart fractures as the realization dawns that I've kissed Violet Holt for the last time.

For once in my life, I've found someone who makes me *feel* something.

And I have to let her go.

CHAPTER 14

SUPERMAN AND LETTIE
LANE

LETTIE

Why does this always look simple when someone else does it? And why hasn't it gotten easier over the years? It's not like this is the first time I've had to use them.

Calamity Lettie is intimately acquainted with one thing in life aside from shame. Crutches. And it doesn't matter how many times I've had the displeasure, it takes a while for my brain to remember how to use them properly.

Tonight is no exception.

Waiting patiently for me, James holds open the exit door at the urgent care center. "You sure you got it?"

"Honestly, when it comes to me and staying upright, I'm hardly sure of much."

He grins, his eyes heating the exposed skin of my legs as I hobble toward him, clip-clopping along. "If you can get to the bench out here, I'll get the car."

As I pass by him, a whiff of his subtle cologne socks me right in the ovaries. I attempt to cover up my arousal with a

self-deprecating joke. “I’m a hazard to myself on two flat feet, but add some giant sticks and have me hop along between them on one foot? Recipe for certain disaster.”

Speaking of which... after disaster struck at the beach this evening, he insisted on taking me to a doctor. And I do mean *insisted*. My objections over cost and lack of health insurance went in one ear and out the other. He paid the few hundred dollars without batting an eye. Stubborn mule.

I’m racking up quite the debt with this man. And sadly, he’s not interested in cashing in with sexual favors.

Not that I’d be qualified for that anyhow. I’m just bitter knowing he won’t make my toes curl again with more kisses. I should be grateful for that, though, since two of my toes are, in fact, broken, according to the X-rays.

Pro tip — and this comes from someone with the utmost experience in getting first aid and emergency medical care — if you need to see a doctor, getting to an urgent care right before closing does wonders for reducing your wait time. They’re in a hurry to leave, so they whip you in and out lickety-split.

They did a buddy taping on each broken toe and gave me a boot to wear. The lovely metal crutches are like the cherry on top of the Calamity Lettie sundae. I should be okay to wear regular shoes in a few days if I stay off it and let it heal.

James has been reserved since we left the beach, so I offer another joke to avoid the stilted silence. “These things are the worst invention for the uncoordinated.”

He helps me to the bench under the awning in front of the building. Once I’m seated, he takes the crutches with him and dashes into the parking lot.

“Hey! Don’t I need those?” I yell to his retreating back as the evening breeze rustles my hair.

“I can’t watch you *attempt* to use these anymore,” he retorts cryptically, a hint of teasing in his tone.

He’s also carrying my strappy sandal, and a little snort escapes me at how it flops around with his impersonation of

me nearly falling.

From what I know of him, he's not one for physical comedy, which makes it extra humorous.

Comfy on the bench, I watch him slide into the car and drive around to pick me up. Once he shifts into park, he pops out, moving swiftly, and returns to my side.

Without the crutches.

Maybe he's gonna be my human crutch.

When he gets in front of me, I stick out my hand, assuming he will help me stand. He doesn't, nor does he explain his plan. Instead, he shakes his head, bends at the waist, moves in close, and scoops me up in his arms.

No objections to this man hauling me all over town if he wants to. When we left the beach park, he carried me from the picnic table to the car. I considered licking his neck but dug deep and found the willpower to settle for a sniff instead.

I'm so strong I scare myself sometimes.

I sling my arm over his shoulder, loving the feel of his firm muscles under my skin. "Thank you. This is much better than using crutches."

Didn't mean to be all breathy sounding, but he's short-circuiting my brain with his general hotness.

Heh. *General hotness, reporting for duty.* Stella would have liked that one. I'll have to tell her later.

"No problem," he grits out like it pained him. He doesn't look at me despite how my gaze must burn into the side of his face.

Once he has me tucked in the front seat, he closes the door wordlessly. As he walks around the back of the car, I watch him in the mirror. He wiggles his arms and shoulders in a full-body version of the *Pride and Prejudice* hand flex.

Giggle.

He wants me. As mutual as the desire is, though, I don't see it being something he will compromise on. His mind is

made up. I might as well make peace with it.

Not to worry. Self-control is one of my many strengths, so that's probably going to work out just fine. *Eye roll.* Let's see how long I keep myself in check before I try to tempt him again.

We almost get out of the parking lot before I start back on my bullshit. "Will you be carrying me into my hotel room as well? How about to and from the bathroom for the next few days? Should we stop to get your pillow and some clean clothes at your place on the way, or will you be moving me in with you?"

Impressive amount of self-control, Lettie. Bravo.

His deep, throaty chuckle makes my nipples sharpen to points. But he sobers almost immediately. "Don't tempt me, Lettie," he rumbles with a scolding tone to his words.

My frame stiffens as a jolt of guilt settles low in my tummy. He was clear about not wanting to be physical, and I told him I'd respect that. It would be nice if I actually attempted to uphold that promise.

"I'm just teasing. I'll be fine. But thank you again."

The car accelerates smoothly after he exits the parking lot.

When he speaks again, his tone holds less of a reprimand. "Stop thanking me. That's the seventh time. I told you I'm not doing this for the thanks." He adds a half grin to let me know he's not overly annoyed.

"I know. It's hard for me to accept a lot of things in life. Compliments and gifts are at the top of the list. Maybe I'm over-thanking you as an adverse side effect to my discomfort over all you've given me. I don't know."

He glances at me and then refocuses on the road. "Why is it hard to accept help or praise?"

For a moment, I get lost in the sexiness of his hold on the steering wheel and the flex of his forearm muscles. "Uh... what?"

He opens his mouth to speak, but his question finally computes, so I blurt out my answer. *Fuck you, ADHD.*

“Part of my issue with accepting gifts is because I was raised to feel inferior to men. Accepting something with a monetary value from a man — or anyone for that matter — reminds me of that shitty feeling. I don’t want to be dependent on anyone. If I can’t afford something on my own, I don’t want it.”

“You aren’t dependent on me. You just need a hand right now.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“No.” Pausing briefly, he purses his lips. “If you had no prospects for improving your situation and no hope for the future, then you’d be dependent. You’re just in a rough spot at the moment. It’s not permanent.”

I let his words steep, unsure how much I buy the sentiment. “It still feels icky. I promise to pay you back every cent.”

“If it makes you feel better, fine. But it’s not necessary.”

“Are you shittin’ in high cotton or something?” I tease.

Through a wide smile, he says, “Your Southernisms are going to bring out my old accent if I spend much more time around you.”

“I hear it a little when you say my name,” I admit, then put my head down. Not sure why that confession embarrassed me, but I rarely make sense. Even to myself.

I notice a bob in his throat right before he obliterates what’s left of my good sense by purring my name in the sexiest twang I’ve ever heard. “You mean when I say *Lettie*?”

“Yes,” I squeak. “But please don’t do that again unless you intend to pull over and do that thing you mentioned you wanted to do to me. On the side of the road. With the hair and the hood. That thing.”

He takes one hand from the wheel to scruff it down his face while groaning into his palm. “Lettie, stop that shit.”

That time, it wasn't Southern or sexy sounding. But I still liked it.

I feel a touch guilty for teasing him, but he's got me all riled up with his... I don't know what it is about him that gets me going, to be frank.

I just like him.

"I'll behave. For now."

His chest shakes with silent laughter. "And here I was... thinking you were a good girl."

For once, I keep my mouth shut.

The longer this evening goes on, the more comfortable I become with him. We've fallen into an easy rhythm. There are patches of peaceful quiet interspersed with levity. "Thanks for tonight. It was fun."

When he stops at the traffic light near my hotel, he quirks his head at me with his brows drawn tight. "Lettie, you broke your damn toes, and we spent an hour in the urgent care."

I shrug off his dismissal. "Yeah, but the company was sure nice. Best I've ever had while getting X-rays or medical care. And there's a lot of competition for that honor."

His face softens as he stares back at me. The air grows thick with sexual tension. He brings his hand up toward my shoulder again, trailing his fingers over that patch of skin he seems drawn to. The spot beside my sundress strap. I get an involuntary chill.

A car horn blares from behind us. We both flinch, severing our connection.

Clearing his throat, he shifts his attention back to the road. The light has turned green.

We don't speak for the last few minutes of our drive.

Once he parks and cuts off the ignition, he faces me. "Wait there," he orders, a hint of velvet bossiness in his tone. "I'll come around to help you out."

"Okay," I answer, barely able to speak.

He grabs the crutches from the backseat. While he circles the car, I take a deep breath and prepare myself for more sexual frustration.

I will not beg him for a goodnight kiss. I'm better than that.

Probably.

By the time he opens the door, I've thrown my purse strap across my body, freeing up my hands.

After propping the crutches on the side of the car, he helps me to my feet. Honestly, I still have one good foot, and the heel of the other is fine. I can walk without his help. But I find myself growing more comfortable with how he takes care of me.

I just wish he didn't need to spend money to do it. The way he comforts and looks after me feels good. Dare I go so far as to say it feels *right*. But I hate how often he's had to open his wallet since I met him.

Gah. This man has turned my brain to cheesy potato casserole.

And not the good kind like Katie Walker used to bring to the church potluck back in Climax.

Standing face to face beside his car, the tension bouncing between us sparks to life again. Heat flames my cheeks, and my breath hitches.

He studies me with what can only be described as a carnal intensity before he finally breaks his stare by glancing at the crutches on my right.

"I can walk, James. I'll be fine," I offer, hoping to put an end to our suffering. If this continues much longer, we'll both be smothered to death by sexual tension.

He nods somberly, hands me the crutches, and takes a step back to give me room to get situated. Yet he stays close enough to assist if needed.

Thack. Crunch. Thack. Crunch.

I prod along toward my room, him lingering nearby. He's stoic and reserved once more.

Halfway down the sidewalk to my room, he grumbles an annoyed harrumph. "Fuck it." He picks me up, but it's so abrupt this time that I let out a startled squeak. My crutches clatter to the concrete.

"It's okay." His buried Southern twang rises to the surface and caresses my ears. "I got you, sugar."

Sugar? Oh my god. He *really* shouldn't give me an endearment if he doesn't intend to kiss me good night. That's just downright cruel.

I lock my arms behind his neck, holding him close. I'm not fearful that he'll drop me, but I'm greedily soaking up my last few minutes with him. So I can pretend there are more moments like this to come.

Not those with me needing emergency medical care — although we all know that's going to happen — but moments where I'm in his arms. Feeling his steadiness. Letting it surround me and soothe my chaotic thoughts.

It dawns on me that I need to direct him. When he picked me up tonight, I met him by the parking lot. "Aren't you going to ask me which room?"

His pace slows to a near stop. "Oh. Good point." He glances down at me. "Where am I taking you?"

"One thirty-six."

He nods and resumes our trek. It's only a few steps away. Odd. It was almost as if he knew where he was going. Maybe he's psychic.

Unfortunately, my stolen cuddle ends when we get to my door. He sets me down gently so I can get the key out of my purse. "Once you get inside, I'll grab your crutches off the sidewalk. And I'm gonna run to the store to get you some pain reliever. Do you have a preference for the brand?"

"Oh that's not necessary. I have plenty. Believe it or not, I have a habit of finding myself in need of pain-relieving

medications.”

He’s chuckling from over my shoulder as I pop open the door to my room. It’s taking all my strength not to drag him inside. The only thing stopping me is the sting of the rejection I know he’ll eventually deliver.

He kicks his foot forward to prop open the door, then moves beside me, lifting me subtly from one side like he’s actually my human crutch.

“Thank you,” I mutter.

He shakes his head and grins, his eyes twinkling with mirth. “I think that’s eight times. Maybe nine.”

This man is adorable when he’s annoyed by my manners. But if he touches me much more or grins at me like that again, I’ll wind up humping his leg.

After bringing me to the bed, he sets me down gingerly on the edge. Kneeling, he unstraps the support boot they gave me.

To distract myself from the feel of his skin on mine, I start rambling nonsense. “Speaking of pain meds. Did you know that ibuprofen is a blood thinner? I didn’t realize that, but it explains so much about past bleeding incidents. The darndest thing happened a few weeks ago. I broke my nose right here in this room, actually. I guess my painful screams were too loud for this fine establishment. The front desk called me ‘cause my dickhead neighbors complained about the noise, which is hypocrisy at its finest.”

With a deep chuckle, he smirks at me. Not an expression I expect from him, but I like that he’s unexpected. *Argh*. I want to kiss him again.

In lieu of begging for another kiss like a pathetic sap, I opt for more nonsense-spewing. “Anyhow, when I explained about my mishap and my bloody nose, the guy from the front desk told me about the blood thinner thing. He quite possibly saved my life because I’ve never bled that much as it was. Imagine if I added ibuprofen to the mix.”

“He sounds like a hero,” he says, the corners of his lips quirking upward as he slowly rises to stand.

I wanna lick those lips so flipping bad.

Nope. Can't do that.

Let's go with more rambling.

"It gets weirder, though. I went to the front desk two days later to thank him. And they said nobody by that name works there. Crazy, right?"

His face creases, lips crinkling.

"I know what you're thinking... that's creepy. My friend Stella said the same thing. But I must have gotten his name wrong. I was bleeding like a stuck pig, lightheaded, and in a ton of pain. So it's just more classic me. You know? And then —"

My sentence fizzles mid-thought when he lowers his face to mine. Like a first-class idiot, I tilt my chin up to offer my lips. Sadly, he's aiming for my forehead.

Boo! As nice as forehead kisses can be, I want his damn lips.

When I realize he's not going to do the hot guy thing of silencing me with his tongue, I jerk my chin down abruptly to spare myself the rejection. But he's already too close for a move like that.

Thunk goes his chin into my forehead, sending jolts of pain through my skull.

"Shit! Ouch," he yelps and stutters back a step.

My hands shoot out to comfort him, but he's already out of my reach. "Oh sorry. I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

On reflex, I bolt upright, but my toes are *not* on board with this plan. Now I've got pain from head to toe — literally.

Typical weeknight for me.

Hissing in pain and cursing under my breath, I plop onto the bed.

As he rubs his chin, he shakes his head at me. "Stay seated, Lettie."

My throbbing forehead and toes are mild compared to the brutal assault on my pride.

“Are you okay?”

“I’ve taken harder hits to the face before.”

“You sure? Mama always said I had rocks in here.” I tap at the side of my forehead.

He grins at me, fighting back a bigger reaction. “I’ll be right back with your crutches.”

While he’s gone, I cushion my face with my palms and consider flex-taping my mouth shut. Having him here in my room is messing with me. It’s making me a bucket of nerves. As embarrassed as I am to *show off* my humble space, I don’t want him to leave.

For the first time since getting to Florida, it dawns on me that I’m lonely.

Maybe that’s why I’m clinging to James so much.

Or is it something specifically about him that I crave? I can’t remember wanting someone’s company like I do his.

Oh well. I guess it doesn’t matter. Once I get a job — at the club or elsewhere — I’ll make more friends. I’ll be fine. I can do this.

I don’t need anyone else to make me whole. I’m enough on my own.

And if I burn some sage and speak that aloud ten more times, I might believe it one day.

He returns a few seconds later, leaning the crutches on the wall beside my bed. Next, he grabs the ice bucket on the bathroom counter and heads out again. “Be right back. Getting some ice for your toes.”

This man can’t stop himself from taking care of me.

My phone chimes with an incoming text. It’s Stella, checking up on me. I send a quick reply to ease her mind, telling her I’ll talk to her later.

James comes back with what's left of our dinner from his car along with a full ice bucket. He sets everything down, wordlessly scoops ice cubes into a plastic bag, ties it off, and gets a towel. He leaves that sitting on the bathroom counter, returning to the picnic stuff.

I sit in silence, watching him navigate my hotel room as he throws the leftover chicken and potato salad in the mini fridge.

Once he's done, he surveys the fridge more closely before closing the door. "You need a new place. There's hardly any room in here for more food."

"Given my finances, that's not really an issue with me right now," I quip before thinking it through.

He straightens to his full height, placing his fists on his hips.

Attempting to distract him from my poverty, I tease, "Are you impersonating Superman?" That spurs an idea, so I amp up the coyness. "Should I be Lois Lane? You've already got the carrying me around thing down pat. I've been a damsel in distress since you met me."

He bites his lip and drops his arms to his sides in a huff. "I have to work tomorrow. But I'll come by afterward and take you to the grocery store. We can put you on one of those scooter things so you don't have to walk. You've got enough leftovers to hold you over, right?"

I nod, sadness pouring into me.

For one, he didn't flirt back — not that I expected him to. But more worrisome, he's leaving. I don't want him to go.

Dammit, Lettie. You don't need anyone else to make you happy. Find your strength.

Unaware of my mounting melancholy, he continues, "Good. I'll text you when I'm on my way. It'll probably be around eight. It's hard for me to get out of work much earlier."

"And if I were to object to you insisting on taking me to the grocery store and spending more money on me?"

He does a one-shoulder shrug. "I'd ignore your protests. Better for you to be pissed at me than go hungry."

"That's what I figured." I add an over-pronounced pouty lip. His gaze catches on my mouth, but he blinks himself free.

Dammit. He's dead set on resisting this attraction between us. That blows.

On the bright side, at least I'll see him tomorrow. One less lonely day in my life.

He stalks toward me with the ice bag and towel. "Let's get your foot elevated."

My insides quiver more with each step he takes toward me. He bends a pillow in half and puts it under my ankle. He drapes the towel over my toes and gently positions the ice.

"Thank you," I say for the millionth time.

Without a grin, he shakes his head and edges toward the door. My heart leaps into my throat, my pulse thrumming wildly.

"James, wait. Don't go yet."

Pathetic, Lettie.

His face remains impassive. "Do you need anything else?"

Just you.

"Want to stay and watch a movie?"

Dragging a hand through his hair, he scans the room. "Nowhere to sit but the floor. And no offense, but it's not the cleanest looking."

"Oh it's disgusting. I agree." I pat the bed. "You can sit up here with me." I cut off the objections brewing in his eyes by adding, "Just *sit*. Above the covers. I won't try anything. Honest."

His face reveals nothing as he considers my offer. How does he stay so stoic? Is he as calm on the inside as he usually seems on the outside?

What must that be like?

Unsure if he's going to cave or is merely killing time while he thinks of an excuse, I attempt to convince him. "I've been lonely lately. Been here for a month now, and you're my first guest. And I like your company. *Please.*"

Vulnerability is never easy, but honesty has a certain therapeutic quality.

After an eternity of indecision, he *finally* shrugs and eases toward the bed. "Fine. What are we watching?"

CHAPTER 15

FROM THE TEXTS OF SUGAR BEAR AND DOMINANT JAMES

The next day...

SUGAR BEAR

I woke up, and you weren't here. I didn't get to say goodbye or thank you for the 80th time.

DOMINANT JAMES

You fell asleep during the movie. I didn't want to wake you.

SUGAR BEAR

Thanks for making sure I was under the covers before leaving. But how did I end up naked?

DOMINANT JAMES

What the fuck?

SUGAR BEAR

Why are you calling me? <gif from the Black Panther movie: We don't do that here>

DOMINANT JAMES

Lettie, I promise I didn't remove your clothes.

SUGAR BEAR

I was kidding. Gotcha!

DOMINANT JAMES

To be clear... you didn't wake up naked, right?

SUGAR BEAR

No. I was still in my sundress and comfy under the covers, just like you left me.

DOMINANT JAMES

Thank fuck. I was about to lose my shit.

SUGAR BEAR

What do you mean "about to"? You totally lost it. Calling me. On the phone. Eww. Don't do that. Unless it's a full-on emergency. Text first. Text last. Text always. This is the way.

DOMINANT JAMES

I was thinking that you either thought I took your clothes off without your consent — which I would never do — or that someone else stripped you after I left. Both were emergencies.

SUGAR BEAR

Well, good thing I was just joking. Sorry for flipping you out. I figured you'd know it was a joke.

DOMINANT JAMES

Some things you just don't joke about.

SUGAR BEAR

Sorry.

DOMINANT JAMES

It's my fault for not getting the humor. Why do you hate phone calls?

SUGAR BEAR

I'm not sure, honestly. I think it's an ADHD thing. Even the idea of a phone call makes me anxious, which is weird because I'm not an overly anxious person.

DOMINANT JAMES

Interesting. You answered the last time I called.

SUGAR BEAR

That was different.

DOMINANT JAMES

How?

SUGAR BEAR

Next question. New subject, perhaps?

DOMINANT JAMES

Same subject. Same question. Why did you answer last time but not today?

SUGAR BEAR

I don't think you want the answer.

DOMINANT JAMES

Try me.

SUGAR BEAR

I answered the first time because I wanted to talk to you. Because I like you.

DOMINANT JAMES

And you didn't want to talk to me now?

SUGAR BEAR

I was already texting with you, so talking was pointless. And besides, you told me we can only be friends.

DOMINANT JAMES

I'm struggling to follow your reasoning, but I'm moving on. Next subject. How are your toes?

SUGAR BEAR

Look worse than they feel. They're bruised pretty badly. So that's fun. Are you still coming over tonight?

DOMINANT JAMES

Yeah. I think I can get out of work a little earlier tonight. Does 7 p.m. work for you?

SUGAR BEAR

Let me check my very busy schedule.

SUGAR BEAR

It'll be fine. I'll just reschedule dinner with Beyonce for another night.

DOMINANT JAMES

I'm sure she'll understand. I need to get back to work now. Stay off your foot.

SUGAR BEAR

Fine. I'll see you at 7. TEXT ME when you get here, and I'll meet you in the parking lot. (Read: Don't call me)

DOMINANT JAMES

I'll knock on your door. (Read: I don't want you to bust your ass on the sidewalk)

SUGAR BEAR

Well, that's offensive. I'll have you know I'm excellent at using crutches, as I am in all things requiring physical coordination. Even as a toddler when I was first learning to walk, I was sure-footed. My gracefulness is second only to my self-control. I don't fracture bones, slip, fall, trip, break things, choke on water, run into doors, or drop my phone. Ever. I've never had an accident-prone moment in my life.

DOMINANT JAMES

I have an urgent care receipt proving otherwise.

SUGAR BEAR

That was just once. Speaking of which... thanks again. I noted the cost in my phone and will pay you back every cent. Please note: the phone doesn't have a broken screen from being dropped on the bathroom tile this morning. Anything you hear otherwise is a rumor.

DOMINANT JAMES

What am I going to do with you?

SUGAR BEAR

I have a few ideas.

DOMINANT JAMES

See you around 7 p.m. Stay off your foot.



The next day...

SUGAR BEAR

Good morning. This is your daily dose of gratitude. Thanks again for taking me grocery shopping last night.

DOMINANT JAMES

You know how you said you're keeping a list of money you claim to owe me in your phone?

SUGAR BEAR

Yeah.

DOMINANT JAMES

Well, I'm keeping a list of all your extra thank yous in mine.

SUGAR BEAR

Two questions about that. One: what did you title this note? Two: what's my tally?

DOMINANT JAMES

I didn't name the list. Open to suggestions. And your total is approaching a googolplex.

SUGAR BEAR

That's not a real number.

DOMINANT JAMES

Look it up.

SUGAR BEAR

Hold please.

SUGAR BEAR

OMG! You cannot be serious. I do NOT have a hundred zeros after my number. I'm side-eying you so hard right now.

DOMINANT JAMES

You got me.

SUGAR BEAR

Not the way I want to have you, though.

SUGAR BEAR

Delete the last text. Forget I said that. Impulsivity strikes again.

DOMINANT JAMES

Didn't we talk again last night about keeping things platonic? I'm sorry, but I need to get back to work.

SUGAR BEAR

I'm going to go take a bath with my hair dryer now.

DOMINANT JAMES

If the hair dryer doesn't end you, the infection you'll get from the tub in that hotel will finish the job.

SUGAR BEAR

No longer needed. Your unexpected humor murdered me. I'm dead now. Mourn me.



A few days later...

DOMINANT JAMES

Did I leave my sunglasses at your place last night?

SUGAR BEAR

You did. I'm holding them hostage.

DOMINANT JAMES

What are your ransom demands?

SUGAR BEAR

I only have one demand.

DOMINANT JAMES

What?

SUGAR BEAR

I get to pick the movie next time.

DOMINANT JAMES

Nah. Keep the sunglasses.

SUGAR BEAR

Oh come on!

DOMINANT JAMES

I'll never forgive you for making me watch Zoolander 2. You've officially lost the right to select movies.

SUGAR BEAR

I didn't know it would be that bad. The first one was funny for an old movie.

DOMINANT JAMES

Old movie? Now you're making me feel ancient.

SUGAR BEAR

Don't worry. At your age, you're bound to forget soon.

DOMINANT JAMES

Isn't it your bedtime, little girl?

SUGAR BEAR

Reverse age burn! Nice. <gif of someone playing the UNO reverse card>

DOMINANT JAMES

Talk to you later. I need to get back to work.

SUGAR BEAR

You work too much.

DOMINANT JAMES

I know.



The next day...

DOMINANT JAMES

Did you read the stuff I sent you the other night?

SUGAR BEAR

Yes. It was quite... um... stimulating reading material. I'm officially ready to tour the club. I am no longer at risk of clutching my pearls or fainting. I promise you won't be embarrassed by how vanilla I am.

DOMINANT JAMES

Good. See you tonight.

SUGAR BEAR

Can't wait. One last question, though. Do we wear clothes? Or are we going naked?

DOMINANT JAMES

Thanks for that visual. Why are you always messing with me?

SUGAR BEAR

I'm testing out new hobbies. So far, messing with you is my favorite.

DOMINANT JAMES

Clothes. Lots of them. Long pants. Turtleneck sweaters.

SUGAR BEAR

Got it. Hot pants and a crop top.



A few days later...

SUGAR BEAR

Guess who just called me with good news.

DOMINANT JAMES

Probably Dante.

SUGAR BEAR

No fair! How did you know?

DOMINANT JAMES

Wild guess. So you got the job?

SUGAR BEAR

I did.

DOMINANT JAMES

That's great. Congratulations. When do you start?

SUGAR BEAR

Next week. I asked for some extra time before I start to let my toes heal.

DOMINANT JAMES

Good idea.

SUGAR BEAR

So now that I accepted the job offer, does that mean we can't hang out anymore?

DOMINANT JAMES

We can still hang out if you want.

SUGAR BEAR

I do want. Movie tonight?

DOMINANT JAMES

Would you be opposed to watching one at my place for a change? I have an actual couch.

SUGAR BEAR

A real couch? With cushions on it? James, stop. That can't possibly be true. Don't tell tall tales and play with my emotions this way.

DOMINANT JAMES

I also have a table where we can put plates, silverware, and have a meal. Like civilized people.

SUGAR BEAR

Someone pinch me. It's like being invited to Buckingham Palace.

DOMINANT JAMES

Is that a yes?

SUGAR BEAR

I'll have to cancel Beyonce again, but I enjoy your company more anyway.

DOMINANT JAMES

I'll text you when I'm on my way to pick you up.

SUGAR BEAR

I can drive so you don't have to bring me home that late.

DOMINANT JAMES

Not a chance. You shouldn't drive yet. And I wouldn't be comfortable sending you home alone late without being there to walk you to your room.

SUGAR BEAR

I can drive with my heel instead of my toes. And I'm a big girl.

DOMINANT JAMES

I'll feel better driving you.

SUGAR BEAR

Fine. If you insist.

DOMINANT JAMES

Good girl.

SUGAR BEAR

Didn't we talk about keeping things platonic?

DOMINANT JAMES

Touché.

CHAPTER 16

YOU NEED TO CALM
DOWN (LETTIE'S
VERSION)

LETTIE

I check my reflection in the mirror, twirling back and forth to ensure I don't accidentally give anyone a free show in this skirt.

"It's pretty short, kitten." Stella adds a whistle to her judgment. "If it were winter, you'd get old *and* new monia dressed like that."

With a snort-laugh, I move in front of my phone screen, giving her a better view. "Jokes aside, is it *too* short?"

"For the Piggly Wiggly? Yes. For where you're going? No. Not at all."

Biting my lower lip, I twist once more, adding a shake to see if it flashes my ass. "You sure?"

"Let me consult my attorney," she deadpans, then holds up her pointer finger at me as if she's asking me for a moment.

Putting my fists on my hips, I cut a glare at my phone and stick out my tongue.

Her finger lowers. "Attorney says it's good to go."

I walk away from the mirror and grab the phone from the dresser, bringing it close to my face. “How’s my makeup?”

She narrows her eyes at the screen, then closes them dramatically while batting her hand toward me. “Oh my god. Make it stop. Turn the camera away. *Turn it away now.* You’re hideous.”

I barely flinch at her sarcasm since I’m totally used to it by this point in our friendship.

“Violet Anastasia Holt,” she bellows like an angry school marm. “Why are you freaking out about your appearance? This isn’t like you.”

When I exhale, my lips flap in a raspberry. “I know it’s not. But I’m so damn nervous I’m pitchin’ a hissy fit with a tail on it.”

All traces of her teasing fall from her face. “Talk to me, hun. What’s got you worried?”

I roll out my shoulders, trying to dispel the tension. “The better question is what hasn’t got me worried.”

“Okay, close your eyes and breathe with me. In for four and out for four.”

Together, we take a few steady breaths.

She coaches me through a mini meditation. “Feel the solid earth underneath your feet. Concentrate on your steady pulse. Notice the oxygen filling your lungs.”

My eyes pop open. “But it smells like stale smoke and terrible decisions in here.” I sniff the air pointedly. “And also regret, shame, and... I’m pretty sure the last odor is sexual frustration.” Lowering my nose to my chest and armpits, I inhale again. “Yep. Those last three are coming from me.”

Stella giggles with me but soon grows serious again. “How long until you need to leave?”

“Ten minutes.”

“Good. Sit down for a minute.”

I follow her instructions, trusting she won't steer me wrong this close to my first night on the job at Club Bask.
"Sitting."

"Excellent. I'm going to ask you a series of questions. Try not to overthink the answers. Just give me the first answer that pops into your head."

"Is this a test?"

She chuckles softly, shaking her head. "First question. Ready?"

I nod. "Ready."

"What's something you're looking forward to about tonight?"

The first thing that comes to mind probably wouldn't paint me in the best light, so I skip *him* and move on.

"Earning money."

"Good. What's something you're scared of happening tonight?"

"Looking like a fool."

"How did you feel when you found out you got the job?"

"Relieved and happy."

"What's that face for?"

I crick my head at her, my lips pursing. "What face?"

"Your lying face. Lettie, why are you lying?"

I hate that she knows my tell.

My exhale is a trembling fluttery release of nerves coated with a thin layer of shame. "To be clear, that wasn't a total lie. I was and am happy to get a job. Money has been tight, and I need gainful employment. The job seems like it will be exciting."

"But?" she prods.

From behind the shield of my hands, I blurt out my truth. "By getting the job, my chance to explore the connection with

James is kaput.”

“Lettie bear, we done plowed this furrow clean down to the bedrock. It’s time to rest the mule.”

Southern translation: We’ve talked it to death and need to move on.

And yeah, we have.

The picnic with James was ten days ago. Since then, Stella and I have discussed it ad nauseam. I don’t hide shit from her if I can help it. And I needed her shoulder to whine on.

“If mother earth wants you to be with James, a path will clear in the forest.”

I close my eyes and groan. “That was the most ridiculous thing you’ve said to me all week.”

“Oh look at you. Exercising your right to be snarky.”

I laugh at our silly banter, grateful for the moment of levity. “Am I making a mistake, Stella? I can’t help but think he’s worth losing out on the job. A man like him doesn’t come around every day.”

“I can’t argue with that. He does sound pretty great. Especially the way he took care of you and your broken toes.”

Ah, that reminds me. Although I told him I already did it, I keep forgetting to add the urgent care visit to my list of shit to pay him back for, as well as the hundred and twenty bucks worth of groceries he stuffed into my buggy the next day. I’m starting to wonder if he’s wealthy or just reckless with money.

The whole experience left me as confused as a fart in a fan factory. I hate being dependent on someone or needing a handout, but I also loved how he insisted on caring for me. He’s a sexy guardian angel who kisses like the devil.

Stella snaps me back to the moment. “If the James situation didn’t exist, would you be happy about this job?”

“Oh my gosh, yes. The vibe there was incredible. I loved it. And the people were so nice. Plus, it’s exciting and a bit naughty, which is perfect for my rebellious era.”

“And you felt safe, right?”

She’s asked me a few times about safety precautions. Apparently, not all clubs are alike.

“Yes. The owner was explicitly clear about how I can expect to be treated. He went over the rules in detail, and all the members must sit through a class on club etiquette. And according to James, all the Doms will be looking out for me.”

“Okay. Let’s look at this objectively. Box up your emotions for a hot minute.” She gives me a stern glare. “You’re going to be earning money like a big girl. And you’re working in a safe place that’s exciting, fun, and a little naughty. So there’s nothing to be nervous about, right?”

My lips bunch over to one side, and I nibble at the inside of my cheek. “Well…”

“Well what?”

As much as I wish I could avoid this topic, I need to tell her this. She’ll help me deal with it.

“James will be there tonight.”

“And? You said he’s looking out for you, so that should be a good thing. You’ll already have a friend there.”

“But he’s not *working* tonight.”

Her mouth opens in a perfect O shape. “Oooh.”

“What if he has sex with someone else?” My tone spikes up an octave. “Or whatever else he does there? Spanking a woman or tying up a hot naked chick? Getting a BJ? Oh my gosh. I can’t, Stella. *I can’t.*”

Bands tighten around my chest, making it hard to breathe. How awful would that be to have to watch him with another woman? I’ll die, have a heart attack, and puke, but in reverse order.

Stella maintains a calming voice. “I doubt he’d do that to you.”

“Why else is he going?”

She closes her eyes and clicks her tongue. “I know you’re not that obtuse, Lettie.”

“Pretend I am. Tell me why you think he’s coming tonight. I need to hear it because I can’t trust my thoughts about him.”

“He’s going for you, sweetie.”

With a downward jerk of my chin, I bob my head a few times, then shake it out. My head and neck are as wonky as my thoughts. I don’t know whether to agree or refute her assertion.

I *want* to believe her.

James has been nothing but kind and considerate. Unfortunately, he hasn’t made a move to kiss me again since the night at the beach. And he’s had plenty of opportunities, given how often we’ve hung out.

Turns out our taste in movies aligns, and we seem to genuinely enjoy each other’s company.

When I fell asleep on his shoulder the other night, it was the most relaxing sleep I had. He’d somehow tucked me into bed and left without waking me.

Why does the stupid no-dating rule exist? *It’s so unfair!*

My nostrils flare with a rich intake of oxygen. I’d hoped for a cleansing breath, but sadly, I live in filth, so it makes me want to gag.

After rubbing one flattened palm over my thigh a few times, I stand. “I hope you’re right, Stella Bella. Because time is up, and I need to skedaddle.”

“It’ll be fine, hun. You’ll see. Call me on your way home.”

I tip the phone toward my face and lean the side of my head close so she gets a view of my ear. “Call you? Like with my voice? Did I hear you right?”

Her answer hitches a ride on a melodic laugh. “Yes. For tonight only, the ban is lifted.”

“It’s gonna be super late when I’m done working. We can talk tomorrow.”

“Fine. But promise me this. If you see him having sex with someone else, you’ll call me so I can talk you down off the ledge.”

“I’m not going to be on a ledge. I’ll be totally chill.” I shrug, attempting to pull off blasé. “You’ve taught me a lot about the kink lifestyle. Sex isn’t emotional for everyone; sometimes, it’s just physical. And if he has sexual relations with someone else, it doesn’t have anything to do with me. None whatsoever.”

“That’s my girl. But call me anyway. Not that I think he’s going to do that. I stand by my earlier comment.”

“I think so too. He’s been caring and compassionate. It’s most likely that he wants to make sure I’m comfortable.”

“Exactly. And don’t forget that you’re a tough chick who doesn’t need a man to complete her.”

I flash a toothy smile and quip, “Tell that to Pastor Ben and my mama.”

“Shush with that. Their opinions are as worthless as gum on a boot heel!” She laughs at her joke, and it makes me smile. “I expect a full report tomorrow and text updates as the night unfolds to hold me over.”

“Got it.”

“If you don’t, I’ll punish you.”

“Don’t make promises you won’t keep.”

“But you won’t like my punishments, hun. It’ll involve tying you down and letting Pumpkin walk all over your chest.”

“Do it, and I’ll kill you, then swear you died of natural causes.”

CHAPTER 17

**SHE'S NOT GONNA BE
JESSE'S GIRL**

TOMER

I check the clock for the third time in the last sixty seconds. My knee bobs with impatience as Boss reads and rereads my report while pacing around his office.

He slams the papers onto the table and curses under his breath. Frustration crimps every line of his face, making him look older than his fifty-some-odd years.

This last month has been a reminder the size of a billboard an inch in front of my face as to why I can't tell him about his daughter yet.

It's a shitstorm at Redleg.

When he finishes reading the summary of findings aloud, he plops down at the table opposite me and pins me with a haggard look. "We vetted them, right? Did we miss something? How the fuck did this happen?"

I pick at the fabric of my pants, struggling to suppress my irritation. "We checked references, evaluated the specs, and ran a full battery of performance testing. Doug in Purchasing checked all the shit he normally does before entering a

contract. The software and hardware were verified and verified again. I don't think we did anything wrong."

"If that were the case, I wouldn't be hauled in for a deposition."

"Boss, everything you need to defend our practices is in that file. All blame rests squarely on SECO Tech."

"Let me get George on the horn. I need to get his take on this shit. Did you send your report to him?"

I nod. "About twenty minutes before I came in here."

"Good."

He presses the intercom button to call his assistant.

"Yes, Boss?" Peg answers.

"Can you get Lionheart and Klein in here? And then call our attorney George Lennox to see when he can talk to me about this damn deposition."

"I'm on it."

He clicks off the speaker and grabs the report again, his gaze sweeping over it studiously.

A month ago, one of our home security client's residences was burglarized. And the system we'd installed didn't register the break-in. Total system failure. The last month has been a shitshow of work. Klein and I analyzed every component to identify the breakdown.

Three days ago, we received word that the client is suing us and the manufacturer who designed the tech we used for the install. I've spent the last few days getting all the proof compiled for Boss to cover our ass. Even if I were an independent auditor examining this situation, I wouldn't be able to find Redleg liable for this shit.

Big Al quickly flips through the pages. "Where's the info on our biweekly system checks? We did that, right?"

"Page four. Section C."

He moves to that section and drags his index finger over the page until he finds the report. “This is the full system check log, right?”

“Yes. And the daily error logs are in the appendix. You can see there isn’t even a blip. Everything was normal, including the day of the break-in.”

He grimaces. “That makes no sense. How could it...” His words trail off as he skims the logs.

“I have a theory.”

His eyes jump off the page at me. The intensity of his glare is intimidating. When he looks at me this way, I get sucked into the past. Suddenly, I’m an unsure teen standing in front of my angry father while he berates me for something I said or did wrong. Usually, it was a combination of things I shouldn’t have done.

Blinking, I yank myself back to the here and now. “I suspect SECO was cutting corners. The interface between their network and ours wasn’t properly supported on their end. Instead of maintaining it the way they should, they put a patch in place so it would look like the daily system verification was occurring, but it wasn’t.”

“Can you prove that?”

I shrug. “With a little time, perhaps.”

“How confident are you? And how much time?”

“It’s a theory, but I can’t think of any other reason why the logs show no disruption or signals, yet the camera footage shows the burglars accessed the home through windows that were tagged with sensors.”

“And our wiring was good? All wireless components working?”

I point him back to the second page of the report that details our quality measures. “All hardware components were tested at install, and we performed our quarterly checks on the premises, per the contract. No issues. No termite damage or

other concerns either. Battery life good. The hardware was working as designed.”

“So the system was installed properly and was firing normally, but the breakdown happens in the server relay stage.”

“Exactly.”

He drags his hand over his forehead roughly, massaging his weathered skin. “Why the fuck would SECO do that? They’d know we’d be able to prove it. Wouldn’t they?”

“Could be a timing thing. Maybe they put a patch to bypass reporting while figuring out how to fix their shit.”

“And in the meantime, they employed the hope strategy. But it backfired, and our client had a break-in during that time frame, however long it may have lasted.”

My mind races through other possibilities, the same way it has for the last few days. I can’t identify any other viable explanations. It has to be shitty software, network issues, or...

“Boss, what if the burglars hacked the system? Maybe they were the cause of the bypass?”

He lets his head loll around his shoulder and grumbles, “Holy shit. That could be it.”

“Not sure why I didn’t think of it sooner.”

A twinge of guilt slips between my ribs and squeezes my lungs. That’s a lie. I know exactly why I didn’t think of it sooner.

Violet Holt consumes my every waking thought.

I’m either with her, texting her, or thinking about her. When I sleep, I fucking dream about her.

She makes mundane shit like grocery shopping and watching TV exciting and different. Everything’s better when I’m with her.

A knock at the door startles me.

“Come in,” Boss bellows.

Leo and Klein enter the room, both reeking of trepidation. No one likes being summoned to Big Al's office in a rush.

"Peg said you wanted us," Lionheart offers.

Big Al motions to the two open chairs at the table. "Take a seat."

When Leo sits, his enormous frame makes the small space uncomfortably crowded. I shift away to give myself room to breathe. He can't help that he's a giant.

Big Al spends a few minutes bringing the guys up to speed. They already knew about the break-in but not the legal matters.

Once they are briefed, Boss leans back in his seat and crosses his arms behind his head. "We have insurance to cover our losses from the lawsuit if it comes to that, but the hit to our reputation could be catastrophic. If word gets out, we're fucked. Current clients will fire us in droves, and we can kiss prospective high-dollar contracts like Langley S&D goodbye. Redleg will be dead in the water."

Nobody replies since Boss doesn't look like he's finished.

He puffs up his reddening cheeks and groans with a forceful exhale. "I'll be damned if we let anything like this happen again. And not just because of the impact on the company, but because of the risk it poses to our clients. It's unacceptable. And that's not fucking lip service. What if the family was home, for fuck's sake? Someone could have died." He shakes his head. "We need a plan and fast. What do you got for me, brain trust?"

While Leo contemplates a response, Klein and I trade glances. We're both thinking the same thing.

A slow grin emerges, steadily overtaking his face. I give him a quick tip of my chin, silently green-lighting him to make the pitch.

"Tomer and I have talked about expanding our employee monitoring system. It could be scaled for commercial use in a month or two if necessary."

“The one we have in our homes? That’s possible?” Leo asks, glancing from Klein to me.

I give him a nod. “Affirmative.”

Klein and I designed a system that’s installed in all Redleg employees’ homes. Lots of bells and whistles. Fully customizable.

Boss leans forward, bracing himself on the table with his elbows. He narrows his eyes, encouraging Klein to continue.

“If we did it, we could cut out all outside contractors and suppliers, making it 100 percent our product. We already do the monitoring, so we’d have the control from top to bottom. Never counting on a company like SECO to give us the shaft.”

Leo smirks, his eyes darting between us and landing on Boss. He gives Big Al the subtlest of nods.

Our fearless leader shifts his gaze to the ceiling while wobbling his jaw from side to side. Once he’s decided, his arms fall to the table, fists banging quietly on the wood.

“Okay.”

Klein pumps his fist. “Yes.”

I’m a little less enthused. But that’s only because of how much time this is going to take. Especially when I’d rather spend that time on other pursuits.

But life has a way of giving you what you need, not what you want. Or rather, taking you away from what you shouldn’t want.

It’s yet another reminder to keep my attention on what matters.

Starting tonight, Lettie will be employed, resolving her money issues. As soon as I find her a safe place to live, I won’t need to watch over her. All my focus can be on Redleg. Like it always should have been.

The four of us brainstorm action items for another half hour before he dismisses everyone.

Except me.

Fuck.

Once we're alone, he pins me with a hard glare. "You seem jumpy tonight. Is it this shit, or is something else going on?"

Something tells me it wouldn't go over well if I told him the truth.

Well, gee, Boss, I need to hurry up and leave. Got to get to the kink club where I got your secret daughter a job. I want to ensure she's comfortable on her first night. Oh, and by the way, I kissed her twice, and I fuck my fist to thoughts of her every fucking day. Is it cool if I cut out early today?

Since I'd rather not be junk-punched by Big Al, I opt for avoidance. "All good. Are we done for now?"

He presses his lips together, checks the time, and flicks his wrist at me. "Fine. Get out of here. Tomorrow, we start on the next chapter for Redleg."

"Good night, Boss."

And then I'm gone.

When I get home, I jump in the shower, washing at record speed. Before leaving, I turn off the GPS tracking on my vehicle in case someone at the office is monitoring. They don't need to know where I go at night. That's my business.

I pass Tim as I enter Bask, and he offers the customary greeting. But I can't focus on him. I'm busy searching for blond hair and blue eyes. It's been a few days since I've seen her.

Well, in person.

And she's nervous about tonight, so she needs a familiar face.

Freya is at the front desk when I walk in, and she immediately perks up, rolls her shoulders back, and bats her lashes at me. "Hi, James."

"Freya." I nod at her, but my eyes are scanning the room. I expected Lettie to be up here.

“Looking for something?” She leans across the counter, smacking her lips around a lollipop.

“Not exactly,” I respond in a clipped tone, finally meeting her eyes.

She licks her lips and arches her brow. “Someone, perhaps?”

I shrug, unsure how to respond.

She giggles and flashes a knowing grin at me, followed by a wink. “Your girl’s in the back with Dante.”

My shoulders stiffen, eyes bulging. “What’s she doing in there?”

Her head flops back, and her annoying laugh rattles around the room. “She’s not in *that* back room. Dante was giving her a tour and shit.” She claps, her laughter increasing. “Thanks for confirming that she is, in fact, *your* girl. Aw, man. You should see your face.”

Stepping closer, I narrow my eyes at her, my lip curling up in warning. She recognizes the shift in me in an instant.

She casts her eyes to the floor, assuming a submissive stance. “Sorry, sir.”

I don’t add anything else because she got my meaning loud and clear with one look. She’s a good sub, even if she is too bratty for my taste.

Passing by the desk, I open the room to the main floor and scan the room. A blond on my right catches my attention, but she doesn’t have Lettie’s curves.

A familiar voice comes from over my right shoulder as I advance into the room. “Hey, handsome.”

I nod in her direction, grinding my teeth. “Hi, Vanessa.”

Not paying her any attention, I resume searching for Lettie. Uneasiness settles in my chest.

Vanessa doesn’t take the hint, moving closer instead. Her fingertip trails up and down my forearm. “We haven’t played in a while. Do you have your ropes with you?”

“No,” I lie. They’re in my locker, but I won’t be taking them out tonight for her or anyone. “If you’ll excuse me. I’m looking for someone.”

“Take care, Jimmy.”

She knows better than to call me that. But I ignore it since she’s only trying to bait me. Someone needs to knock her down a peg.

I fucking hate brats.

Striding away, I work my way through the room, asking a few of the regulars if they’ve seen someone matching Lettie’s description. Every single man I question responds in the affirmative. And I hate the way their faces light up at her mention. Clearly, no one is immune to her beauty.

My fist twitches when a member named Jesse bites his knuckle jokingly and mock growls. “Get in line, James. Everyone wants a shot at that one.”

Disrespectful son of a bitch.

Not usually. But he is right now. And I can’t stand for that.

On instinct, I grip his shoulder, squeezing at the pressure point near his collarbone. His eyes widen, and he hisses in pain while trying to shrug out of my grip. Not happening.

“Listen up, Jesse, and listen good. She’s. Not. Available. You got it?”

He puts his hands up, palms facing out. “No problem.”

Feeling a touch guilty, I lessen my hold. “If anyone else mentions her, let them know she’s taken. Got it?”

He tries again to shrug out of my grip. “Yeah. I got it. I didn’t know she was spoken for, or I never would have made that comment.”

I *should* believe him. Jesse’s a good guy. He’s been a member here for a few years and is always good to his subs. We never get complaints about him. I’ve vetted him thoroughly.

But I can't seem to follow my own advice when it comes to Lettie.

Before I let go of Jesse, I issue a final warning. "If anyone approaches her about a scene, it won't end well. That includes you. Stay away from her."

As he slips away from me, he rolls out his shoulder to shrug off the pain. "Fuck, man. Why don't you collar her if you're that worried?"

"She's not a sub."

"She sure as hell ain't no Domme. She has submissive written all over her."

Biting the side of my cheek, I attempt to rein in my uncharacteristic outburst. "She's here to work, and that's all."

If the submission hold I had him in didn't make it clear, the look on my face likely removes any lingering doubt.

"James, you have my word. I won't approach her for that, and I won't let anyone else either. I'll look out for her. Same as you'd do for me."

The seriousness in his tone eases my frustration enough for me to unclench my fists, letting the blood flow return to my extremities.

Jesse tugs at the collar of his dress shirt. "Who is she, anyhow?"

Once again, my eyes sweep over the room, coming up empty. "A friend."

"A friend, huh?"

A groan emanates from deep in my chest.

"Must be a good friend for that type of reaction." He taps me on my upper back. "It's nice to see you connect with someone."

"Thanks." I return the gesture. "Sorry for overreacting. I'm protective over her."

He dips his chin. "All good, man. We've all been there."

Been where? Obsessed over someone they can't have and living in a hell of their own making? That's where I am.

A few others acknowledge me as I circle the room again. A nagging fear pricks at the back of my mind. Could the *supposed* joke Freya told me be based on some amount of truth? Did the tour Dante's taking Lettie on include the voyeur room in the back? She's not ready to see that shit.

Moving swiftly, I power down the hall, paying no mind to the members I pass. When I get to the door, I pause and count to three. I can't go in there in this state of mind. If she's in there, I need to react logically and not with this... rage or whatever the fuck I'm feeling.

Stay calm.

Don't freak out.

Get a grip.

My panic slowly recedes, allowing a sense of calm to return. Now that I'm under control, I enter the room.

A glance at the two-sided glass reveals a scene in progress. A woman I don't recognize is naked, spread wide open, and bound face up in a seated cross chair. Eric, one of the Doms, hovers between her thighs, lining up a sex machine with her entrance. There are red marks all over her thighs and stomach from impact play.

Normally, I'd be all for watching that. But not tonight.

I scan the crowd of onlookers. Some are engaged in various sexual acts with partners or masturbation. Others quietly watch the room.

No Lettie or Dante.

Spinning on my heel, I leave as quickly as I came. The sense of relief I feel at her not being back here is alarming.

It shouldn't matter so much to me.

Eventually, she'll see what happens in here. She might even decide to do a scene or become a member.

I have no right to stop her. No claim to her.

Hell, she might even find a Dom who will teach her all the things I can't.

No. Not can't. *It's that I won't.*

She's off-limits.

It's not only who her father is but the dynamic of our relationship. I met her under false pretenses. I've been lying to her for weeks.

As I move slowly through the hallway, passing the private rooms, I force myself to tamp down my concerns for Lettie. Anything beyond caring for her physical well-being is no longer my concern.

Aside from helping her find a place to live, I need to move on. After that's done, I'll be her friend.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

I'll protect her, even if she doesn't know it. All the while, I'll work on getting Boss ready by taking on more responsibility at Redleg.

Once I bring them together, I'll deal with the fallout. But at least I won't have crossed that line with her. It'll never go any further than those stolen kisses.

I'm watching over her.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

CHAPTER 18

THAT DESERVES A
THUMB TACK TO THE NUT
SACK

LETTIE

Freya bumps my shoulder with hers. “You’ve got company of the sexy, quiet, brooding Dom variety.”

My head whips around in the direction of her head tilt. Instantly, my gaze locks on him walking toward the front desk. My heart does a triple back handspring and sticks the landing.

“There you are, Lettie.”

His voice caresses my ears like a velvet-wrapped sonnet.

I’m so gone for this man that the mere sight of him has me grinnin’ like a possum eatin’ a sweet tater.

I bob on my tiptoes, ignoring the pain it causes. “Hi, James.”

He pauses a few feet from the front desk where Freya is going over some procedures with me. In typical James fashion, he doesn’t speak. He’s often entirely content with the silence.

“I guess I’ll give you two some privacy.” Freya edges around the desk and heads to the door leading to the main room.

Once she's out of earshot, he moves the rest of the way to the front desk and rests his elbows on the top, still silent as a mouse.

No matter how badly I want to know what he was doing in the club, I won't be asking.

Nope. I won't. *Promise.*

I smile warmly, and there's a slight tremble in my voice when I finally find the words. "I didn't see you in the main room when I came through a few minutes ago. Were you in the back or a private room?"

Dammit. Turns out I'm shitty at keeping promises to myself.

"Back room."

My neck moves like a well-oiled spring, bobbling my head around like I've got a medical condition. "Cool, cool, cool. Sounds fun."

The crease of his mouth curves upward a tad. "I was only back there because I was looking for you."

"Oh?" I feign disinterest, complete with a nonchalant shrug and approximately twenty-seven rapid fire blinks. "I wasn't back there, of course. Did you happen to see anything interesting?"

I don't want to know what he saw or did while he was there. I'd prefer not knowing that room even exists. So why am I asking?

His voice brings my attention back to his handsome face. "Why are your cheeks getting red?"

"It's a little warm up here," I fib, fanning myself with a sticky note. Everyone knows sticky notes are known for their cooling properties due to their robust size.

His eyes light up with a twinkle of mischievousness, communicating his disbelief. "It was a scorcher today, but the rain cooled it down."

“We sure needed it,” I offer, as is customary when someone mentions precipitation.

We have the *best* conversations when we’re uncomfortable like this.

His external awkwardness pairs nicely with my internal awkwardness.

He taps his knuckles on the top of the front desk. “You look nice.”

“Thank you. As do you.”

I glance at my short skirt and low-cut blouse, suddenly self-conscious as all get out. But his eyes seem to eat up my skin, so that feeling is soon replaced by warmth.

The silence stretches far too long, so I take the bull by the horns. “Listen, James, this feels weird.” I gesture between us. “Why is it weird?”

“I’m not sure. But I’m working through it.”

“Working through it,” I whisper, nodding eagerly like it’s fascinating information. Glancing at my desk, I grab a club guidebook that Dante gave me.

“Everything good so far?” he asks after a few seconds of my pamphlet flipping.

“Yes. Freya is sweet and funny. She’s training me until I’m comfortable enough to be on my own.”

“Great. Were you with Dante earlier?”

The desire to needle him hits me out of nowhere. To tease him with innuendo or not to tease him with innuendo? That’s the question.

And the answer I choose? Tease him.

My eyes fall to the most interesting pamphlet ever printed. In truth, I’m using it as a safety blanket. I guess that would make it a safety pamphlet. Har har har.

Ignoring the cracked-out squirrel controlling my thoughts, I reply, “Yes.” Intentionally, I add a breathy heat to my tone.

“He needed to teach me a few things about the business.”

The counter of the desk creaks, drawing my attention to the source of the sound. James has a white-knuckle-death grip on the wooden surface. My lips repeatedly quirk into a teasing grin, but I school my expression by sheer force of will, determined to carry out the gag.

When I meet his eyes, he’s looking to the ceiling and mumbling softly.

I can’t be sure, but it sounds like a list. Maybe... *friend, sponsor, mentor*. What is he rattling on about? I lean forward, my ears straining.

“Are you okay?”

His nostrils flare with a deliberate inhale. “Yeah.”

When the wood creaks again, I rise and walk around the counter. After placing my hand on top of his, whimpers of mirth break through my tightly sealed lips. The grin I’ve been fighting finally wins the battle, eclipsing my entire face.

Instead of laughing with me, he glances at my hand caressing his, then burns his gaze into mine with a look so penetrating that I can barely stand.

My chest quivers with a shuttering breath, and tightness coils in my lower abdomen.

His eyes are dark aquamarine fathomless pools of secrets and desires. I want nothing more than to wade through to uncover all they hide.

When the moment gets too intense, I blink to clear my head. “I was just kidding. Dante had me complete my employment paperwork in his office, and he talked about the expectations he had of his staff. Stuff like that. Totally innocent.” I raise my free hand up like I’m taking an oath. “I promise.”

James shakes his head repeatedly and licks his lips. His demeanor shifts into something softer and more playful. “Of course. I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For almost breaking the desk on your first night here.”

He gives me a lopsided grin, and my panties flood.

The comforting vibe we’ve developed in our time together slowly returns. “Is this going to be a frequent problem? Should I alert management of the need to reinforce the carpentry? Perhaps replace it with steel?”

His chuckle is low, quiet, and utterly arousing. “That’s unnecessary. I’m good now. I’m just a little protective over you.”

I let my eyes dance. “Are you? I hadn’t noticed.”

He moves a step closer to me. “You know I am.”

I inch closer to him, brushing my arm against his. “Yes, I suppose I do.”

“How are your toes?”

“A little sore, but I stayed off them like the doctor told me to.”

“Being a good girl, huh?”

Unable to stop myself, I nibble my lip, loving how it draws his attention. “Uh-huh.”

He rolls his shoulders back and averts his eyes. “Did you have any questions so far? Anything I can answer for you?”

I have a million questions. None of them about my actual job, and all of them about his *activities* here.

“Nope.”

Awkward silence.

“Oh. I saw your last name on the contact list, though, *Mr. Harris*.”

“Yep. That’s me.”

“My last name is Holt. And I don’t know why I’m bringing that up.”

“I already knew that from when we went to the urgent care.”

“That makes sense. This is some great small talk, huh?”

He bites his lower lip, holding back a grin. “Okay, I’ll let you continue training. I’ll send Freya back.”

My stomach leaps into my throat at the idea of him leaving. Not because I’m afraid to be alone, but because I don’t want him to go back there. “What are you going to do?”

“I’ll help monitor the floor. If I stay up here much longer, I’m going to do something reckless.”

A rascally smirk settles on my face. “Well, if you’re going to be reckless, just ensure consent first. And you already know you have that with me, sir.”

In a voice as smooth as silk, he warns, “Don’t call me sir.”

My hand involuntarily cups my stomach to stop the riot of butterflies from making me levitate off the floor. “I thought that was customary for Doms.”

“I’m not your Dom. And you’re not a sub.”

As he turns to leave, he mutters something sounding like “unfortunately.” But I’m honestly not sure whether I heard that word or merely wanted to.

The door closes behind him, essentially leaving me alone in the front lobby, except for Tim the bouncer.

Like I have lead in my shoes, I trudge around to the other side of the desk and take my seat. My broken toes are hurting from being on my feet so much today. So I cross my legs at the knees and slip off my strappy sandal. My little piggies are swollen.

Before Freya comes back, I fire off a text to Stella.

ME

James is here. We chatted. It was awkward. That is all.

A FEW SECONDS LATER, I add one more update.

ME

He confessed to being protective of me. But I don't know if that changes anything.

ME

I also teased him a tiny bit by making it sound like the manager was "teaching me" about BDSM in his office. James squeezed the counter so hard he almost broke it.

WHEN I SEE Freya strolling back into the lobby, I slide my phone away, shoving it under the pamphlet.

"Psh. You can be on your phone as long as you're not ignoring members or guests."

"I was just texting my friend to let her know all is well on my first shift."

"Did you and James work out whatever is going on?"

My cheeks flame. "There's nothing to work out."

"By the look of him, I'd say there's some sexual frustration to work out."

"Oh. Is it that obvious?"

"Helen Keller could see it."

"Really?"

We weren't *that* obvious, were we? Besides, she was only up here for a minute, and he didn't even speak during that time other than one sentence. How could she have noticed that fast?

She lightly taps my forearm. "I'm kidding. It wasn't quite that bad, but I did hear some rumblings on the floor about you being off-limits."

"What?" I screech, leaning forward with my mouth agape.

She nods and crinkles her nose playfully. "He's all but collared you, babe."

Collared me? *Heavens to Betsy.*

I'm not entirely sure what that means, but thanks to some titillating reading material James sent me, I know it's a possession thing.

But I can't let my inner reaction to her words show.

What is my inner reaction, you ask? The little squirrel in my brain is diddling her bean like a DJ, and my feminism is hiding under a blanket.

Needless to say, I'm on board.

"Will that get back to Dante? I don't want to get James in trouble over me."

Freya's head thrusts backward as incredulousness coats her features. "Why would he get in trouble?"

"Because he's not supposed to be involved with staff. And for the record, we're only friends. He hasn't touched me again since we kissed." I tug in a sudden swell of air, creating a hissing sound through my teeth and nostrils. "Forget I said that last part."

She snorts, smacking her upper thighs. What the hell is so funny? I suddenly feel as lost as last year's Easter egg.

I'm having a mini crisis over here. The least she could do is give me a moment to flip out.

My hands cup to my cheeks like the kid from that old Christmas movie. "What's that look for?"

"Honey, this is a look of pity." I don't get the feeling she's teasing me, despite her words.

My hand flies to my chest. "Pity? Why? Am I going to get fired for kissing him? It happened before I even interviewed."

She shushes me. "Calm down, Lettie. He's not in trouble, and neither are you. Why do you think he can't have a relationship with staff?"

I grab a pen from the desk and start clicking the button on top rapidly, giving myself something to focus on besides my

dumbfounded panic. “Because he’s a floor monitor. Isn’t that the policy?”

“No. Not at all. And if it were, there’d be no monitors willing to work here.”

“What? Are you telling me they all engage in... you know... with the staff?”

She nods. “And the members.”

My veins turn to ice. “Why that egg suckin’ dawg,” I whisper-yell.

Freya tries to hold back her chuckle at my expression but fails. “Who told you about this make-believe policy?”

My face falls slack as my gut twists and coils.

He lied to me. That asshole.

I meet her eyes, shocked to see genuine concern carved into her features, from her wide eyes to the gentle purse of her lips. At first, I thought Freya was a bit vapid. But she’s not. In fact, she’s caring and kind.

As my stunned response to his deceit fades into sadness, my lips roll into a pronounced pout. “James lied to me.”

Everyone lies to me.

“Well, he may be quiet, mysterious, and crazy sexy, but he’s still a man.” She rubs my shoulder soothingly. “Men do dumb shit. It’s part of what makes them men. I think that’s what the Y chromosome is for.”

A ghost of a laugh breaks free, threatening to shake me from my sudden sullenness. I shake my head a few more times, searching for something to excuse his deceit. “Why would he lie about that?”

“I don’t know. But I can help you get payback whenever you’re ready. A thumbtack in the nut sack would work nicely.”

As she stands to greet the person who just cleared the bouncer, she winks at me.

I've never been one for vengeance. Even without the church's influence on my upbringing, I've always been a fan of turning the other cheek. But if he doesn't tell me why he lied, I just might change my stance on the topic.

CHAPTER 19

BIG GIRLS DON'T CRY

LETTIE

“Good night, Freya. Thanks for everything.”

She waves before ducking into her car. “See ya tomorrow night, kid.”

My hands shake as I fumble for my keys. Klutz mode activated after an exhausting and emotional night.

“You should really have those ready before leaving the building.”

Jump scare alert.

I jolt at the unexpected deep voice behind me. Spinning around in a flash, I press my back to my car. In the process, my purse topples to the pavement, sending the contents flying.

Classic me.

“Jesus, Lettie,” James chides me while stooping to pick up my purse.

Once the initial shock recedes, I heft in a steadying breath and join him, taking a knee to clean my mess. “I got it. Don’t

worry about it.” A hiss of pain seeps out from the strain the position puts on my toes.

He pays my words no mind, rushing to scoop up my face powder compact, car keys, reading glasses, backup contact lenses, and about seventeen pens.

I like pens, okay? They’re cheaper versions of fidget spinners.

He moves so swiftly I only have time to grab a tube of lipstick.

Good to know he’s still dedicated to swooping in to save the day, in accordance with the chapter on *Saving Helpless Lettie* in the James Harris Operations Manual.

Without speaking, he motions for me to open my purse. He slips the remaining items in for me.

We rise to our feet, moving in sync like mirror images. Everything seems to happen in slow motion. He glances at my mouth, and I look at his. My throat bobs, then his does the same.

The pain from my toes steadily ebbs at his nearness. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I almost smile, but then I remember he’s a no-good lyin’ snake.

Pivoting on my good foot, I give him my back and beep the key fob to unlock my car. After opening the door, I chuck my purse onto the passenger seat.

As you’d expect, it promptly spills its contents again. That’s part of the Lettie Holt Operations Manual.

With a shake of my head, I meet James’s expectant gaze from over my shoulder. “Good night.”

Gently, he grazes my upper arm. “Hang on a second.”

With a resigned sigh, I obey, turning around to face him.

The tumultuous hoard of emotions battering my insides leaves me a touch queasy.

I'm angry with him for lying. I'm aroused by his very presence. I'm hurt that he felt the need to make excuses to avoid dating me in the first place.

Above all, I'm confused.

Oh. Let's also add mega horny to the list because the sounds coming from the club tonight won't likely be vacating my mind any time soon.

In the main room alone, there was enough exposed flesh and bodies in motion to fire up engines I didn't know were under my hood. I can't imagine how hot a peek into the voyeur room would make me. Probably need a fire extinguisher between my legs.

I press my lips together and let my face go lax, aiming for impassive. If he has something to say, I'm not dragging it out of him.

There's nothing I'm ready to say to him. I succeeded in looking busy whenever he popped back into the lobby the rest of the night. And the few times I had to walk through the main room toward the restroom, my eyes were locked straight ahead so I didn't risk seeing him talking to another woman or doing who knows what else.

Before I tell him the jig is up, I need to figure out why it matters so much. Do I really want to fight for someone who's dishonest? Or doesn't want me?

He finally speaks when he realizes I'm not doing the talking. "You okay?"

"I'm tired. Ready to get home."

"I'll follow you to ensure your safety. My car is over there." He flips his thumb over his shoulder. "Wait for me before you pull out."

"That's what she said," I mutter, unable to stop myself. Fortunately, he didn't hear my immature joke since he was walking toward his car already.

He plants his feet and looks my way. “What was that?”

Maybe he did hear me.

But he doesn’t deserve my joke.

“I just said thanks.”

I’d like to tell him to kick rocks and that I don’t need an escort home. But my hotel is sketchy in the daytime, let alone this late at night. So I accept his offer with the manners I was raised with.

He nods and retreats toward his car.

Once I’m behind the wheel, I tap out a text to Stella to tell her I survived the shift and am on my way home. We messaged back and forth throughout the evening until about an hour ago when she said she was falling asleep. But she made me promise to send her a message when I was leaving the club and another one when I was home safely.

And unlike James, I don’t lie to my friends.

As he pulls onto the street behind me, I make a childish face in the rearview mirror, complete with my tongue sticking out.

On the drive home, I let the rush of getting through my first night at the club wash off me. I sing along to the radio at the top of my lungs, holding nothing back. It’s some type of endorphin blast or stress relief.

By the time we pull into the hotel parking lot, I’m not as petulant as I was when he insisted on following me home.

Part of me is tempted to confront him about his bullshit. But the other half is just too tired to deal with it. It can wait another day. It’s best for me to talk to Stella and get her take on the situation. She’ll help balance my knee-jerk, impulsive response so I don’t go off half-cocked and cause a big scene.

Before exiting my car, I bend over the seat and shove all my crap back into my purse. And on cue, James is standing there, silent as a tree and scaring the shit out of me. *Again.*

“*Oh mylanta!*”

On the bright side, I didn't spill my purse this time. Hooray for small victories.

"Shh. Easy, Lettie. So jumpy tonight."

I drop my hand from my chest and exhale with gusto. "Quit sneakin' up on me."

He holds his hands out in front of him. "Wilco."

My nose wrinkles. "Huh?"

"Sorry. It means I will comply."

Too tired to ask about the odd phrase, I roll my eyes. "Well, thanks for following me home." I lower my chin and step to the side to walk around him. "Have a good night."

Five or so feet from my car, I hear footsteps behind me. A glance over my shoulder, and sure enough, he's following me.

I stop, and so does he.

In a huff, I turn around, some of my frustration seeping onto my face. My Southern manners are harder to tap into when I've been up for this many hours and put through an emotional wringer. "What are you doing?"

With zero inflection, he replies, "I'm following you to your room."

I slope my head to one side. "Yeah. But why?"

He squints like he's baffled. "To ensure your safety."

My head falls, curving in an inverted arc. "Am I in danger or somethin'?" My accent slips out a bit stronger than normal, in part because of my fatigue and the other part because I'm getting as mad as all get out at his confusing treatment.

"You might be. This isn't the best side of town."

"Well, it's what I got." I toss my hands to the sides, my purse hitching a ride with my right arm, then slapping me in the side with the ebb of the momentum.

My shoulders slump in utter defeat.

His forehead wrinkles, and a severe look hardens his features. "You're tired. Go to your room, Lettie."

Moving on instinct, my feet stutter a step toward my room while years of being forced to comply without objection flutter through the back of my mind.

Do as you're told, Lettie.

Good girls hold their tongue in the presence of a man.

Obedience brings you closer to the Lord.

Let the wiser man guide you since you can't trust your thoughts, feelings, or emotions.

No, no, no. That's not true. My thoughts and feelings are valid.

I am valid.

I plant my feet and hold James's gaze. With a tremble in my voice, I find myself begging him. "Please don't talk to me like I'm a child."

His expression melts, the frustration giving way to remorse. "Sorry. I didn't mean it like that." He blinks, and his shoulders rise with a forceful inhale like he's trying to restrain himself. "I only want you to be safe. I'll feel better knowing you're secure inside your room for the night."

I choke down my response out of fear. Fear of overreacting because I'm tired and hurt. Fear of angering him after all he's done for me. Fear of embarrassing myself.

And mostly out of fear of revealing myself.

Or of *being* myself.

Without speaking, I turn around and slink off toward my room. With each step I take away from him, my heart pounds more violently, and my sinuses sting as tears prick at the back of my eyes.

I *refuse* to cry in front of him.

He's already seen me ten shades of pathetic. He doesn't need to see the eleventh.

With determined focus, I call forth any remaining serenity left in my soul. It won't last long; I already feel it threatening

to slip away. These damn tears are determined to get the best of me.

Lettie Holt, you will not cry in front of James.

He'll make me talk about it because he won't understand why I'm upset. He doesn't know I'm aware he lied about the no-dating policy. And I'm not prepared to confront him.

That fucker. Why did he do that?

If he doesn't want anything to do with me, why is he here? I'm so confused.

I pick up my pace, aiming to get to my room before I lose this battle brewing inside my chest. His steps speed up, keeping him in stride with me.

With shaky hands, I open the door to my room and step inside. Keeping my lips pressed in a tight line, I'm barely able to hold off the wave of emotions. I turn and meet his eyes, then dip my forehead in a thank you gesture as I start to close the door.

When he sees the turmoil painted on my features, he moves closer, almost as if he's compelled to soothe me.

But if he comes closer, I'll cry.

If he comes into my room, I'll cry.

If I let him touch me, I'll cry.

Manners be damned, I close the door squarely in his face. It's self-preservation at this point.

Right before the door meets the frame, his hand slips in and blocks it from closing. I look down and his foot is in the way as well.

Oh good gravy!

"Good night, James," I grit out, fighting back the tears with the strength of a gladiator.

"Lettie, open up for a minute." Instead of bossy dominance, there's an unobtrusive tenderness to his tone. "Please."

My conditioned response of compliance rears its traitorous head again. I roll my shoulders, take two quick breaths, then open the door. “Yes?”

He pokes his head in the crack, taking one step closer so that he’s hovering over the threshold. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just tired,” I fib, offering a half-truth.

I *am* tired. But I’m not fine.

He scoffs. “You’re a bad liar.”

Despite the hurricane inside me, the reminder of that drive we took to the beach and the kiss that followed brings a tug to the corner of my mouth. “Thanks again for looking after me. For the food. The loan. Getting me the job. And everything else.” After another deep breath, I make it clear that I’m done talking. “I’ll see you around the club. Good night.”

I step forward, my hand pressing against the door and inching it closed. He relinquishes a step backward, then another. His mouth hangs open like there’s something on the tip of his tongue.

If I hear it, I’ll cry.

Instead of waiting for him to find the words, I gradually close the door. His backward movement keeps pace with the forward motion of the door.

My eyes hold his as the space between the door and jamb narrows to a slit, making my view of him narrow slowly until he’s gone.

“Good night,” he finally whispers at the last second.

And then I close the door on him.

Literally and figuratively.

I rest my forehead on the back of the hard, cold metal and whisper, “Goodbye, James.”

CHAPTER 20

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE
NIGHT

TOMER

As soon as her glassy blue eyes disappear in the crack, I rest my head against the door.

My chest caves in as an undecipherable weight presses against my sternum. I lose track of time while I stand frozen in place.

Her pain — whatever has caused it — has leached into my heart.

I'm not built to experience emotion this profoundly. It's uncomfortable and foreign. And I'm powerless to break free from her spell.

By some cruel twist of fate, this forbidden, sweet, complicated, hurricane of a woman has penetrated all my defenses, reaching a place so deep inside that she's become rooted in my soul.

Before her, I never knew I could *feel* anything beyond surface-level emotions.

Now I wonder if I'll ever be able to stop feeling this gravely.

It's hard to breathe.

I have no clue what's upset her so much, and I can't fathom how to fix it. But one thing is for sure, something changed in Lettie tonight. And it's changing me too.

With my forehead still pressed against the cold metal of her door, I attempt to sort my turbulent thoughts.

Why is she so hostile and sorrowful at the same time? It was as if something broke inside her tonight. Somehow, I'm to blame.

Was getting her a job at the club a mistake? Did she see something she wishes she didn't? Is she mad at me for exposing her to that part of my world? Did I taint her innocence?

A headache at the base of my skull forms as I'm pelted with dozens of questions and not a single answer.

I never touched another woman tonight, and I didn't watch any scenes for sexual gratification. All night long, I walked the floor as if I were on duty, occasionally talking to some of the regulars. Aside from when I searched for her in the back room, I didn't even go down the hallway past the private rooms.

The only reason I was at Bask was to ensure she was comfortable.

I went for her.

Was that a mistake? Would she have been more comfortable without me there?

This family would be better off without you, boy.

Perhaps Freya said something about me that upset her. She could've told her that we've scened together in the past. That might have upset Lettie.

I think.

If that's what caused her distress, how do I fix it? I can't change the past.

Or should I even try to right this ship?

This thing with her — this attraction — can't go anywhere. Any connection with her was destined to end badly before it even began.

It's for the best that I withdraw from her and avoid hurting her worse than I already have.

If you can't learn how to talk to people like a normal kid, then shut your mouth.

Yeah. I need to step away before I'm forced to tell more lies in the interest of protecting her father.

I press off the door and drag myself to my car, keeping my eyes open and staying on guard for unexpected trouble. Once I'm driving away, I let my thoughts roll without holding them back.

I wish I could tell Big Al about her. She could use a father like him.

Especially now.

But he's not ready for that.

With the lawsuit, the upcoming build-out of the security system, all the new bodyguards coming aboard, and the Langley S&D gig, he's at max capacity for shit he can handle. It'd be cruel to dump news of this magnitude on his plate now.

He wouldn't be able to give Lettie the time she needs. Time she'd want and deserve from him. He'd end up torn between getting to know her and getting the company back on track.

Once things stabilize, I'll tell him.

For now, I'll keep my distance from Lettie, protecting her from afar. Tonight, I spoke with enough of the Doms at the club about her. I trust them to look after her almost as closely as I would. Dante is watching out for her too.

I'll speak with Freya and some of the other girls to see if anyone has a room for Lettie. Then I can disappear from her life entirely. I won't even need to monitor her activity. It'll be a clean break.

Redleg will bounce back, and when Boss is ready, I'll bring them together. She'll be angry at me, but ultimately, she'll understand why I couldn't pursue a physical relationship with her.

That's the best I can do.

I wish it felt like enough.

When I pull into my driveway, I reconnect the GPS beacon on my vehicle and scan my home security system for trouble.

Once inside, I kick off my shoes and collapse on the couch. Beside me sit my tablet and laptop, both in their protective cases. In silence, I scroll through my work phone, finding nothing needing urgent attention.

I grab the tablet, leave the laptop behind, and trudge to bed. I should be able to get three hours. Once in my bedroom, I place the tablet on the nightstand alongside my phones, throw my clothes in the hamper, and slip into bed.

Thoughts of Lettie continue hijacking my mind, causing me to toss and turn for a half hour. I hope she's not upset anymore and was able to get some rest, unlike me.

Maybe I should check.

As soon as I verify that she's sleeping peacefully, I'll be able to sleep.

With a few taps on my tablet, I connect to her phone. Before accessing the camera and microphone, I skim her activity from this evening.

Just a few texts. Looks like she was just updating Stella on her first night at Bask. A smile tugs at my face when I read what she wrote about how she teased me, and I nearly broke the front desk. That's brat behavior, but unsurprisingly, I like it from her.

With nothing of concern in her texts, I swap through the rest. A few web searches on BDSM terms throughout the night. Likely as she learned more about the job. Nothing alarming.

Uh-oh. She ordered meal delivery not long after I left her at the hotel.

Shit. I should have ensured she wasn't hungry before I left. Having someone deliver food to her at this hour is risky. Based on the activity on the app, the food was delivered twelve minutes ago.

Without wasting another second, I access the camera and mic on her phone. It takes a moment to connect, but once it does, I can't see anything but the ceiling.

But I hear her.

She's safe.

Country music plays softly in the background. And she's fucking singing again.

Devoid of its usual lightness, her voice is woven with sorrow tonight. I wish I understood why. I never want to hurt her, whether intentionally or not.

She pauses occasionally, and one of those sexy sounds she makes when she's enjoying her food slips through the speaker. A memory of how she closes her eyes when she's savoring a bite slips to the forefront of my mind.

At least she's safe. After plugging in the tablet's power cable, I roll to my side and set it beside me, propping it up on a pillow.

Staring at the screen, I let her sad serenade lull me to sleep.



MY ALARM WAKES me a few hours later. When my eyes spring open, I see the tablet in front of me, still open to Lettie's phone's camera and microphone. But it's not the ceiling like it was when I fell asleep. She's awake, in deep concentration, and gaping at something on the phone.

It's as if she's looking back at me. Even if she isn't, I can pretend.

I blink a few times and rub the sleep from my eyes. The expression Lettie wears as she stares at the screen intrigues

me. I wonder what she's doing. The nibble on her lower lip is enough to propel my curiosity to the point I can't let it go without finding out.

I split the display on my tablet and pull up her screen to identify what she's watching on one side, while still viewing her captivating face on the other.

She's reading an e-book.

Guess she couldn't sleep either.

After a quick glance at the clock, I decide to read along with her for a bit.

It takes me exactly four and a half sentences to realize she's not reading a self-help book. And it's not a biography either. Unless it's the life story of a porn star.

My cock, already half hard because I've just woken up, stiffens more as my skimming comes across words I'm not used to seeing in black and white.

Thrust.

Cock.

Soaking wet pussy.

Choke.

Restraints.

As the scene continues, I put together the pieces. This is one of the books her friend sent her to indoctrinate her into BDSM.

The scene progresses, growing increasingly kinky.

The male character has the female tied to something, restraining her at her wrists and ankles. With her spread out before him, he fucks her furiously. It's written from his perspective, and he's angry with her for some transgression. Seems like a punishment fuck. And he has no intention of letting her come. His hand squeezes her throat tighter, and he leans close to her face. After a rough kiss, he calls her his good little slut.

Fucking hell. This is hot.

I knew those books would have sex, but the level of graphic detail isn't quite what I imagined. No wonder girls love this shit so much.

Instead of advancing to the next page, Lettie flips to the prior. I focus on her expression and realize the camera is moving in slow, up-and-down movements like she doesn't have a good grip on it. Occasionally, her eyes pinch closed. She alternates from biting her lip to opening her mouth for a gasping breath. And then a quiet moan falls from her lips.

Holy fuck.

Lettie's touching herself to this scene.

She likes it. Enough to make herself come at the idea of what's happening on those pages.

Does she want to be restrained? Punished and fucked while being choked?

Those are all things I can do for her.

Wait. No, I fucking can't.

My arousal overpowers my willpower. This is *far* too tempting to resist. The woman I've been obsessed with for weeks is about to make herself come. And I have my favorite view — a fly on the wall.

Without a doubt, it's wrong to jack off to what she's doing without her consent.

Of course, I love to watch. But never without consent.

Never.

Yet I can't keep my hand off my dick.

I have to stop watching her. *Now.*

After closing the app, I turn off the tablet and toss it aside. Rolling onto my back, I pull down the comforter and fist my cock. A guttural moan erupts from the back of my throat as my hips pump my dick into my firm grip. I squeeze the tip, wiping the precum all over the head with the pad of my thumb.

Closing my eyes, I try to push the sight of Lettie on the screen out of my mind. Instead, I replace her with a faceless woman. Someone I don't know. Someone who doesn't exist. Someone I can fuck my fist to without it being a violation of consent.

But it's no use.

Lettie has tattooed herself on my mind, my cock, and my heart.

Rather than using the real-life memories I obtained without her knowledge, I place her in a scene similar to the one in the book.

She'd look like a vision lying on my bed, her blond hair cascading over the dark gray bedding.

I'd beckon her to her knees with a crick of my finger, and she'd obey instantly. Instead of binding her wrists and ankles with leather cuffs, I'd use my rope. The blue bamboo would be soft on her skin and bring out the sparkling hue of her irises. I wouldn't want to mar her beautiful skin beyond red rings that fade quickly. Nothing too painful for her. Not at first. Not until she's ready.

I'd bend her legs at the knees and bind her thigh to her shin with a futo tie. One leg, then the other, my movements would be slow and methodical. I'd press her bent and bound legs apart nice and wide, then add her forearms to the bindings, attaching them to the rope on the top of her thighs. In this position, she'd be restrained perfectly for me to do whatever I want to her.

Taste her.

Tease her.

Punish her.

Please her.

Suck her clit.

Finger her.

Fuck her.

My hips buck up furiously as the vision of her tied up and under my control while crying out in pleasure explodes in my mind, becoming as vibrant as a picture. I work my fist faster and harder over my shaft until my balls draw up with an intense need for release.

A few more tugs, and I spill warm ribbons of cum onto my stomach while moaning her name as if she's mine. As if I'm entitled to call her name.

But I'm not.

The thought rips me from my climax with a biting force.

Violet Holt is not mine.

She'll never be mine.

Even if she weren't off-limits, I wouldn't be worthy of her. What can I offer a woman like Lettie? I'd never be able to keep her happy.

Despite our physical chemistry, we have nothing in common. Hell, I don't have anything in common with anyone, let alone someone twelve years my junior with her whole life ahead of her.

I'd only end up hurting her or fucking it up. Even if I were lucky enough to get her to forgive me for lying about who I am, we'd still never work.

My father's voice cuts through my mind as clearly as if he were in the room with me.

You'll never be worth anything.

Get used to being alone.

Even your mother left to get away from you.

You're not worth my time, boy.

I slink to the shower to wash away the evidence of my obsession with Lettie off my flesh. Unfortunately, the way she implanted herself under my skin isn't something I can scrub away.

The only way to remove her is to cut her out with the precision of a surgeon.

Today, I'll get started on securing suitable housing for her.

And then I'll get the scalpel.

DO VAGINAS ACCEPT EMAILS?

LETTIE

Stella answers the video call with a toothy grin and that scaly lizard sitting on her shoulder. My standard involuntary gag and full-body shudder greet her.

“Violet,” she scolds. “We’ve discussed this. Pumpkin is not amused by your disdain.”

I fake a smile. “Hey, gorgeous human and not-at-all-creepy reptile.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere. You’ve shown your true colors, and they are putrid.” She turns to the bearded dragon devil creature, holding out a leaf of kale for her to munch on. “Isn’t that right, mama’s sweet angel?” The lizard chomps on the leaf.

I may never eat salad again.

“So tell me everything about your first night as a working girl.” She narrows her eyes at me, skewing her head to one side. “You look happy-adjacent.”

“Before we get to the good, the bad, and the confusing, I have something to share. And I think you’ll be exceedingly

proud of me.”

One of her brows arches. “You have my attention.”

A metaphorical fist grabs my stomach and yanks it upward to the back of my throat as shame attempts to steal my moment of personal growth. But I pry myself free of its grasp.

This is something to be celebrated.

“Last night —” I cut myself off with a correction. “Well, technically, this morning,” I close my eyes and blurt out, “I watched porn.”

My eyes remain fastened shut, so I can’t see her response.

“Well, well, well. So the club was so stimulating you had to pop your porn cherry, huh? How brazen.”

I open my eyes and squeal with embarrassment. Shamelessly, Stella waggles her brows at me while shimmying her shoulders. A beaming smile spreads across her face.

“Surprisingly enough, it wasn’t the club so much as it was the book I was reading.”

She nods three times while flashing wide eyes at the screen. “Dish the details, baby. Which book? Why did you need to watch porn when you were reading it?”

My head flops backward, and my cheeks burn. “There was a scene where the main dude tied his sub to a contraption I’d never heard of.”

“Naturally,” she interjects, pointing out my inexperience.

“Yeah, but with the other books, I could more or less figure it out. Or it didn’t matter enough for me to care to look it up.”

“And this one?”

“This scene was so fucking hot steam was coming off my screen. Although I couldn’t picture exactly what was happening, I still had to,” my hands fly to my face to cover my eyes, “take care of business before I could look it up or keep reading.”

“Oh my goodness gracious, Lettie.” Glee lights up her voice.

I can't resist seeing her expression, so I peek between my fingers. She has the crazed look of a serial killer. Eyes huge. Upper lip curled. All that's missing is a hacksaw, rubber gloves, and some black garbage bags, and she'd be ready for an episode of CSI.

“Wait, wait, wait,” she says, her eyes narrowing.

Sensing an interrogation looming, I cringe. “Yes?”

“You watched porn for the first time *and* played *Clitar Hero* while reading a smutty book? Isn't that a first as well?”

Returning to my cozy hideout behind my palms, I nod, far too ashamed to speak.

“Lettie! I love this for you. It's momentous. Do you feel the chains of religious imprisonment loosening?”

Her mention of the cause of my shame seems to smack me out of needing to hide. I drop my hands, finally brave enough to face her.

Swallowing, I nod a few times and finally agree. “I do.”

I was raised thinking that masturbating is unclean and would sully my body, making me unfit for my future husband and unworthy of God's love. And pornography of any form — written, visual, auditory — would have been far worse.

Over the last few years, my deep-rooted shame of pleasuring myself has been challenging to deal with. It's taken a concentrated effort to work through the discomfort enough to enjoy it, but I have. Mostly. At least until it's over when the guilt sets in.

But the idea of doing it in response to pornography of any type? I never thought I'd be able to tackle that.

“Only a few weeks in a new place, and you're already emerging from your cocoon. How does it feel to take charge of your sexuality? Do you see your body as an instrument of pleasure yet?”

I hold my hand up, palm facing the floor, and wobble it back and forth. “Sort of. I’m not all the way there. I still felt guilty as hell, queasy even. But at least I did it.”

“Oh my gosh, Lettie. I’m so proud of you,” she squeals and claps.

The noise and movement startle the devil dragon on her shoulder. Pumpkin scurries down her arm and off the screen.

Like the irrational nutjob I am, I instantly bolt up, fully expecting the lizard to come around the edge of my propped-up phone any second now.

I’m a mess.

As soon as common-sense returns, I realize my dumpy hotel room is still sans lizard and sit back down on the bed.

When I look back at Stella, she’s laughing at me from behind her cupped hand. “Did you honestly think she was going to come out of the phone onto your lap?”

“Shut up. My fear of reptiles isn’t rational. It’s a phobia.”

When she’s done laughing and pointing at me, she gathers herself in a yoga lotus pose. She even pinches her fingers, hovering them slightly over her knees, and takes a steadying breath to rid herself of the remaining giggles.

Drama queen.

“Where were we? Ah yes. My best friend in life, sexually repressed Violet Anastasia Holt, has popped two more cherries. A watching porn cherry *and* masturbating to book smut cherry. Which leads me to two questions.”

“Question one?”

“Did you also masturbate while watching porn? If so, that’s a third cherry. Popping three cherries in one night is big news. I may need to send you a gift basket.”

With a tight grin, I close my eyes and nod my silent confession. “I couldn’t help it, Stella. It was so fucking hot.”

“Holy shit! May I *please* post about this on the TC? The public deserves to know.”

“Shut your face hole,” I tease.

She holds up her pointer finger toward the roof. “Hold on. Hold on. There’s a fourth cherry.”

“What?”

“You worked a shift in a sex club, where you likely witnessed sex in person. That’s cherry-worthy.” She leans forward, lowering her jaw. “Eh? Eh? Whadaya say, kid? Four cherries? Eh?”

My laugh echoes off the grungy walls. “Okay, I’ll give you that. Four cherries in one night.”

“I’m high-fiving you and sending all the sexy energy to you through the interwebs. I’m so fucking psyched for you. Only a few more cherries to go, and you’ll no longer be *Sexually Repressie Bessie*.”

“I accept your sexy energy. But please, let’s move on. We have other topics on the agenda.”

Her mouth rounds, and she bounces a few times with impatience or an objection. “Oh, wait, wait, wait. I have one more question before we go to the next item on the docket.”

“Hold, please. Let me consult with counsel.” I pantomime covering the nonexistent microphone and having a side bar with no one. “Continue with your cross-examination, counselor.”

“Thank you. My question is this. What position and or scene description had you so hot and bothered while simultaneously confused enough to look at porn, i.e., Satan’s Netflix?”

I palm my forehead and groan playfully before dragging my hand down my entire face. “Okay, don’t judge me.”

Cringing, she sucks in a gulp of air, making a hissing sound. “Oh, I hate to tell you this, but that’s a foregone conclusion. I’ve been judging you since the day we first met when you asked to borrow a pencil from Elizabeth Ranne by writing her a note with an actual pencil.”

I cross my arms, shooting her a scathing look. “Very fucking funny. That never happened.”

“Your denial is adorable, but I have the note. It’s been hidden in a shoe box ever since. I kept it as proof of your mental state in the event that I was found murdered. I wanted to be sure the cops could look at the most obvious suspect first. And don’t think you can find the letter and destroy it. I’ve sent copies to Wendy Hendricks and Katy Curio.”

Despite raising my middle finger at the screen, my rapidly shaking shoulders reveal how humorous I find her crazy diatribe. “Back to your question, please. Stay on topic. I have only so many hours before I have to go back to work.”

“Excellent point. I apologize. Please describe what scene sent you tumbling down a porn hole.”

My nose wrinkles involuntarily. “That sounds horrible.” I shake my head and give her the answer she’s seeking. “In the scene, the main love interest had her tied to a bench of sorts. Her ass was in the air, and there was room for one of the other men,” I clear my throat and lean closer to the screen so I can whisper, “to position himself underneath her and put his P in her V. Meanwhile, the hero was having P in the A sex with her, and a third man was in her mouth.”

“Nice. Triple penetration with a side of Eiffel Tower, assuming the hero and the guy getting a BJ did a high five over her back.” Her eyes flit to the ceiling as if she’s visualizing it. “Did you find that position online? If not, I’m sure I can locate it for you.”

I wave my hand. “That won’t be necessary. I found something that gave me the gist of it.”

There go her overzealous eyebrows again, and she adds a purring sound. “Hot, huh?”

“I had no idea you could have sex with two men before. Down there.” I motion to my lower body. “It’s not hard to imagine one in your mouth and another in your... ahem. But two down there at the same time? I couldn’t visualize how that

would work. Logistically.” I waft my pajama top around, fanning myself.

“Plus, the bench thing. That’s even more to imagine. Do you remember what type of bench it was?”

“No. And I don’t care.” My head falls back, and I jokingly put my hand on my chest. “Fucking hell, that was hot. I can’t even imagine what that would feel like. Two at the same time?”

“Oh, it’s amazing.”

My jaw drops to my chest. “Seriously? You’ve done that?”

She bites her lip. “Oh yeah. And you can even get two in the same hole.”

“Shut up. You lie.”

She holds up her hand, palm facing the screen. “Honest.”

“We’ll need to have an entire conversation about this. But later. I need to get your feedback on something else first. And I have some shit to do before work. I’m starting to feel a major time crunch.”

She gives me a salute. “Major time crunch.”

Damn. “I walked right into that one.”

“You so did.” She quickly grows serious. “Now, what’s up?”

After taking a deep breath, I tell her about Freya and our conversation about the sexual tension and how she casually mentioned there’s no rule about staff being involved, including dungeon monitors. Then I quickly pivot to how he insisted on following me home and walking me to my door like he’s my personal bodyguard.

As I speak, she nods in long, contemplative movements. “Where’s your head? What are you thinking?”

“Stella, I don’t freaking know what to think. I’m utterly confused. On one hand, he treats me like this fragile, precious creature in dire need of salvation. All the while, I literally *feel* how profoundly he wants me beyond a shadow of a doubt. His

desire is so potent it surrounds me like a fog of pheromones.” I massage my temples. “I get how that must sound ludicrous. I mean, what do I know about desire, right?”

“I didn’t say that. You’re a smart girl. You’ve always had loads of empathy. If you think he’s attracted to you, he most likely is. I don’t see that as the area where your wires get crossed.”

That makes it marginally more digestible. She’s not the type to give me lip service. Never has been.

“But on the other hand, he makes up lies to avoid being with me, which is the definition of *he’s just not into you.*”

“Right. I agree.”

“Why does he care so much if I’m safe or not? Who am I to him?” I throw my hands out to the sides and let my head lop backward, eyes rolling toward the heavens. “If he isn’t interested in me romantically, why does he bend over backward to ensure I have a job? That I have enough food, money, gas? Pay for the urgent care visit for my broken toes? Take me grocery shopping? Watch movies with me and text me so much? Follow me home and walk me to the door for my safety? *Why?* He does all that and then kisses the ever-loving life out of me, telling me he wants to bend me over the hood of his car. But then he’s like,” I lower my voice, “no, nope, no thanks.” I clench my jaw, letting my eyes fall back to the screen while huffing, “Gah! Who does that?”

Stella’s eyes fill with rage, and her fingers are cast into a curved shape like she’s holding a crystal ball, about to crush it with her bare hands.

Oh shit.

I said things I shouldn’t have said.

She seethes, “Money? Food? Gas? *The fuck?*”

“Don’t be mad. I made it clear I’d be paying him back for everything.”

After giving me the death stare to end all death stares, she forces me to spill the entire story. So I tell her the truth, the

whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Mortification wraps me from head to toe like a plush Snuggie.

When I'm done explaining, I put my head down, awaiting her judgment.

Instead of yelling at me, she's quiet for a long time. Too long.

Stella and I aren't known for silence.

When I muster enough courage to glimpse at the screen, she's dabbing her eyes with a tissue.

"Is it allergies, or are you crying?"

"I'm crying, you dumbass." She snuffles. "Why didn't you call me? I'd have helped you."

"I know you would have. And that's exactly why I didn't ask."

"What do you mean?"

"I need to do this on my own. This move. This job. This," I gesture up and down my body, "whatever this mess is inside me. I have to figure it out for myself. Sink or swim." My cheeks puff up with air. "You've worked hard to earn enough money to live on your own and build your business from the ground up. You're following your dreams, and it's beautiful. I couldn't be happier for you. But I also can't take any of that from you. I didn't earn it. So yes, I hid it from you, and I'm sorry for upsetting you. But I'd do it again the same way."

"Yet you'll take money from a stranger. How is that better?"

Fantastic question, and it's one I've turned around in my head enough to formulate what I hope is a partially coherent answer.

"James didn't know me enough to be disappointed in me. All he saw is a woman who needed help. That's it. He doesn't have a clue about all the shit I've been through." I close my eyes and purse my lips. "Well, he didn't at first. He knows most of it now. But my point is this... he didn't give me charity because he felt sorry for all I've been through. He did

it to be nice. And further, his judgment wasn't important. Not at first. It is now, and that's where I get mega confused."

"I'm not following."

"Because my thoughts are convoluted at best. Let me try again." Deep breath, in and out. "If a random person — and he was at the time — sees me as a failure, it's not the same as you or Mama seeing me that way. I accepted his help because I was starving and at the end of my rope. He was there, offered help, and although it hurt to accept the handout, I did. It was either that or admit my failure to the people I love. But whether he saw me as a screwup didn't matter. For all I knew, I'd never see him again. But for you..." My words trail off as tears fill my eyes.

"I think I get it. But you should know I wouldn't have seen you differently. Your mother? Yes. She's a special kind of bitch. Her nose is so high in the air she could drown in a rainstorm. But I'd *never* make you feel bad for needing a hand. We don't have that type of relationship."

"Stella, I know that. I really do. This isn't a reflection on you and our friendship. It's all on me."

She tips her head and waits silently, encouraging me to continue at my own pace.

"I was foolish enough to think that if I left, I'd be able to make it without any help. I'd show Mama she was wrong about me. I wasn't destined to be a disappointment like she always predicted. Like my birth mother. And I'd make Papa proud." My chin wobbles. "And everyone back home would see me as a success, including you. But if I asked for help, all that would be gone."

She picks up her disgusting reptile friend and cuddles it to her chest. I'm too emotionally drained to give her shit about it. I barely flinch.

"I understand, baby. I don't see myself in that category. I'd be part of your team, you know? But I get why you viewed it that way. After all the shit your mama said to you for your entire life, I know why you need to do this yourself. But for

the love of melted cheese, don't lump me in with her anymore. I'm on *Team Lettie*. I'll help you stick it to her. Put a hair right in her biscuit. Okay?"

An honest smile creases my lips.

"I mean it. If you need someone to drive the getaway car or to show up with a shovel to bury the body, I'm there."

"I'm so lucky to have you."

Her nods grow in size and speed. "You really, *really* are. I'm fantastic. Everyone says so."

Lightness returns, lifting my spirits. "Do you forgive me?"

"I forgive you. Because I'm the captain of Team Lettie. Even when our team does dumb shit because the coach is a hot mess."

"Thanks."

She heaves a weary sigh, one side of her head falling toward her shoulder. "Now, with that out of the way, back to James. If I'd have known how he found you, the advice I gave you about him would have differed."

Oh no.

I shirk back from my phone as if I could hide from what she's about to say. "How so?"

"He sees you as a project, babe. Classic *White Knight Syndrome*."

I don't answer. I can't. It's too painful.

And shameful.

In my heart of hearts, I know she's right. And it freaking sucks.

"You were the damsel in distress, so you naturally felt a connection to him. Who doesn't want a hero? He rode in on his horse, threw money and coffee around, and saved you. That made him feel good and, likely, a bit responsible for you. He's clearly a good person, so he doesn't want to see anything bad happen to you. Sadly, though, you've boxed yourselves

into the roles of savior and save-ee. And because you're you — the most beautiful woman on the planet — of course, he's attracted to you, which explains the kissing. But he's not going to let himself go any further because he sees you as dependent on him."

"Which isn't desirable," I finish her thought.

She shrugs her shoulders. "Not so much." Her breath expels through perfectly rounded lips.

"Well that's freaking depressing."

"In light of this, do his actions make more sense?"

"They do. It all makes sense." I collapse backward like a dead fish, even kicking my legs and jerking about. Tantrum mode activated. "This fucking sucks."

"Hey, it's fine, baby. You didn't have enough time to form a deep connection. It was superficial. Just do a good job at the club, earn that money, pay him back, and move the fuck on."

"And hide my face every time he walks by."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a pathetic charity case to him. This is so embarrassing. It makes so much sense. I can't believe I didn't see it before."

"You didn't want to see it. Who would? Even for those who aren't trying to prove something to their bitchy, judgmental shrew mothers, it's hard to admit something like that."

"Truth."

"So don't hide from him. Just be yourself."

"What does that mean? Who the fuck am I if not the dumb ass, naive charity project who was reckless enough to move to another state with a tiny savings account, which she ate up in a month and then needed a stupid fucking man to pull her from the hole she dug for herself?"

"If I could teleport to Florida right now, I would. And I'd smack the daylight out of you. I'd tie you up — not in the sexy

way — and torture the hell out of you until you stop talking so much shit about yourself. And we wouldn't have the luxury of safe words.”

She cracks me up, even if she did threaten me with torture. “Has anyone told you that you'd make a fabulous Domme?”

She shrugs and juts her lower lip. “Perhaps one or two people.”

“I can't wait to hear what your kinks are. Especially now that I understand some of them. So we'll circle back to that once I've had time to digest everything else we've feasted on today.”

“*Oh.* That reminds me.”

“What?”

“I found a kink test. It's an online thing that will help you figure out what you're into. You interested?”

“Yes, please. Clearly, we know DP has my attention. I wonder what else may strike my fancy.”

“Violet Holt, you're turning into a whole new bitch before my eyes, and I'm here for it. Bravo.”

“Settle down. Don't get too excited.” I grab my bottle of water from the nightstand and chug away.

“Too late. I'm already panting, and my nipples are hard.”

I attempt to hold the water in my mouth, but I fail. Dribbles fall down my chin, which makes me laugh harder until water shoots out onto my phone screen.

“Wow. I didn't know I sat in the splash zone. They should label these seats better.”

“Apologies,” I retort through lingering guffaws.

Once she finally has a straight face and my screen has been dried, she wraps up our little life lesson. “Okay, so tonight when you go to the club, you won't be ashamed. Just be your fantastic fucking self. You'll make friends, be sexy as hell, flirt, or whatever you feel like doing. After a few weeks, you'll have enough money to pay James back without taking food

out of your mouth. And you'll move on from this. Problem solved. Got it?"

"Yes, mistress. But one question?"

She points her thumb and forefinger at me like a gun while making a clicking sound with her mouth. "Shoot."

"Who is breaking the news to my vagina that James isn't going to be visiting?"

Stella waves her hands flamboyantly. "I got this. Say no more. What's your vagina's email address?"

CHAPTER 22

MISSION SUCCESS BUT FEELS SHITTY AF

TOMER

My pace on the treadmill falters, causing me to drift back along the belt. Shaking it off, I increase my pace while my mind races faster than my feet.

Thoughts of Lettie have plagued me all day, and there's a hollow ache under my rib cage I can't shake.

It was too hard to focus on my work, so I came down to the gym at HQ to clear my mind. Thus far, it's not working.

I still don't know what happened last night to cause such a dramatic shift in Lettie's demeanor. I was hopeful we could continue to be friends, but now it seems that's not the case.

Perhaps she no longer needs me since she got the job.

That doesn't feel right, given all our past conversations, but what else could it be?

You've really done it this time, boy.

I block out my father's voice in my conscience and open my eyes so I don't bust ass on this damn machine and give myself first-degree treadmill burn.

Pushing my body harder than I have in a while, I up the speed and lengthen my strides. Sweat pours down my neck, adding to my raging irritability.

After wiping my neck with a gym towel, I swipe across my phone screen to bring up my text thread with Dante. I need to take a break from Bask. It's time to finish removing her from my life.

The thought cuts me deep, leaving a jagged scar from my sternum to my stomach. The only thing that dulls the pain is knowing I was able to help her when she needed a hand. Since she's Redleg family, I stepped in. No one can fault me for that.

Now, it's time to move on. Disappear into the background, which is exactly where I belong.

Not being a part of her life anymore rubs thick grains of salt into that gaping wound down my torso.

Fortunately, I have a metric shit ton of work to do at Redleg to keep my mind occupied. After I finish this exercise break, I'll shower and return to my lair. And I won't be leaving early tonight.

Or anytime soon.

Klein and I have mountains of tasks to handle. I've tasked him with running background checks on a large group of job applicants. Boss is adding more bodyguards to the Redleg family to keep up with the influx of business coming our way. He's forming a new squad that we've affectionately started calling C-team.

Meanwhile, I'll handle issues from the guards in the field, along with mountains of shit that keeps things running smoothly. I'm also up to my eyes in drafting the specifications document and project plan for the home security system rollout.

This is going to take a long time with only Klein and me handling it. Fortunately, we have the design basics established for the system we use for Redleg employees. Now, we just need to tweak it for mass usage and scale it up. We'll need to

conduct training on installation and monitoring once it's ready. But we're a long way from that point.

Nearing the end of my workout, I lower the incline and slow the speed for a quick cool down. While my heart rate slows, I finally tap out my message to Dante.

Time to make it official.

ME

I won't be able to cover any shifts for a while. Busy at work. Keep an eye on Violet for me.

DANTE

Should I put you on the schedule for next week? Or leave you off?

ME

Leave me off. I'll let you know if that changes.

DANTE

You got it. And don't worry about Violet. We'll take care of her.

I GRIT MY TEETH, reminding myself that he isn't saying that with innuendo. I made my position about her clear. Dante won't cross me on this, and neither will the others.

I bring up a blank message, filling in Freya's contact information.

ME

Have you heard of anyone at the club who needs a roommate or has a room they'd consider renting out?

FREYA

Who is this?

ME

It's James from Bask.

FREYA

Oh hey, handsome. Didn't know you had my number. Do you need a place to stay? My bed is always open for you. Strike that. My stance on this has changed in the last 24 hours.

ME

It's not for me. And what's that supposed to mean?

FREYA

So it's not an act. You're truly clueless about people, aren't you?

ME

Do you know of anyone with an available room or not?

FREYA

I might. What's it worth to you?

ME

Quit fucking around, or I'll get Jesse to dole out some punishments. And it won't be the good kind.

FREYA

They're all the good kind to me. But I can sense you're getting heated, so I'll cut to the chase. I have a room I was considering renting out. However, I have exacting standards. So I'd need to know who it is before I commit. Need to ensure we'd be a good fit.

ME

It's Violet.

FREYA

My precious little Lettie needs a place to stay? She's as sweet as a Georgia peach. Unless she's a slob in disguise, I'd be happy to rent her my guest room. We can even carpool. Why didn't she mention it?

ME

She's stubborn and proud. To her own detriment.

FREYA

I'll talk to her about it tonight.

ME

Don't mention that I'm the one who told you about this.

FREYA

Interesting.

ME

On second thought, is there any way you can ask her if she's interested without letting her know that anyone revealed she needs a place?

FREYA

Interesting on steroids.

ME

Can you?

FREYA

Yeah, I'll just ask her if she knows anyone who's interested in renting a room at my place and see what she says.

ME

That's perfect.

FREYA

I'll come up with a way for you to pay me back.

ME

No, you won't. And speaking of paying... if you need a deposit or first and last month's rent, come to me. Don't tell her. I'll cover the costs. And if the room is unfurnished, I'll provide anything she needs to be comfortable. Bed, furniture, TV, whatever. Just don't tell her it's from me because she won't accept it.

FREYA

Speechless. And not gonna lie, swooning a bit.

ME

What is that supposed to mean?

FREYA

Never mind. I'll see you tonight.

ME

Not coming in for a while.

FREYA

Oh? You're leaving her to fend for herself so soon?

ME

She doesn't need me.

FREYA

No, but the heart wants what it wants.

ME

Keep an eye on her for me. If any of the members try anything with her, get Dante or Jesse to intervene.

FREYA

Yes, Master. How else may I please you?

ME

Nothing else.

FREYA

Sigh. It's just too bad I'm not blond, twenty-four with a perfect body, big blue eyes, and don't have you wrapped around my little finger.

ME

Choosing to ignore that. Call me if there's any trouble with her. And let me know what she says about the room.

FREYA

Yes, sir. I will.

I PUT THE PHONE AWAY, a grin finally threatening to overtake my face since I'm one step closer to getting Lettie suitable lodging.

A few minutes later, as I wash the sweat off in the shower, a sense of contentment settles on my skin.

This is going to work. Freya's a smart choice. I trust her to look after Lettie like a sister would, and she'll keep me updated on her needs.

This is a terrific plan for Lettie.

Steady employment. Safe place to live. And I have an idea for something that'll make her exercise routine less risky; it should entice her because of her love of music. All the risks to her safety that I can control will be minimized.

Then I can move on without a heavy conscience.

My life will return to normal. I'll focus on work, using the club for stress relief when time permits — only when she's not working. Eventually, things at Redleg will steady, and I'll bring her together with her father.

It's perfect.

Mission success. The road was bumpy at first, but I pushed through and forged a clear path.

Once the plan falls the rest of the way into place, everyone will be happy.

Everyone but me.

NICE NIGHT FOR A SWIM

LETTIE

My second night on the job was a success, if I do say so myself.

I strolled to the bathroom twice, sashaying through the main room of the club without wanting to cover my eyes or giggle like a twelve-year-old at the vast display of naked flesh.

And for bonus points, I didn't spend my break hiding in a bathroom stall hyperventilating into a paper bag.

See? Total success.

I'm a half step away from kink master status.

Side note: I'm unsure if that's a real thing.

Like the champion best friend she is, Stella made me promise to text her once when I finish working and again when I'm safe at the hotel. As soon as I'm in my car with the doors locked, I send her the first message and put my phone on the charger.

While pulling out of the club parking lot, I wave to Tim. He's standing at the edge of the parking lot, ensuring

everybody gets to their cars safely. Seems like a nice guy.

Once on the road, I turn up the radio and belt out song after song like I'm performing a private concert for my steering wheel. As it always does when I'm driving, my mind wanders. Try as I may to stop them, thoughts of James invade my psyche, bringing a fresh bite of humiliation.

I practically threw myself at him. And he was humoring me. Too nice to tell me he wasn't really interested in dating a naive country girl like me. Instead, he invented that cockamamie story about not being able to date coworkers. Did he think I wouldn't find out? For a smart guy, that was an idiotic move.

But it's like Stella always says — assholes don't think, they stink.

My eyes continuously scan the mirrors as I cruise along. It takes a moment before it dawns on me that I'm looking for that annoying handsome shithead, expecting him to be following me home like last night.

Could I be more pathetic?

As I pull into the hotel parking lot, I glance around more than I normally do, looking between the cars and in the tree line. My heart rate picks up, and my breathing grows choppy.

Am I hoping to see him, or am I scared of what goes bump in the night?

Either way, damn him for causing the paranoia.

All that talk about my safety and this being a sketchy neighborhood is plain ol' messing with my head. By the time I exit the car, I'm a hairsbreadth from jumping out of my skin with nerves. The pain of my healing toes barely registers over the panic assaulting me with each step toward my room.

About halfway to my room, it dawns on me that I left my phone on the charger. *Argh*. I spin on my heel to hustle back for it, but when I do, a glimpse of dark gray darts from the corner of my field of vision. In the shape of a person. I think.

Maybe.

Chills dance along my spine, and gooseflesh peppers my skin.

Ignoring my jackhammering heartbeat, I slink back toward my car. Not wanting to fumble for my keys in the dark parking lot, I stop with my back to the side of the hotel and fetch them from my purse.

Something isn't right. I feel like I'm being watched.

That's crazy, Lettie. You've been here more than a month, and no one has bothered you once.

With my key fob securely in my hand, I advance the rest of the way to my car as fast as my throbbing toes will allow. Another glance around me, and then I duck into my car, swipe the phone from the console and pop back up. As my head clears the hood of the car, another flash of something in the distance draws my attention.

"Hello? Is someone there?" I call out into the night.

There's no answer, and I have no clue why I thought there would be. If someone were poised to attack, why on God's green earth would they announce themselves?

It's official. I'd be the first one killed in a horror movie.

I clear my head with a few blinks, lock the car, and propel my ass toward my room. The longer I stay out here in the wee hours of the morning, the more delusional my thoughts will get. That's some type of unwritten law of nature.

Somewhere in the distance, a couple is arguing, and their voices echo off the nearby pool deck. Like the nosy bitch I am, I strain to hear the topic of tonight's battle royale. Free entertainment is one of the few perks of living at a trashy hotel.

When my feet stutter to a near stop to give me a better listen, a scuffing noise comes from behind me, sounding like rubber-soled shoes on the pavement.

My heart skitters to a stop, my pulse stalling out.

Someone's following me.

I whip my head to the sides, searching for someone who might be in the hotel's common area — an ally or salvation. But it's all quiet tonight, except for the arguing couple. They're on the second level, so they won't be much help if I'm about to be attacked.

Do I fight or flee?

My toes are still killing me, so running seems foolhearted. As I inhale, preparing to fight, I realize how paranoid I've become.

This is ludicrous. If someone were out to get me, I'd have done been gotten by now.

It's all in my head. I'm overreacting, in accordance with the Violet Holt Charter, Sections 3-10.

Annoyed with myself, I take three ambling steps forward as an idea takes shape. If I turn around unexpectedly and no one is there, it'll prove I'm not being followed. Right? Then I won't be in a tizzy all night long, compelled to barricade my hotel room door with my dresser.

Genius plan, Lettie.

I lurch another few steps, feigning casualness. In a rush, I spin around with my fists held in front of me for protection. I even add a playful "ah-ha" to sell my fictitious gotcha moment.

To my astonishment, it's *not* fictitious.

A man is there.

Standing about thirty feet behind me, wearing a dark gray hoodie and staring right at me.

I straighten my spine, roll back my shoulders, and seethe with rage. "James! What the *hell* are you doing following me? Are ya tryin' to give me a heart attack?"

He slumps forward, hunching in on himself. That's the posture of a busted man right there.

In a huff, I stomp toward him, not giving two shits that my toes are screaming at me. As I approach, he removes the hood

from his head and holds his palms out in front of him to placate me.

Good luck trying to calm me down tonight, buddy.

Before I get too close, I plant my feet and skewer him with an angry glare. “Well?”

“Hi, Lettie.”

My eye twitches. “Hi, Lettie? That’s what you have to say for yourself? *Hi, Lettie?*”

The simple shrug he offers as a response would be comical if I weren’t spittin’ mad and ready to blow my top.

“You scared the shit out of me. Why are you following me like a creepy stalker?”

He purses his lips, head sloping to one side like a curious puppy dog. “I’m not stalking you. I only want to make sure —”

I cut him off, finishing his sentence. “Make sure I’m safe. Yeah, yeah. Heard it before. The thing is, I’m startin’ to think the person I need protection from is you.”

His entire frame rocks backward like I drove the pointy tip of my shoe into his gut. “I’d *never* hurt you, Lettie. I’m looking after you. Your safety is my only concern. Believe me.”

“Believe you?” I bring my fists to my hips, noticing his eyes follow the movement. “Oh that’s rich coming from you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

With barbed wire wrapped around my words, I demand, “Why did you lie to me, James?”

His face falls, eyes straying from mine. He tucks his hands into his rear pockets and mumbles, “About what?”

I chuckle humorlessly and move a step closer. “Are there so many things you’ve lied about that you’re unclear which one I’m referring to?”

He blows out a huge gush of air, muffling a groan, then tips his chin toward my room. “Get going, Lettie. It’s late and unsafe out here.”

Not this fucking shit again.

Like it usually does, his steady, commanding tone spurs me to comply. Involuntarily, I suck my lips into my mouth, aiming to silence my sarcastic retort. It doesn’t work to stop me from responding, but it does dial down my sass.

“James, I don’t need an escort to my room. Please don’t talk to me like I’m a child. I’m a capable adult. We’ve discussed this before.”

He rocks back on his heels, muttering under his breath like he did in the club last night.

Determined to get answers, I take yet another step closer. “Why did you lie to me about the club’s rules on dating? Did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

A glimpse of pain slips behind his eyes, weakening my resolve a smidgen. But I bottle that shit up and stick a cork in it. *I’m not weak*. He lied to me, and he damn well better tell me why.

“I deserve an answer. Your behavior is confusing and bizarre. You like me. You don’t like me. You want to kiss me. You don’t want to kiss me. You worry about my safety. You lie to get out of pursuing something with me. And now you show up here at three thirty in the damn morning? You’re giving me so much whiplash I’m gonna need a chiropractor to treat it, but my health insurance hasn’t kicked in yet.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Scoffing, I shake my head. “Try the truth. If you weren’t interested in me, why didn’t you just say so?” My hands fly to the sides of my head, and my fingers curve with tension. “But then why are you here if you’re not interested? It doesn’t make sense. Make it make sense.”

“I can’t make it make sense. I would if I could. *Fuck*. I want to, but I can’t.” His voice is wrought with barely restrained intensity. The flat, emotionless tone he often has is

gone. He's about to boil over with something. Something strong.

"You're not responsible for me. I'm not a helpless kid in need of a savior."

"A kid? Is *that* how you think I see you?"

My hands fall to my sides. "I don't know what to think."

He moves close, his chest brushing up against mine. I jut out my chin and refuse to back down.

In a deep, sultry voice, he grits out, "If you knew even half the thoughts I had about you, you'd know I don't see you like a kid. Not at all."

Gulp.

"Then why did you lie about the no-dating rule? *Dammit.* Why does everyone lie to me?" I stamp my foot, and it sends a jolt of pain from my broken toes all the way to my hip. "Oh, fuck. Ow. Ow. *Ow.*"

"You need to get off your feet. Go to your room, Lettie."

My eyes threaten to bulge out of my skull. All thoughts of the pain evaporate in an instant. "Excuse me? Are you seriously telling me to go to my room like you're my daddy or somethin'?"

He bends close, putting his face right in mind. "Go to your room on your own, or I'll pick you up and put you there."

The typical reaction I have to him — where I blindly do anything he asks — vanishes.

Instead, I jab my index finger into his chest and hold his stare. "Stop telling me what to do. You ain't my daddy. I don't have one of those anymore."

He lowers his forehead, the intensity in his eyes reaching molten levels. "Last chance. Go to your room, Violet."

Fire ignites in my veins as my need for independence courses through me. "Is that your Dom voice? Are you tryin' to make me obey you? 'Cause I'm not feeling very obedient

right now. You're not my Dom, remember? And this ain't the club."

He mashes his teeth together, his jaw clicking under the strain. Against my will, my body reacts. My core clenches, and my pulse thumps wildly in my neck.

James is cute when he's a little dorky. He's adorable when he's flustered and doesn't know what to say. He's attractive when he's caring for me or giving me glimpses of his intelligence.

But an angry James is a scorching inferno of sex appeal. His eyes could melt the sun. The flare and constriction of his nostrils from his angry breaths might make me detonate.

So *this* is why Freya loves being a brat.

When he doesn't react to my outburst, I roll my eyes and tear off toward my room in a dramatic show. My little piggies hurt with each clomp of my foot, but I'm too angry to be bothered.

Angry or sexually frustrated?

Probably both.

Yep, it's both.

James doesn't speak, but I hear and feel him trailing behind me. Of course he is. Because why would he take a hint? He probably doesn't even realize I'm upset. Just a normal night for Captain Clueless of the USS Baffling.

And I'm not even going to mentally salute myself for that one.

Several feet before arriving at my door, I freeze, my posture going rigid. On my left is an outdoor hallway leading to the laundry room and a pop machine. On the right is a pathway to the pool. A flickering light inside the pool gives off a blue-green glow that flashes dark every few seconds. The color is hauntingly similar to James's eyes.

It's calling to me, tempting me to dive in, clothes and all. For the simple purpose of disobeying him and pushing his damn buttons.

The nerve of him. Go to my room? What am I? A child?

Fuck that.

Without thinking it through, I abruptly launch myself down the path leading to the pool. When I get to the gate, I propel it open with far too much force, and it slams behind me, causing an awful racket.

“Where are you going?” he calls out.

I flip him off over my shoulder.

Mature and classy. Always a lady. That’s me. Mama would be so proud. I’ve become the trash she always thought I was.

Fuck her. And fuck him.

At the closest patio table, I throw down my purse and reach down to remove my sandals, hopping slightly on one foot.

Not sure why I’m about to jump in the pool. Lord knows when it was last cleaned. Knowing me, I’ll end up with dysentery or cholera. At a minimum, gonorrhea.

Knowing James, he won’t let me get in. And a growing part of me wants to see how far I can push him. I’m embracing my wild side and testing out this whole bratty thing.

Is it immature? Probably.

But it’s not exactly mature to lie to someone like he did, now is it? And then to refuse to explain when confronted? Childish as fuck.

Mama always said to treat others the way you wish to be treated. So I’m teaching him that lesson.

Rationalization level: Expert.

I hear the pool gate slam behind me as I pull my blouse over my head, leaving me topless except for my bra. When I reach around my back to unzip my skirt, a warm, firm hand grips my wrist, stopping me.

His commanding voice pours over me. “Stop it this instant, Violet. You’re *not* fucking going in that pool.”

Wanna bet?

CHAPTER 24

**BOLD STRATEGY,
COTTON. LET'S SEE IF IT
PAYS OFF**

LETTIE

I wiggle my hand, trying to break my wrist free while leveying him with a fierce glare from over my shoulder. “I can do what I want. And right now, I wanna skinny dip.”

Bucking my hips backward, I brush him off and lunge forward. The motion catches him off guard enough for me to break his hold. In those precious few seconds of freedom, I finish unzipping my skirt.

Right as the waistband clears my hips, his hands are there. With one rigid palm on each hip, he holds my skirt up while pressing himself flush against my backside. There’s a bite to his touch as his anger and desire sear into my flesh.

And yet, I’ve never felt more powerful. It’s madness.

Burrowing his face into the curve of my neck, he inhales deeply. My skin pebbles as he trails his lips over my sensitive skin.

His warm breath fans across my neck as he utters a threat against my flesh. “If you take off that skirt, you’ll end up with an imprint of my palm on both your ass cheeks.”

I've never heard him use *that* voice.

So rich, deep, and smooth.

My core tightens, and my breasts heave with my choppy breaths. His breathing is equally frenzied, and the sound echoes around the pool deck, making it sound illicit.

I have no clue why I do it, but I press my ass backward, thrusting it against him. This time, it isn't to buck him off, but to tease him. The thin fabric of my barely-hanging-on skirt does nothing to block the thick bulge in the front of his jeans.

Allowing myself to revel in the feel of him this close, I slam my eyes closed and trap the air in my lungs. When he doesn't stop me from rubbing against him, I add another pass, curving my hips in the opposite direction.

An honest to goodness growl leaves him. This man is a caged animal, fighting against his restraints and ready to attack.

Knowing the power I hold over him is intoxicating. And I want more.

Testing him further, I cross one of my hands across my chest to tug down one strap of my bra. "And what will happen if I take off my bra?"

"You sure you want to play this game?" he challenges, still firmly holding me in place by my hips.

"I'm not sure about anything where you're concerned. Except how desperately I want you and how furious you've made me."

Strangely, my confession surprises me. By now, I should be used to whatever thoughts are in my head flying out of my mouth around him.

His only response is a low rumble followed by a vigorous inhale. I can't hold back the defiant grin that splays over my face.

With his hands still fastened onto my hips, I have him in a predicament. He can't physically stop me from removing my

bra *and* hold up my skirt at the same time. If he lets go with one hand, I'll overpower him and yank down my skirt.

The excitement of defying him consumes me, mingling with the reckless euphoria pulsating through my veins.

I'm playing with fire. But I don't want to stop. I need to see this through. To prove something.

To me? To him?

It doesn't matter.

Before I make my move to force his hand, I swirl my hips, dragging my ass against his dick again. Tingles set off low in my belly, making my clit throb and a shudder traverse my entire body.

He holds my hips tighter, halting my movements. But he doesn't push me away. He keeps me tucked against his erection. *Hard.*

A moan bubbles up my throat, with no trace of my customary shame to stop it from escaping.

For once, I don't care who knows how wanton I am.

With my hands free, I bring them up to my breasts, squeezing the cups gently before skimming my fingertips toward my cleavage. Given our height difference and body positioning, he can see over my shoulder and down the front of my body. He makes no attempt to hide how carefully he's studying my movements.

Makes sense, given he likes to watch.

When I find the plastic clasp between my breasts, I work it between the fingers of both hands.

"Don't do it, Lettie."

"Can't call it skinny dipping if I leave it on, now can I?"

"People could see you." His words are a warning, but his tone makes them seem like a dare.

I lift my chin defiantly. "Maybe I want them to see."

"You don't want strangers to see you naked."

“No?”

“No. I think you want *me* to see you naked.”

He’s right. I want that so badly I can taste it.

My reply is a breathy simper. “Do you want that?”

“More than anything,” he admits in a low rumble.

My lips curve upward at his admission. “Then let go of my skirt and take a step back,” I challenge. “You can watch since you like that.”

“No.”

I shrug, feigning confidence and cockiness, despite having neither. “Your loss.”

Without waiting another second, I pop open my bra with a flick of my wrists.

He inhales and lets go of my hips, but instead of covering my breasts as I expect, he grabs my upper arms and spins me around so I’m facing him. “Fucking hell,” he snarls as he bends at the knees, wraps one of his strong arms under my ass, and hoists me over his shoulder.

A confusing bevy of emotions strikes me. All at once, I’m enraged at his audacity, aroused by the feel of my bare breasts against his broad shoulder, and giddy with nervous energy.

Muttering angry gibberish, he hauls me toward my room. I don’t even fight him. Why would I? The battle is over.

I won.

By the time we get to my door, my face is flush, and my panties are drenched. An electric current zaps over my exposed skin. Before I know it, he’s somehow got the door to my room unlocked and flings it open.

Wait. How did he do that?

Once we’re inside, he tosses me on the bed like I weigh nothing. My purse goes flying onto the floor. I guess he thought to grab it from the table using the hand that wasn’t pinning me to his shoulder.

A heartbeat later, he's on the bed with me, his body hovering inches over mine.

"How did you unlock the door?" I pant out.

"Is that really what you want to talk about right now?"

"No."

Our raspy breaths mingle in the scant space between our mouths. If I tilt my head up a quarter of an inch, I could taste him.

"Can I touch you?" he asks.

"Didn't ask my permission by the pool."

"That was different. I was protecting you."

"And now?"

"Now I'm going to devour you. But only if you say yes."

I don't even need a second to think.

"Yes."

In a flash, he slams his lips to mine. His body lowers, pressing flat against me. With his full weight on me, we sink into the mattress.

His kiss isn't sweet and tender like the last time. It's raw and needy with a fiery intensity I feel down to my bones. He demands entrance into my mouth, thrusting his tongue out and spearing it past my lips.

The feel of his lean, firm body on me is exquisite. His shape molds to mine like he was always meant to be there.

It doesn't matter that I don't know what I'm doing because he's fully in control.

Without stopping his possessive assault on my mouth, he deftly maneuvers my hands over my head, crossing my wrists on top of each other and pinning them to the bed with a firm grip. Bringing his other hand from my wrist, he trails it down the inside of my forearm, past my shoulder and chest, finally settling it on my naked breast.

My bra hangs open with only one strap remaining on my shoulder. My skirt fell halfway down my body at some point and now rests around my knees. Sadly, it's preventing me from spreading my legs, which I desperately need to do.

I've never exposed this much of my body to a man before. But for whatever reason, I'm not shy or ashamed.

How could I with the way he's worshipping me?

He breaks the kiss, raining pecks and nips over my jaw, throat, and chest. Once his head is level with the breast he's squeezing, he takes my nipple between his lips and swirls his tongue over the pebbled bud.

Never been kissed there. Another first for me.

Oh I like it.

Hollowing his cheeks, he applies the perfect suction while flicking his tongue rapidly over my nipple. Each tug of his mouth sends a bolt of pleasure to the juncture of my thighs as if my nipple connects to my clit with a live wire.

Having never even played with my own nipples, I had no idea that would happen. It's heavenly.

I arch my back, thrusting my breast deeper into his mouth. "Oh my god, yes."

"Mmm," he hums against my breast like he's enjoying it as much as I am.

He sucks on my nipple in rhythmic tugs, rotating the hand cupping my breast in a matching pattern. It's so arousing my body begins moving on autopilot. My hips thrash upward, seeking friction for my needy pussy. His erection grazes my clit with each of my thrusts, giving me a twinge of relief, so I do it again. And again.

But it's not enough.

A whimper escapes me, making me sound as desperate as I feel.

I want him nestled between my thighs like the pillow I used to ride to make myself come before I realized I could

touch myself there. I bet it'd feel even better to squeeze my legs around him as I buck against him.

Straining with all my might, I force my knees apart until I hear fabric ripping. So much for that skirt. Worth it.

With the restrictive skirt a thing of the past, my knees fall to the sides, allowing him to settle his hips fully between my thighs. As he adjusts his position, he returns his attention to my mouth and slants his lips over mine.

Now that I know what to expect from his kiss, I match his fervor. All my senses go into overdrive as he captures my mewls in his mouth and rumbles an appreciative moan in return.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Is this really happening?

Can I go all the way with him? Am I ready?

My body says yes, but a nagging worry in the back of my mind says to wait. There's still so much we've not resolved or settled. I don't want to be merely a quick fuck.

I want to be more.

That worrisome part of me is quickly silenced when he finally releases my hands from over our heads, allowing me to explore his firm shoulders over his clothes. The amazing way he feels in my arms decides for me.

I need him. *All of him.*

Even if it's just once.

Able to control my movements better now, I pulse and writhe, dragging my needy pussy along the thick ridge behind his zipper. He helps me along, driving himself against me, pulse by pulse.

But I want to feel his dick. Hold it. Squeeze it. Stroke it.

Taste it.

I've seen Freya and her lollipop enough to have a good idea how to do it.

Before I can figure out how to communicate what I want to try with him, he slips his hand between us. Once he works his way into my panties, all thoughts are wiped from my mind.

A blend of panic and excitement overwhelms me until I'm not sure whether they're separate emotions. My eyes fasten shut, and I doubt I'll ever be able to open them again.

"I've been dreaming about touching you here for so long, Lettie," he whispers in my ear. "You have no idea how much I've wanted you."

The heat of his breath makes my clit pulse, and I involuntarily tilt my hips. The motion brings his fingertips fully into contact with the tender flesh between my legs, drawing a breathy gasp from me.

A man is touching me *there*. Skin on skin. Yet another first for me.

Butterflies pelt my insides as I wait for the pleasure I know he's about to unleash on me.

He doesn't make me wait long. Arousal floods my core as he drags two fingers along my slit and massages the silky flesh of my pussy. When he finds my clit, he swirls it for a few seconds before pinching it. I go mute, my mouth opening wide in a silent scream.

"You like that, Lettie baby?"

Unable to speak, I simply nod, a whining sound falling from my lips.

My grip on his shoulders tightens as he alternates between swirls, flicks, and pinches. I'm entirely overwhelmed by his presence and how he seems to know just how to touch me. My body is no longer under my control. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I couldn't stop now, even if I wanted to.

"Is this what you wanted when you stripped down by the pool? My hands on you?"

Miraculously, I manage to utter a response. "Uh-huh."

It's not entirely true. I don't know what I wanted other than to disobey him and push him to do... something.

“Do you only want this? Or do you want more?”

“More,” I whine, despite not knowing what I want or need. All I know is I don’t want him to stop.

His movements slow. “Say please.”

“Please. Oh please.”

“That’s a good girl.”

Slamming his lips back on mine, he rubs faster and harder against my clit, relentlessly flicking and teasing it. With my breath picking up, I moan and keen as he brings me to the precipice.

At some point, he stopped kissing me and shifted his weight slightly, so he’s hovering on one side. But he stays close enough for me to grab his shoulders, and his head lingers close so he can whisper in my ear and kiss my neck.

“Do you want to come with my fingers here,” he brings his fingers from my clit and swirls them around my opening, “or in here?”

I can’t answer with anything other than a keening sound, which doesn’t tell him what he wants to know. But I don’t know what I want. And I’m also not sure how to speak anymore.

What are words?

In my entire life, I’ve never felt this overwhelming level of shyness. It’s not shame—not even close. I’m proudly enjoying the way he’s playing my body. But I’m terrified of saying the wrong thing or doing something stupid that will reveal my inexperience.

“Answer me,” he demands, a firmness threaded into his tone. “Up here,” he moves back to my clit, plucking the tender pearl, “or down here?” When he slinks his fingers back down to my virgin hole, he attempts to put two fingers inside me.

Yes, he *attempts*.

But fails.

He can’t fit them both inside me.

Mortification floods my system. I don't use tampons. Never had a vibrator or dildo. Not even my fingers have been in there. All my self-pleasuring has been of the humping variety until recently, when I finally began rubbing my clit with my fingertips. But that's all.

I've avoided getting a female exam. So literally no one has ever been where he's trying to go. Like it's the final frontier of space.

He groans, dragging his tongue along the sensitive skin below my ear. "So fucking tight. Relax and let me in, sugar bear."

Sugar bear. Like he saved my contact in his phone.

Why does that sound so sweet and sexy at the same time?

"I'm trying," I press out through panting breaths.

He must hear something he doesn't like in my voice because he stops, rises to his elbow, and removes his hand from my panties.

Panic fills me, my eyes finally fling open. I grab his wrist, holding it down there with both of my hands. "Don't stop," I beg as I lock my gaze on him. "Please don't stop."

If he stops, I'll die.

Death by blue bean. What an obituary that would make.

He settles against my body, his lips hovering over mine. "I can't say no to you. Fuck, woman, you drive me insane."

And he kisses me. Hard and punishing. Like he's angry with me.

Or with himself.

His hand snakes back into my panties, and I let go of my death grip on his wrist.

"Thank you," I rasp after he breaks the kiss and begins toying with my clit. My eyes hold fast to his. I'm afraid he'll stop if I look away.

“Those fucking manners again.” He grins, then sucks my lower lip between his teeth for a gentle nibble. “I like that you’re a good girl, but I want to make you a bad girl too. That stunt you pulled tonight proved there’s a naughty girl in you. I’m going to pull her to the surface — one orgasm at a time.”

I don’t have time or mental capacity to formulate a response because my toes curl and thighs tighten around his hand as the coil deep inside me begins to spring free, slicing through me with the first wave of my climax.

“That’s it, sugar bear. Come for me.” He sucks my nipple into his mouth, causing my orgasm to explode, blasting pleasure throughout my body.

The pitch and volume of my moans crescendo.

He pops off my breast and orders, “Let me hear you. Scream for me.”

My hands wrap around his wrist again, holding him in place. Throwing my head back, I convulse and thrash against his hand.

Powerless to disobey him, I yell a litany of sheer nonsense, “Oh my god. Shit. Yes. Yes, yes, shit. Fuck.”

Moving faster now, he swirls and gyrates his fingertips over my clit. “Yes, sweetness. That’s it. Good girl.”

I would have stopped by now if that were my hand, but his continued assault on my body prolongs the ecstasy. When I hit the top of that peak, I keep going over it, flying into the clouds until I can’t maintain it anymore. A pained groan escapes me when I reach the limit, and I shove his hand away, involuntarily scooting back from him.

“Fucking hell, you’re sexy when you come,” he whispers from somewhere beside me.

The only reason I know he’s not on top of me is because I feel his warm breath flutter against my shoulder.

But I can’t open my eyes.

The persistent post-climax guilt and shame wrap me up, bolder and more insistent than when I’m alone. I try to bat the

negative emotions away, but I can't. I'm not strong enough to fight them.

My chin quivers as the tears build at a rate I've never experienced. I shift to the side so he doesn't see me, but I don't think I can hide this from him unless I run to the bathroom. And I don't trust my legs right now.

I haven't cried after orgasming for a long time. A few years, I think. But tonight, I did something I've never done before.

I let a man see my body. Feel me. Touch me. Please me.

And I liked it.

Consciously, I know it's not dirty, but I feel like filth.

CHAPTER 25

BENDING WITH THE WIND

TOMER

“Lettie, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

My already racing pulse kicks up even more frantically as panic unfurls inside me.

I *know* I didn’t hurt her. I had her consent. And she undoubtedly enjoyed what I was doing.

So why the fuck is she crying and cowering from me?

What the hell did I do now? Did I cross a line? How did everything go wrong this fast?

It’s your fault, boy.

You always ruin everything.

Sniffling back a sob, she rolls onto her side, shifting away from me. Her face hides behind her forearm, and her lower arm covers her exposed chest.

I don’t stray from the club for this very reason. I’m out of my element here. When I engage with a sub, there’s an agreement. We lay out the scene, talking about shit like this in

advance. I don't like these types of surprises because I never know what the fuck to do.

Or what I did to cause it — which is nothing new, I suppose.

Just not in sexual situations. But the disconcerting emotion is the same. As many times as this feeling scratches my insides, it never gets easier to take.

The rush of confusion fades away quickly, and I shift into aftercare mode, muscle memory taking control. I'll treat it as if she used a safe word to stop a scene. That happens. Nothing I can't handle.

My chest expands, allowing room for a swell of confidence. *I got this.*

Tentatively, I caress her shoulder and speak in a soothing tone. "Lettie, I don't know what's wrong, but I'm right here. Can you tell me what's going on? Let me help you."

No response.

I move closer, folding my body behind hers. Not enough to make her feel trapped. Just to let her know I'm ready to ease her through her comedown. Assuming that's what's happening.

"Did I hurt you? Can you talk to me, sugar bear?"

She shakes her head vehemently.

I seek clarification. "No, I didn't hurt you? Or no, you can't talk to me?"

A muffled one-word response is all I get. "Both."

It should be a relief to know I didn't cause her pain. But given her reaction, that knowledge does nothing to ease the gnawing ache in my chest.

I've seen subs come down from pleasure too fast before. The adrenaline leaving the body can be overwhelming.

But this doesn't feel like that.

It was just *one* climax, and it didn't seem especially explosive. Besides, we weren't doing a scene or playing, so I doubt she slipped into subspace that fast.

Nah. Something else triggered her.

Searching my mind for a logical explanation isn't possible over the sounds of her sobs. I can't think while she needs comforting. So I rely on aftercare techniques. It's all I've got in my arsenal unless she gives me a clue about where I went wrong.

I squeeze her shoulders, kiss the top of her head, and begin scratching her scalp. "Relax, Lettie. Just breathe."

After a few moments, her sobs weaken a touch.

"Stay here. I'm not leaving you. I'm going to get up to get you something to drink."

Slipping out of bed, I retrieve a bottle of water from her mini fridge. After unscrewing the cap, I kneel beside the bed.

My heart thumps wildly at the small glimpses of her reddened face peeking out around her forearm. Tight coils wrap around my stomach, clenching my insides with an almost painful force.

Seeing her *this* shaken up after we shared an intimate moment is burying me in desperation and guilt.

Gently removing her arm from her face, I whisper, "Lettie, baby. Open your eyes. Have some water."

She grits her eyes shut with more force, the motion causing more tears to spill down her cheek onto the bed.

I hate the anguished look on her face. Hate that I put it there. I don't ever want to see her cry and certainly never about what we've done.

My only goal is to bring her pleasure and joy. *Always.*

That statement's strength and truthfulness hit me with the force of a boot to the gut.

Above all other things, I want to make Lettie happy. She's what I want. She's what I need.

Not just in bed. But *with* me. *Really with me.*

Not James. Me.

A life without her isn't appealing. It's empty, dark, and drab — like every day before I met her.

Shaking myself back to what matters most now, I nudge her shoulder lightly. "Here, sweetness. Take a drink."

Opening her eyes, she focuses on the water, avoiding my gaze. She props herself on her elbow while keeping her other arm over her breasts. When I pass the bottle to her, I cup her trembling hand to help her hold it steady.

After she's had a few gulps, I set it on the side table and move back into the bed, positioning myself behind her. Grabbing the sheets, I drape them over her so she no longer feels the need to cover her body.

She has no reason to hide from me or feel shame. She's perfect to me, exactly how she is. But it's not the time to press that issue with her.

"Come here, sugar," I whisper as I pull her back against my chest and tuck her head onto my inner arm. "Just relax now." I brush her hair with my fingers, stroking and caressing her scalp.

Soon after, her breathing steadies and her sniffles cease.

But I don't push her to talk or attempt to adjust our positioning. If she stopped crying, this must be helping.

We lie that way for a long while, but I have no clue how much time passes. I can't see the clock since it's behind me, and my watch is underneath her head. I could reach for my phone in my pocket, but it's not worth the effort. All that matters is holding her and ensuring she feels my presence. She needs to know I'm not upset with her.

Although I can't, for the life of me, figure out what's wrong. I can only assume I did something wrong.

Like I usually do.

Until she's able to talk, all I can do is hope I didn't fuck up so badly she's unable to forgive me.

Without speaking, she twists in my arms to face me. With the movement, the sheet dislodges a little, but she quickly covers herself.

I swipe the hair out of her face and caress her cheek before letting my hand fall back to the curve of her hip. She doesn't speak. All she does is gaze at me with sadness painted across every inch of her face.

Her eyes are bloodshot and red-rimmed. Her nose is pink and puffy. Blotches dot her cheeks and the area around her mouth.

She's still the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen.

The urge to kiss her strums through my veins, if only to reassure myself that we'll be okay. "You feel better?"

She swallows and licks her lips. "Yeah. I do."

"Good. Can you tell me what happened?"

"I-I-I know I should talk about it with you, but I don't think I can. Not right now."

"I understand. I won't make you talk if you don't want to. But can you answer one thing for me?"

She props the side of her head on her open palm. "I'll try."

A sad smile tugs at my lips. She's so sweet. "It's selfish to ask, but I need to know. Did I do something to hurt you? Emotionally or physically?"

She cups my cheek with her palm. My eyes close on reflex as I lean into her touch. That heavenly touch. Such a simple gesture, but it means much more than words can convey.

But she gives me the words as well.

"You didn't do anything wrong. You were wonderful. *More* than wonderful."

"Was it just a comedown? An adrenaline drop, maybe?"

The more I think about it, the more probable it becomes. I startled her when she caught me following her too close. And then we had that argument before it escalated into this. Perhaps it wasn't only what happened in here, but everything combined.

She shakes her head, busting my theory. "No, I don't think so. This was *all* me. Just some old shit rattling around my head. It's happened before after I... well, you know."

Everything clicks at once.

I've helped women work through sexual trauma before. BDSM, bondage in particular, can provide healthy ways to overcome feelings of helplessness, shame, and guilt over what happened. It's not how everyone chooses to deal with their past, but for those who do, it can be an effective part of recovery.

If I had known, I'd have gone about everything differently.

Did her ex succeed in assaulting her? Or was there someone else before him?

The thought sickens me, making my neck muscles strain. I grit my teeth to bite back the rage brewing. Whoever hurt her is going on my MFKL.

"Lettie, have you been," I force my voice to remain neutral, "assaulted?"

Her jaw pops, and her chest swells with a rapid intake of breath. "What? Oh my gosh. No. No!"

"It's okay. You can tell me. I can help you."

Her eyes flash wide, and she jerks back like she's been smacked. "*Help me?*"

Those breathtakingly sad blue eyes turn molten. With a slight shake of her head, she stiffens and pulls out of my arms entirely.

Her cheek rolls as she runs the pointed tip of her tongue along the inside of her mouth. "Of course you can. Why

wouldn't you want to help? After all, I'm your little fixer-upper. You are unbelievable."

Jumping out of bed, she grabs the sheet and wraps it around herself like a towel, tucking the ends under her arms.

Strike that. She didn't *grab* the sheet. She yanked it like it was a tablecloth and she was a magician doing the table setting trick. But an angry version.

I'm collecting quite a large pile of fuckups tonight. It's a new record.

Sitting up, I fling my open hands to the sides. "Lettie, what's wrong? What did I say?"

She holds the sheet up with one hand. With the other, she points her index finger at me. "Don't you dare play th —" Her angry words are cut off by the ringing of her cell.

Whipping her neck around, she looks for the phone. By the third ring, she finds her purse on the floor where I flung it when I carried her in here. As soon as she retrieves the phone, she groans as she reads the screen. "Son of a bitch."

I get out of bed, ready to respond to... something. I'm not sure what.

She answers the phone in a huff, "Hey, sorry I didn't text you when I got home. I'm okay. But hang on a second. I need to put out the trash."

The way she glares at me makes my chest cave in. With the phone pressed to her bare chest, just above the sheet line, she snaps, "That would be *you*. Get out."

This time, I'm the one who flinches like I've taken a right cross to my chin. "What? I'm trash?"

She flashes a mocking grin. "Oh you don't miss a thing, do you?" Tipping her head toward the door, she lets anger replace her look of ridicule. "I'd like you to leave. *Now*."

"Hold on. I don't understand what happened."

"I'm noticing that's a theme with you."

“Lettie,” I start, but I don’t have anything to add, so the sentence shrivels up. A lot like my heart does as she rejects me with each rage-filled breath she heaves.

Throwing me out like the trash.

You’ll never find someone who can put up with you, boy.

My legs drudge me toward the door on autopilot while my head swirls in a pained fog.

I can’t meet her eyes, so I don’t.

As I shuffle away from her, I keep my vision trained on my feet, but I don’t see them. I can’t see anything. It’s all black.

When I get to the door, I attempt an apology, even if I don’t know what I did wrong.

Even if it’s just *me* who is wrong.

“I’m sorry, Lettie. I didn’t mean to upset you. I only want to keep you safe and make you happy. But I guess I’m not capable of doing that.”

“James, wait,” she whispers, sounding less angry.

I’m not brave enough to face her, so I keep my eyes on my hand where it hovers over the door handle. I want to leave, but I’m too weak to deny her.

“What, Violet?”

“It’s just...” Her exhale is heavy and ragged enough for me to hear it a few feet away. There’s a quaver to her voice when she continues, “I’m sorry for calling you that. But I don’t need you to protect me or help me. I’m not a charity case or a project for you to fix. I’m *not* broken.”

Her words reach around me from behind, squeezing my throat until I can barely breathe.

Lettie might bend with the wind, but she’ll never break.

Before I go, I *need* to see her face. Just one more time while she’s actively looking back at me, acknowledging me as a person. As someone sharing the space with her. Worthy to exist in her presence.

Like I'm real.

Like I matter.

Even if she hates me, at least she'll be looking *at* me. I won't be invisible to her.

Just once more.

Keeping my hand on the doorknob, I peek over my shoulder to soak up the intensity of her eyes and how they pierce into me.

For a moment, I pretend it's not disgust, hatred, or annoyance she sees in me.

But something worthwhile.

All too soon, the moment is over.

"Of the two of us, only one is broken, Lettie. And it's not you."

CHAPTER 26

IN THE ARMS OF AN ANGEL

LETTIE

It's odd how you can wish for something with every fiber of your being, but when it comes to fruition, you ache to toss it back into the abyss from which it came.

Take, for example, my newfound freedom from James's overbearing and distracting presence.

I wanted it. It's here. And I hate every fucking second of it.

It's been three days since I saw him.

Three days since he threw me over his shoulder and gave me the best orgasm of my life, which then triggered an embarrassing shame spiral.

Three days since he comforted me so tenderly, pulling me out of that dark place where all I felt was regret and guilt over what I'd chosen to do with my body.

Three days since I called him trash and kicked him out of my hotel room when I realized he still saw me as a weak, fragile charity case who is too weak to stand on her own two legs.

And three agonizing days of crippling remorse for how callously I treated him.

Considering he lied about the no-dating rule and sees me as a snowflake, I should be thrilled that he hasn't visited Bask. Ecstatic that he's not looking over my shoulder. And pleased as pie that he's no longer insisting on walking me to my door like a toddler with a wandering problem.

Sadly, I'm not experiencing any of those things.

Instead, I'm steeping in a soup of negativity. It's got a lovely broth of depression, thick and viscous, filled with chunks of anxiety and morsels of sorrow that soak up the boiling brown liquid. It's just one big stew of general melancholy.

General Melancholy, reporting for duty.

Heh. I can't even muster a grin at my dumb internal joke.

Every time someone enters Bask, my frame straightens and my chin lifts until I'm more or less impersonating a dog hearing a car pull into the driveway. If I had a tail, it'd be wagging. But sadly, it's not my master coming home. Ironically, it's often someone else's master.

I'm left staring at the door with my sad puppy dog eyes, longing for the moment he breezes in, giving me a chance to jump on his chest and lick his face.

Sadly, this dog doesn't have a home. Guess that makes me a pound puppy. Cue up the Sarah McLachlan.

Wow. I really went all in with the dog metaphor.

But that's me. A lovesick puppy dog.

Well, *crushsick* and potentially *lustsick*, assuming those are things.

Also *regretsick*. I need to apologize to James.

Lies or not, he didn't deserve what I said or how despicably I treated him.

I've typed out no less than ten text apologies but couldn't bring myself to hit send.

Papa would be so disappointed in me for focusing on the negative like this. He taught me better. Even when he was going through chemo for the second time and felt like death warmed over, he found things to be thankful for. Bright spots in the gloomy clouds, as he called them.

But this damn depression stew tugs me deeper, sticking to my ribs and weighing me down.

My pen taps rhythmically on the front desk as I seek out the spots where the sun shines through my clouds. I hum along to the muted music pulsing from the main room, letting my mind wander.

Good things. Good things. Let's see.

I *am* enjoying the job so far. It's fun and pays great, considering I barely have any responsibilities. They gave me a starting bonus, so I haven't had to ration my meager food stash.

With a bouncer nearby and caring staff checking in with me, I feel exceptionally safe; James was right about that. All the members and staff are respectful and pleasant as peach pie.

Freya and I are becoming fast friends. She visits the lobby several times each night to ensure I've got everything I need. My training is officially over, so she's moved on to other tasks in the back of the house — not going to ask what those are. But whatever they are, she's thrilled about them.

Good for her, I think to myself with almost no sarcasm.

Speaking of the devil, Freya pops into the lobby with one of those satisfied smiles plastered across her entire face. "Hey, gorgeous."

I offer a partial wave at chest height, which I immediately regret because it leaves me looking like a total dork-face loser.

She hops onto the corner of the desk, putting her back to the front door and attention squarely on me. "How you doing, kid?"

Swiveling my chair toward her, I take in the gleam in her eyes and the rosy hue of her cheeks. A tiny sheen of perspiration glistens over her upper lip and her forehead.

“I’m good. How are you? You look radiant and suspiciously satisfied.”

I’ll pretend I know what that looks like, bringing my mantra to life — *fake it ‘til you make it*.

Except I do have a glimmer of experience to draw on since I was satisfied for a few blissful moments the other night before I ruined it. Ruined everything.

But I digress.

Freya winks and giggles demurely, her chin lowering to her chest. “Jesse owed me a favor. And let’s just say I collected it tonight.”

And now she’s sitting on my desk. In a skirt. Fantastic and sanitary. I love Freya and all, but eww.

Mental note: locate disinfectant wipes as soon as this conversation is over.

Ignoring my inner prude, I play along. “Oo la la. Sounds fun.”

She bites her lip, eyes rolling back. “It was. *Extremely*.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.” I didn’t mean to, but a touch of petulance slipped into my tone.

“Well, you don’t have to take my word for it. You could experience it for yourself. Jesse or a dozen other Doms would happily take you on as their sub.”

The woodland creature in my head just smashed the panic button, shooting adrenaline through my veins.

A nervous squeak erupts from the back of my throat. “No, I *really* couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

I shake my head, drawing my thumb and index finger across my lips like a zipper.

She scantily swats my shoulder. “Come on. Is this about him?”

“Him who?”

She tsks at me, lips in a pout and head shaking to sell her skepticism. “Am I supposed to believe you because I’d have to be dumber than Patrick Star to fall for that shit.”

Her reference to SpongeBob’s idiot best friend cracks my facade, sparking a grin at the corners of my mouth. “Fine. Whatever. So maybe it *is* about him, but it’s also about me. I’m not part of the... you know.”

Playing dumb, her expression goes blank. “The what?”

“The BDSM lifestyle thing. I’ve never done any of that.”

“You don’t say?” She pops her mouth open wide, feigning shock. “I never would have guessed you were vanilla.”

After glancing over my shoulder to ensure the lobby is clear of guests, I flip her off playfully.

I’m not vanilla; I’m flavorless. Frigid like an ice cube.

Before the other night with James, I’d done nothing spicier than making out. And said making out was always in an upright position with all hands kept above the waist. If they drifted lower, I swiftly pulled them back to the green zone. According to my ex, that’s called — how did he phrase it — giving him blue balls and being a prick tease. To hear him tell it, I’m excellent at the prick-tease lifestyle, which is the furthest thing from kink.

Freya removes a lollipop from her stash in the top drawer and unwraps it. “Did you give any thought to renting my room?”

Oh! There’s another positive thing I can focus on instead of my negativity stew. Hooray for me.

“Yes, it just so happens I did think it over. I’d love to take you up on your offer. But that’s only if you don’t mind holding the room for a few weeks.”

She pops the candy in her mouth and claps. “Yay!” But her face falls as fast as it brightened. “Why in a few weeks? Let’s move you in this weekend.”

“I paid in advance for my current rental. It doesn’t make sense to leave early and lose out on that money.”

From around the lollipop stick, she mumbles, “So I won’t charge you until next month.”

“Oh no. I can’t let you do that. I’ll pay my own way, fair and square.”

She rolls the candy around in her mouth, licking and twirling it like it’s the most delicious thing. “I honestly don’t care about the money. *I’m lonely*. I’m not built to be on my own. My last roommate moved out to live with her boyfriend, and she already paid through the end of the month. So it’s not like I’d be out the rent or anything.”

She makes a compelling case, but it feels like a handout. And I’ve taken enough of those recently.

“I don’t know, Freya. It doesn’t seem right. And I need to save up for a deposit.”

“Deposit?” she screeches. One hand goes to her hip, and the other waves the candy at me like a weapon. “We are coworkers and friends. There will be no deposits. And you don’t need to pay me anything until the end of next month. Unless your current place is so luxurious you can’t bear to leave early, I don’t know why you’d wait to move in.”

Temptation, thy name is a few free weeks in a clean apartment with my new friend.

“But I also need to save up to buy furniture before I can move in. My place came furnished.” *Because it’s a disgusting pay-by-the-week hotel from hell.* “I’ll go shopping this weekend to see what I find.”

Mental note: look up local thrift shops and secondhand stores.

“Well, what do you need, furniture-wise? I have another friend who was looking to give some stuff away. Better to you

than the curb.”

Holy shit. Is Freya a guardian angel?

Related, what are the odds that the first two people I connect with in my new town are saviors? First James and now Freya. Has my luck finally turned around? Have I found favor with some less judgmental deity?

Best of all, the items she’s offering won’t cost her anything, so it’s not like she’s sacrificing her hard-earned money for me. It doesn’t feel the same as a handout.

She looks at me expectantly, twirling the lollipop in her mouth relentlessly. I bet she gives a great BJ. I wonder if she could teach me how. When I’m ready to give one, that is. More specifically, when I have a penis to suck on.

Focus, Lettie.

“Confession time. I have nothing. At all. I left Georgia with only my car, clothes, cosmetics, and a few worldly possessions — Bluetooth speaker, e-reader, my favorite pillow, and that sort of thing.”

“So you need the works. Got it.” She winks and hops off the edge of the desk. “I’ll go call my friend and let you know. No sense letting what they have go to waste.” Before she gets to the door leading to the main room, she pauses. “What about bedding? I think I have some extra stuff that’ll work if you need it.”

My chest swells with joy. Pure, unadulterated joy. “Really?”

“I gotcha. Keep your Saturday morning free for moving. I’ll have the room all ready for you, sweet girl.”

Tears prick the backs of my eyes, and there’s a slight tremble in my voice when I gush my appreciation. “Oh my gosh, Freya. You’re a lifesaver. Thank you so much.”

She rolls her eyes and shuffles back over, opening her arms for a hug. I dive in without hesitation.

I can’t wait to be out of that gross hotel. Only a few more days before I can consider showering in bare feet again.

And where I won't look at the door and remember how James looked when he left. Defeated, hurt, and battered. Because of me and my stupid overreaction.

All he wanted to do was take care of me.

Yeah, it'll be better when I'm not at the hotel anymore. For many, many reasons.

Best of all, I won't be alone anymore.

TWO BIRDS. ONE BROTHER

TOMER

Sawyer's in the building, as evidenced by the telltale fake British accent chattering up and down the hall. As usual, it's accompanied by random laughter from everyone around him.

Everybody loves Sawyer.

Except me.

Sometimes.

To be fair, it's not Sawyer the person I detest, so much as his personality. Wait. That's not what I meant.

What grates is how at ease he is with himself. He effortlessly spews humor and joy in all directions. The guy doesn't even have to try. It's just who he is. And everyone loves him no matter what he does.

As over his gag *Chuck Nofunfuck* door sign as I may be — and make no mistake, I'm way the fuck over it — I can't help but like him.

And that really grinds my gears.

Some guys have all the luck. And guys like me don't even get the leftover scraps thrown off the table onto the floor where we dwell.

Then again, he had a rough start in life. He's earned his current state.

When he gets close to my office, I meet him at the door. Leaning on the doorframe, I patiently wait for him to finish his parade of pleasantries and small talk.

It's not my style to loiter, especially when I'm as busy as fuck, but I need something from him. That's why I took the sign down today. I summoned him with his version of the Bat signal.

He must have an informant on the inside who's tipping him off. Miraculously, he always knows when I get annoyed enough to take the sign down, and he sneaks in to replace it with a new one.

Sadly, I don't have the time to smoke out the mole. On the bright side, it brought him to my door like I needed.

He stops short when he catches me waiting for him. "Is this a defensive move? Is that your new strategy?"

I glance at the door sign. Correction. I glance at the spot where my door sign used to be. "Not a defense, although, that's not a bad idea. If I move my desk out here, I'd always see you coming."

"So 'tis a fight ye want, matey." He lowers into a partial crouching position, hands extended in front of him, feigning an attack posture. But the index finger on one hand is rounded to mimic a hook.

Ha. Hilarious.

I don't flinch. My only reaction is a yawn, which makes him chuckle. Even his laugh is funny.

Taking a break from the mundane to be part of his little shtick, I bait him, setting him up for a better joke. "Sawyer, is that what they call you? You have got to be the worst pirate I've ever heard of."

His eyes widen and he wobbles his posture like he's full of rum, clearly impersonating Captain Jack Sparrow. "Ah, but you have heard of me."

I drag my hand over my face, mostly to hide my silent laugh, disguising it as annoyance. It's not like he'll believe I have a sense of humor, so why bother?

"What's up, T? What brings you *almost* out of the lair on this fine afternoon?"

He didn't call me Chuck. That's a pleasant change. Perhaps I should play along more often.

I'll dissect that idea another time.

Today, I have more pressing issues requiring my gray matter.

"Where can I buy a quality bedroom set and have it delivered fast? I need something by the end of the day on Friday. Plus bedding, shower curtain, towels, all that shit. Cost isn't a concern. I want good stuff that'll last. It's a gift for someone important. She's moving this weekend. The room and bathroom she's renting have nothing beyond four walls. I scanned the web earlier, but I'm not a shopper like you." I shrug and add, "And honestly, I don't have time with all the shit Boss has us doing. Can you help me out?"

He taps his fingertips across his lips in a wave-like pattern. "Hmm. Let me think. Do I want to spend someone else's money shopping for bougie shit? Uh, *hell yes*. Fork over your credit card." He holds his hand out, palm up. "What color scheme and design motif are we going for?"

I push off the doorframe, scraping my hand over my scalp. "I didn't mean that you'd need to do the shopping for me. I was hoping you could point me to the best online stores. Something reputable. Perhaps make a recommendation or two for a nice mattress."

He cups his hands on my shoulders and hits me with eyes coated in pity. "Tomer, Tomer, Tomer." His tongue clicks at me to help him drive home his point. "If you want good shit, you need to see it, smell it, feel it. How can you pick a bedding

set without rubbing it between your fingers? You need to caress it lovingly. What if it's scratchy? Too thin? Too thick? You can't trust thread count alone. This isn't the dark ages, and we aren't animals."

The skin around my mouth twitches as I fight off my amusement. "Sawyer, come on."

Removing his hands from my person, thank goodness, he continues, undaunted by my objection. "What kind of heathen buys towels online? How does that even work? By reading the manufacturer's description on the site, likely in broken English? Or worse... trust the reviewers? Gah! No thanks. It would be madness to trust random strangers on the internet for matters this important." He adds a showy scoff, crossing his arms at his chest and muttering, "Disgusting. Towels and bedding online. Like barbarians. I won't allow it. Nay. I *cannot* allow it. Not on my watch, Isis."

A twinge of blood suddenly shocks my taste buds. *Fuck*, I bit my cheek to stop from laughing.

I clear my throat to shield my response. "Okay. I'll hit up Target to get the bedding shit. What about the furniture? I don't have time to find a bed and dresser, nightstand, and that shit. That's way too many stores."

"Although Target is better than Wal-Mart, it's still not approved by me."

His grin is so cheesy that I can't hold back my laugh this time. Mirth dances over his expression, and his brown eyes flash deviously.

But he's not done.

"As for online furniture shopping, I have to veto that as well. Now, if you were going custom-made, then perhaps. Like those Amish craftsmen who carve it for you personally. That shit is tight. But you don't have time for that. So again, this requires a personal touch. Plus, furniture is heavy, and they really fuck you over with exuberant shipping charges. You're better using the money you'd have spent on shipping to get

higher-quality stuff. We'll rally some guys to pick it up and assemble it for you."

"This is a lot to ask of you. I'm not su —"

He interjects, "I don't mind. This is what friends are for. Plus shopping is sort of my thing, man. I'm happy to do it. At some point, I'll need a favor, and I'm sure you'll be there with bells on."

"I mean —"

Suddenly, his face lights up like a server monitoring dashboard detecting a complete system crash. He bobs up and down in giddiness, literally bouncing on his toes. "Oh! Oh! Leo's sister mentioned the other day that she needs to go shopping for a few things. She's still not driving, so she was hoping to get a ride. I'll bring her along. I'm off tomorrow anyhow. This is a great idea. I love this idea. Sammy and I will make a day of it. This is perfect. Two birds. One Sawyer."

He nods many, *many* times, and his grin reaches *FPCON Delta* levels. I'm unsure what made him more eager — shopping or hanging out with his best friend's sister. Knowing him, it's a bit of both.

I shift my stance, leaning back against the doorframe. "Well, you make a compelling case. Are you sure you don't mind?"

He counts to three on his fingers to accompany his list of demands. "Credit card. Color scheme. Design motif."

"A feminine color, but not too girly. And I don't know what a design motif is, so get something nice. Whatever you think looks good. If Sammy likes it, I'm sure it will be fine."

Sawyer rubs his palms together. "Got it. Can do. This is going to be fun. It's Christmas in July for me."

I remove my credit card from my wallet and hand it over. "Thank you. I owe you."

"And I'll eagerly collect one day." He purses his lips, then tosses, "And even if I don't ever need a favor, at least I'll have

an enjoyable day shopping with Sammy. There's no downside for me."

Sawyer could really use a lesson dialing back his emotions. His affection for Leo's sister is so obvious even *I* can see it. Teaching him to stop having emotions could be how I pay him back for this favor.

I chuckle.

To myself. Internally. Can't be caught laughing twice in the same conversation. I have a reputation to uphold.

Nofunfucks don't have fun. It's right there in the name. *No fun.*

Besides, I need to text Freya back.

Then I need to figure out how to fit thirty hours of work into a twenty-four-hour day. Rinse and repeat daily for the next several weeks.

After he slips my card into his wallet, he rubs his palms together. "I'll send you pictures of my selections for approval tomorrow."

"If I don't reply to your texts before you're ready to leave the store, just buy whatever you want. I've got work coming out of my ears, nose, and mouth." I tip my chin toward my office. "Klein does too."

"Wilco."

I retreat one step into the relative comfort of my office. "Thanks, Sawyer."

All traces of his humor fade; it's an odd sight on him. "I got you, brother. I'm happy to help." With a nod, he marches off, whistling as he goes.

He might bust my balls and poke fun at me — I *am* an easy target — but he's a genuinely good man. A friend. And yeah, a brother, I guess.

We take care of our own at Redleg.

My thoughts shift to my interaction with Big Al last night when I was on my way home. Apart from the video

monitoring team working the overnight shift, he was the only other one here past midnight. The stress is wearing on him. I'm not sure I've ever seen him so frazzled. He's got eighty-seven balls in the air, most of them on fire.

It was for the best that I saw him like that.

Not only was I able to take some of the burden off his shoulders before I went home, but it also served as a bright, bold reminder to reinforce my decision not to tell him about his daughter yet.

The guilt was getting to me. At times, it's a physical pain, nestling below my ribs. Like shards of glass scoring my innards.

But I'll bear all that pain and be the bad guy to protect Boss. And Lettie.

Because yeah... at Redleg, we take care of our own. And that's what I'm doing.

CHAPTER 28

CAREFUL WITH THAT GUN, OR YOU'LL SHOOT YOUR DICK OFF

LETTIE

After working at Bask for a month, the level of nudity that I've grown accustomed to is nothing short of awe-inspiring. Each time I stroll through the main room, I'm bombarded with a parade of tits, ass, cock, and balls. It's like a flesh festival.

It doesn't even faze me anymore. I barely blink.

In fact, when I'm at the club before it opens, I've found myself slightly bothered by the lack of saggy ball sacks. Turns out, I miss those wrinkled dangly bits.

It's not naked bodies that trip me up. It's the lewd sounds that I'm still adjusting to. Some of the things I hear have me blushing so much I look like I fell asleep on the beach without sunscreen.

I expected sex to have an odor, especially with all the sweaty bodies and *other* fluids. But the erotic symphony of bodies in motion, pleasure-filled cries, skin slapping, moans, grunts, and screams makes me realize how much I still don't know.

Especially the screams.

Apparently, I'm partial to vocal men. Their grunts interspersed with praise and profanity make me as wet as a Slip 'N Slide. When there's a particularly loud Dom doing a scene in the main room, I've been known to make an excuse to breeze through for a better listen. And yes, I have my favorites.

Surprisingly enough, I no longer feel ashamed of enjoying the views and sounds of the club.

Well, not between the hours of six p.m. and three a.m. when I'm on duty. This place is my free pass to be a freak. A shame-free zone. The opposite of what I had growing up.

"Hey, roomie," Freya chirps as she saunters in with a large stack of flyers, plopping them on the front desk.

Turns out, Freya's new job at the club isn't designated sex slave or glory hole attendant like I'd imagined. She's in charge of events and promotion. Yes, kink clubs have mundane jobs like that. Crazy, right? The things you learn out in the real world.

Well, this version of the real world.

I peruse one of the flyers. "What's this?"

She ties up her long, silky black hair into a ponytail. "New activities schedule."

Scanning the calendar, my eyes catch on two events. Kinky Karaoke and Shibari Demonstration.

Visions of the two separate activities merge in my mind, presenting me with a mental image of a naked woman, bound in an intricate pattern of rope, twirling from the ceiling while singing a song about rope burn.

That can't be right. Can it?

"Can you explain Kinky Karaoke? What's that entail?"

Same as always, she scoots onto my desk, fishes out a lollipop, and begins to make sweet love to it. "Well, it's where we have a music system with speakers and the whole shebang

up on stage. There are microphones and a little monitor where people can see the lyrics to a song of their choice. And then..." She pauses and leans forward dramatically. Holding my gaze, she looks as serious as a heart attack. "They sing."

With a giggle, she resumes sucking her sucker, obviously proud of her little joke.

"Very funny. I know what karaoke is. But what makes it kinky?"

She tugs the candy vigorously from her mouth, making a popping sound. "It's in a kink club."

"Freya, I'm serious. I love singing, but I also don't want to be traumatized if I go in there and someone is being fucked with a microphone stand."

"Hey, miss thing, we don't kink shame here." She points that red sucker at me, waving it around to emphasize her sentence. "But more importantly, you love singing, huh? So is that you I hear howling like a dying coyote in the shower?"

"I won't be baited into defending my musical talent. It just so happens you're looking at the three-time Climax Cabaret champ at the DeKalb County Peach Pie Festival. And it would have been four times, but Amanda Dotson stole it from me when it came out that her husband's dick was shot off in a huntin' accident. Naturally, she got the sympathy vote."

Freya's eyes fling open as her mouth gapes so much she almost loses her sucker. "Please tell me I heard you wrong. You did *not* just say a man had his penis shot off. How does that even happen?"

I cross my arms and nod in a big, sweeping movement. "Sure did. Shot it clean off his body. Stella's friend Jill Garrett works at the hospital registration desk, and she was there when Kris with a *K* Dotson came in. Said he was cupping his crotch, bleeding like a stuck pig, and his huntin' partner Wade Bird was holding the flaccid penis in a bag of ice." I lean forward, cupping my mouth to whisper, "She said there was still hair on it. Pubic hair."

Freya taps the side of her head with her palm like she's trying to get water out of her ears. "Get it out. *Get it out.* I can't let those words remain in my head."

"So yeah, Mrs. Dotson got the sympathy vote that year. Otherwise, I'd be undefeated."

With raucous laughter, Freya kicks her dangling feet back and forth like a toddler sitting at the big people's table. "And I thought *Florida Man* was something. But the more stories you tell, the more I'm thinking your hometown should be a meme."

I grab my water bottle, untwisting the cap with dramatic flair. "These are facts. Obviously, we'd call it *Climax Man.*"

"Oh I loved that porno," she jokes. "Well, as always, that was a lovely tale. And I was just joshing ya. I know you've got a beautiful voice. You should definitely sing for us. It's on Tuesdays. I can't wait to see you kill it."

"I'd love to. Do you think Dante will let me? I work on Tuesday nights."

"Does Dante let me suck cock on the clock?" She rolls the lollipop around her mouth, adding a slight moan, then snaps her eyes to mine. "Lettie, how many times do I need to remind you that this is a sex club? The rules of normal society don't apply here. That's why people love this place. To leave the humdrum of the vanilla world behind." Staring off in space like she's having a pleasant memory, she giggles. "Hell, Dante's let me suck *his* cock on the clock."

Nice visual.

Wait. That thought was initially sarcastic, but now I'm not so sure. Maybe I should watch a little more than just breezing by on the way to the restroom.

The old Lettie could *never*.

Shaking off the tempting idea, I refocus on my chance to sing for an audience again. "Do you promise nothing wild is required? I can just go up and sing? I don't have to bang the KJ or anything?"

“You know the rules of the club. I’ve heard you recite them to guests and members alike. Safe, sane, and consensual. Always. So no one is going to make you bang anyone. Ever.”

A trill of excitement zips up my spine, and I involuntarily clap while shimmying in my seat. “*Yay*. Then I’ll do it. I can’t wait.”

“What’s a KJ?”

“It stands for karaoke jockey — like a DJ.”

“Oh.” She crunches on the candy, finishing it off in a few bites.

My gaze crawls over the activities calendar, landing on the other item of interest. But if I ask Freya about it right away, she’ll see right through me. She’s been riding my ass about James ever since I moved in with her.

Speaking of which, living there has been a dream. She’s funny, supportive, and respectful. As much as I miss Stella, I’m so lucky to have found someone I can count on in town.

I tap my finger on the page. “Tantric Trivia sounds cool. And it says Jesse is hosting. He’s funny. I bet that’s a fun event.”

“Not sure. It’s new. We’re giving him a shot. It was his idea. If it sucks, we won’t do it next month.”

Delaying a bit further, I ask about a few other items — a masquerade party for platinum members at the end of the month and an edge play mixer for members seeking new partners for the more extreme kinks.

Feigning nonchalance, I keep my eyes locked on the flyer like it holds the secrets to the universe. “So who’s doing the shibari demonstrations? It doesn’t say.”

Nice job, Lettie. You totally nailed the disinterested vibe. Especially when your voice cracked at the end.

“I didn’t include his name because there’s a chance he won’t be able to do all four sessions. I might need to get a stand-in.” When I glance up, her knowing gaze burns a hole in my face. “Yes. It’s him, oh transparent one.”

I contort my face into an angry glare. “Shut up. That was an entirely innocent question. In fact, I don’t even know who you’re talking about.”

“Did you know your nose twitches when you lie?”

“I hate you.”

Pointing at my face, she proclaims, “It twitched again.” She swoops her head to the side, ear to shoulder, and rolls out her lower lip. “Aww, you love me.” She blows me an air kiss. “And I love you too.”

Now, both of my friends know the telltale sign of my truth-stretching. Fantastic.

Freya stays at the front desk with me for the next hour, teasing and chatting me up. Members come and go in steady waves. But even with her distraction, James doing a rope bondage demonstration is all I can see.

Well, I can imagine it. But I don’t know exactly what it’ll look like.

Will I be able to see him doing that with someone? Obviously, Dante doesn’t care if I pop into the main room, but can I handle it without vomiting or crying?

All these weeks without seeing James, and I still think about him constantly. I’m forever wishing things were different.

But he hasn’t been to the club. Not while I’ve been working, at least. I could check the records to see if he visits on my nights off, but I’m too afraid to find out.

My heartbeat picks up, and my mouth turns into a desert.

Damn. I’m so messed up that the mere idea of watching him with another woman has me twitching and gray dots flooding my field of vision.

When I can’t hold them in any longer, I blurt out the questions flouncing across my mind.

Yes, flouncing. It’s impossible to ignore them as they doddle along, leaping and skipping through my brain with

glittery streamers flowing around them.

In other words, these are attention-seeking, flamboyant thoughts.

“Freya, what will James wear while doing the rope demo? Naked? Leathers?” My chest suddenly expands with tension like a hurricane rages inside me. “Will his rope bottom be naked? Will they have sex on stage once she’s all tied up?” My airway narrows, robbing me of oxygen. I lift my shaky hand to cup my throat as if I could pull it open, allowing air to pass easier. It doesn’t work. “Freya,” I wheeze. “Why. Can’t. I. Breathe?”

She jumps off the desk, spins my chair around, drops her head to my level, and grips me firmly by the upper arms. “Girl, snap out of it. Just breathe. Look at me.” I do as she says, terror locking me in a death grip.

Rubbing my arms, she speaks calmly, her voice level and low. “Keep looking at me. In my eyes. That’s good. Now breathe with me. In for two, out for two.”

Keeping my focus on her, I let her lead me through a series of deep breaths. My vision slowly clears, panic ebbing gradually.

Once I’m under control, her hold on me loosens, and she rises to her full height but remains close. “You okay?”

“I think so. Yeah.” I fill my lungs with another cleansing breath, then swipe my hair out of my face. “What just happened?”

Freya falls back a step, leaning against the wall behind the front desk. “Sweetie, I think that was a panic attack.”

“I don’t have panic attacks,” I contend, but with only a hint of vehemence coating my words.

“There’s a first time for everything.”

I twist the ends of my hair over my shoulder, fidgeting while I process her suggestion. “Huh.”

Her eyes brighten with a hint of amusement. “Huh? Is that all you’re going to say?”

“Not sure what else *to* say.”

“Are you okay now?”

“Yeah, I think so. My heart is still racing, but I’m getting calmer.” Closing my eyes, I shake my shoulders out, releasing some tension. “Boy, that was not fun. I won’t be endorsing panic attacks; I can tell you that much. It’s a no from me.”

After pressing off the wall, she wraps one arm over my shoulder, bringing me in for a side hug. “I frigging love you, girl.”

Remaining seated, I snake my arms around her waist to hug her back. With our five year age difference, she’s what I’d envision an older sister would be like. From her position above me, she pets my hair, much like one would comfort a child. But it’s not condescending or belittling. It’s soothing.

It reminds me of how James comforted me after my orgasm-induced shame spiral.

After a few moments, she breaks her silence. “Are we going to address the elephant in the room now, or would you rather talk about it at home?”

“At home, please.”

I feel, rather than see, her nod of agreement.

“Thanks, Freya.”

“You got it, kid.”



LETTIE

Have you ever had a panic attack?

STELLA

That’s random. Um, once or twice. Why do you ask?
Are you okay?

LETTIE

I'm fine now. But I think I had one tonight at work. Freya said that's what it was.

STELLA

Shit. What happened? Do you need... sigh... a phone call? I'll waive the five-minute rule in this case.

LETTIE

Nah. I'm still at work. Freya was with me when it happened. My chest got all tight, and my throat nearly closed up. My vision was fuzzy, like a tunnel full of gray spots. Intense shit. Does that sound like what you experienced when you had one? Do you think that's what it was?

STELLA

I guess it's different for everybody, but that's basically what happened to me. Perhaps a little less severe than yours. But I agree with Freya. That sounds like a panic attack.

LETTIE

Damn. I guess I'm a certified adult. I have anxiety like a big girl.

STELLA

I can't believe you're joking about it already. But it does make me less worried about you if you're back to your typical mid-level humor.

LETTIE

Bless your heart.

STELLA

Rude.

LETTIE

I know.

STELLA

Do you know what caused the panic attack? Or was it totally random?

LETTIE

Oh I know what caused it.

STELLA

Talk about it later or now?

LETTIE

Option C — both.

STELLA

Go for it. I've got my popcorn ready.

LETTIE

Don't get mad. But it was about him.

STELLA

Seriously? STILL? What the actual fuck?

LETTIE

I said don't get mad!

STELLA

I didn't agree to that, and you're not the boss of me. But... I'm not mad at you. Just hate that he's still infiltrating your thoughts. Did he finally show his face at the club?

LETTIE

Still no sign of him. But Freya showed me the schedule for next month's activities. And he's scheduled to do rope demos on Thursdays. Every Thursday next month.

STELLA

Um. Not sure I see why that's panic-inducing. Am I missing something?

LETTIE

He'll obviously need a partner to tie up.

STELLA

Do you get to bottom for him? OMG! That'll be so good for you. But you have to prepare for it. Can you have someone practice with you? You don't want the first time to be in front of a room full of people. I can see why that would freak you out.

LETTIE

Shut your pie hole for a second, woman! You could drive a preacher to drink. No, no, no. Just no. It's not me. I don't know who his partner will be. That's the point. I'm going to have to see him with someone else.

STELLA

Oh.

LETTIE

Shit. I'm getting panicky again. Why am I like this? He and I aren't together. He can top anyone he wants. What's wrong with me? Am I broken? A defective model human?

STELLA

Do I need to call Freya to sit with you? Or you can video call me now, and I'll help you calm down.

LETTIE

I'm okay. Breathing nice and slow. I've got it under control.

STELLA

Oh, babe. I'm so sorry you're going through this. I want to hug you so freaking bad.

LETTIE

Same. I miss you. Any chance you'll swing by for a long weekend sometime soon?

STELLA

I've been thinking about that. Maybe next month if I can swing it. I need to meet this Freya chick in person and make sure she's worthy of your friendship. Can I crash at y'all's place?

LETTIE

I'm sure she'll say yes, but I'll check. She's awesome. I know you'll love her.

STELLA

Is she into girls?

LETTIE

I know she scenes with guys, but I never asked if she likes girls too.

STELLA

Some wingwoman you are. I should block you for that.

LETTIE

A thousand and one apologies. You're 100% right. I should try harder to ensure one of us has a robust sex life.

STELLA

You could have one too, you know. I'm sure more than a few gentle Doms there would love to make you sing — in the sexy way.

LETTIE

You make it sound so easy. But I have a better chance of sticking a wet noodle up a wildcat's ass. I'm not qualified to be with a man in any dating-adjacent capacity. I made an ass of myself the last time I tried.

STELLA

You did not. He's the ass.

LETTIE

My ears still burn whenever I think back to how bad I messed that up.

STELLA

I'm sick of this shit. Ask Freya to hook you up with a pleasure Dom. You don't have to have sex with him. One good orgasm session from a pleasure Dom and you'll be over James, lickety-clit.

LETTIE

Lickety-clit is my new favorite phrase. I'm putting it on a T-shirt.

STELLA

It's my Fetlife username.

LETTIE

Hush up. No, it's not.

STELLA

No, but it should be.

LETTIE

Gotta let you go. It's fixin' to get busy. Thanks for making me feel better, lickety-clit. I love you.

STELLA

Love you too.

CHAPTER 29

TWERKING AND THE MICROPENIS

TOMER

Klein repeatedly shifts his gaze between me and his screen, his eyes dancing with scantily restrained excitement. “Have we got it, T?”

My fingers rhythmically tap on my desk as I study the results in disbelief. “I think so.”

Shooting his arms toward the ceiling, he bounds from his chair, sending it rolling a few feet behind him. “*Hell yes*. Tomer, we did it. Hell to the fuck yes!”

I clench my right hand into a fist, pumping it subtly. “We fucking did it.”

On the inside, I’m as excited as my partner. But years of repressing my emotions make it challenging to unleash them.

Moving behind me, Klein clamps his hands onto my shoulders and shakes me vigorously. “You bet your sweet ass we did. It’s time to celebrate. Shut everything off. We’re going out tonight.”

He dances around the office, shaking his bubble butt comically. “Twerk with me, T. Twerk it.” He lowers into a

squat and pops his hips rhythmically to the big band music blaring from the speakers. His dancing is atrocious but funny. “Come on, twerk it. Pop it. Mm. Mm. Yeah. Why aren’t you dancing? Just throw it back, buddy.”

Deep swells of laughter rumble from the base of my gut. I’m too tired and happy to tamp down the silliness any longer. “I’ll go for a drink, but I’m eighty-sixing the twerking. That’s a hard limit.”

Still cackling at himself, he ceases his frolicking and pulls out his phone. “I’m texting Kri and the guys to join us. Where should we meet them?”

“I don’t care.”

He lowers his forehead and shoots me a face-splitting grin. “You know where Sawyer will suggest we go.”

“Sassy Parrot,” I answer.

“Sassy Parrot,” he confirms a second later.

Leo’s sister, Sammy, works at that dive bar near the beach. By now, everyone but Leo has picked up on how much Sawyer wants her.

Standing, I press my hands into my lower back and arch my spine in a much-needed stretch. “Sassy Parrot is fine with me.”

Four weeks.

Four fucking weeks of twenty-hour days, often crashing in the bunk room. My shoulders have more knots than all the ropes I’ve ever tied.

It nearly killed us, but we finally completed the last round of testing for the customer-facing security monitor software. All the fucking glitches and bugs were stamped out. The hardware and physical components cleared the testing phase. Klein configured the demo pieces to meet our needs, and all his modifications are up to snuff.

There’s still a lot to do before it’s ready for residential implementation, but the heavy lifting is done.

Thank fuck.

My Redleg phone chimes, so I spare it a glance. It's Klein messaging the gang. The replies begin chirping a few seconds later.

Klein shuts down his system and turns off the music. "I'm stepping out for a quick call to check on someone. Be right back. We leave in ten minutes. Be ready, or I'll leave your sorry ass behind."

Blowing him off, I wave noncommittally over my shoulder. Once he's out, I retrieve my personal phone to check on Lettie.

Although she's finally got a job, a safe place to stay, and new friends, I haven't been able to stop checking on her.

Violet Holt is an addiction.

Despite my attempts to kick the habit, I've only succeeded at stepping down to one check per day.

Most days.

Usually, it's a brief scan of her cell activity and a peek at the GPS history on her car just to ensure she's doing well.

If it's a bad day for me, I *might* listen to her voice through the microphone on her cell. Hearing her sing, even briefly, makes the gnawing pain under my ribs subside.

The surefire way to catch her singing is when she's driving. I cling to those moments.

I tell myself it's innocent and that I'm merely protecting her. *Sometimes*, it's true.

She's a craving I'm powerless to satiate. But I keep trying.

Undoubtedly, I would have crossed every physical line with her by now if she hadn't sent me away. Even with the long workdays, nothing would have kept me from claiming her.

If she wanted me.

But she doesn't.

I should be used to being unwanted. But with her, it's fucking excruciating.

Not being part of her world reminds me of a feeling I've long since buried. It's a longing pang in the back of my throat that burrows down into my gut. Something from my childhood.

In the early morning hours, when my head finally hits the pillow after a grueling day in the office, I've pondered what that familiar sensation might be. Last night, it finally hit me.

It's a mournful wanting to be with her again. That her absence causes me to be somehow less complete. It languishes at the edge of my consciousness, under the surface but never entirely out of grasp. It's something I felt for my mother at night on that dirty mattress. I missed her after she... well, after she was gone.

And I fucking miss Lettie.

Dammit, I miss her. That's what the elusive feeling is.

I don't know how to fix it. There's only one thing that eases it — connecting with her the only way I can. Like right now. After a quick check of her GPS, I'll feel better.

When I tap in the code to unlock my phone, my attention falls immediately to the red bubble over the message icon. Three new texts. All from Freya.

A boulder sinks in my gut. Holding my breath, I skim her messages.

FREYA

We need to talk about your girl. She had an incident tonight when she found out about the rope demos.

FREYA

Just realized my message sounded more alarming than I intended. My bad. Don't panic. She's fine. But she's also not fine.

FREYA

I'll explain more when we speak, but the short of it is this... she saw you on the schedule and had a panic attack. I calmed her down, but I hate seeing her in pain when I know you care about her. I strongly feel that you should come clean with her.

COME CLEAN WITH LETTIE? No fucking way.

How could I possibly confess all the things I've hidden? It's not only the continued invasion of her privacy and all the items I covertly purchased for her room.

There's so much more.

I follow her home on nights when she doesn't carpool with Freya to ensure she gets home safely.

I had a VR headset *mistakenly* delivered to their apartment that I rigged up with a ton of exercise programs to keep her from jogging at odd hours. To entice her to use it, the workout apps *happened* to be music-based and preloaded with all her favorite songs.

I also outfitted Freya's apartment with the employee version of Redleg's home security system.

Freya knows about most of these things, but she has no idea of all the other ways I've deceived Lettie — about who she is, who her father is, and who I am. Not to mention how our meeting at the gas station wasn't accidental.

But the one thing Freya has figured out is how much I care about Lettie. And not in the way you'd care about a charity case or a little sister.

Judging by these texts, something's gotta give.

With my heart in my throat and pulse thrumming, I dial Freya and close the door to the lair. Hopefully, Klein doesn't come back before this call ends. If he does, I'll excuse myself. He can leave without me for all I care.

Lettie might need my help.

The phone rings five times before rolling to voicemail. *Fuck.*

I try once more, getting the same maddening outcome. Instead of leaving a message, I fire off a text, assuming she'll see that sooner.

ME

Answer or call me back. What the fuck is happening? Is she okay?

WHILE I WAIT FOR A RESPONSE, I double-check Lettie's location.

Thank fuck. She's at Bask and not at the hospital. A tendril of relief springs to life, making my chest collapse with a rushed exhale.

I reread the texts, looking for something I missed.

After another minute ticks by with no reply, I employ a last-ditch effort to get answers.

With my thumb hovering over the call icon by Lettie's name, I attempt to predict how this could unfold. By initiating contact with her again, will I make things worse or better for her?

Fuck it.

I tap the call icon.

It rings only once before going to voicemail. *Shit.* Either her phone is off, or she declined my call.

At this point, my options are limited. Over the last month, I've stopped reading her texts word for word, preferring to

merely see who she's communicating with and giving them a cursory scan for keywords that could indicate trouble.

But that's about to end.

I'm a heartbeat from accessing the camera on Lettie's phone when my father's voice grates across my mind.

Go ahead and act like a creepy little fucker.

My hands freeze, and my posture stiffens. Is that what I'm doing?

The phone vibrates with Freya's response, halting my spiraling thoughts.

FREYA

Simmer down! I already told you she's better for now. I helped her through it. I can't answer your calls since I'm in the same room as her, but I can text.

ME

You're sure she's okay?

FREYA

Yep. She's good. But I don't want to see something like this happen again.

ME

Can you tell me more about what happened? I'm still confused. Why did seeing me on the schedule bother her?

FREYA

I can't believe I have to spell this out for you, but here it goes. She doesn't want to see you with anyone else because of how she feels about you.

HOW SHE *FEELS* ABOUT ME? What is that supposed to mean? None of this makes sense.

ME

Can we meet tomorrow? Not at the club or anywhere Lettie will be.

FREYA

Sure. She won't suspect anything if I go out for coffee in the morning. How about Beach Town Bean at 10? The one a few blocks north of the club.

ME

See you then.

FOR SEVERAL SECONDS, I stare at the screen in utter disbelief.

Did I read that right? Lettie doesn't want to see me top anyone else because of how she feels about me.

For the record, topping someone other than Lettie isn't something I'm eager to do. Even for the demos, which won't be sexual in nature.

But the club needs me, and I've been so busy this month with the new system testing at Redleg I haven't been all that helpful there recently.

Regardless, I'm still unsure why Lettie cares.

She's the one who kicked me out of her bed, her room, and her life.

Like trash.

According to what she and Stella discussed in the days following that night, they think I assumed she was a victim in need of rescuing. But I only wanted to take care of her.

Like I want to do tonight.

But if I rush in there and try to save her, will that only piss her off again? Probably.

When I see Freya in the morning, I'm sure she'll help me make sense of this. Since the project is under control, I'll insist Klein takes tomorrow off. Shouldn't raise any eyebrows since it's Saturday. That'll make it easier for me to skip out to see Freya without drawing attention.

My jaw still rests on my chest when Klein comes back into the office a few seconds later. "Ready to go, T?"

Slipping the phone into my back pocket, I gather my things quickly and grab my keys. "Yeah."

"Should we ride together?"

"Nah. I might need to leave before you."

He waggles his brows. "Planning to get lucky, huh?"

"No."

Not now. And probably never again unless I figure out how to get over Boss's secret daughter.

That's so fucked up.

As I drive to the Sassy Parrot in absolute silence, I find myself wondering if I'm being punished for withholding this secret from Big Al and Lettie. Perhaps all this longing and anguish is what I deserve. Although it's illogical to believe in something like that, the thought occasionally pops into my psyche.

But Lettie's suffering too.

I thought I'd done the right thing by distancing myself from her these last few weeks.

Wrong.

That's what I get for attempting to interact with people outside of work or the club.

No matter what I do, I hurt her. Whether I'm by her side or not.

Since I first learned of her existence, it's been my mission to protect her from harm. And now I'm causing it. Not intentionally. But intent doesn't matter if the result is the same.



ABOUT AN HOUR after arriving at the bar, my knee jumps relentlessly under the high-top table with pent-up adrenaline.

My eyes scan the room, looking for Sammy. I wave her over to close out my tab. I can't stay here any longer.

When Sammy gets to our table, she flops in the open chair across from me. "Someone save me from the creep in the corner."

Sawyer and Leo trade glances, both of their frames stiffening.

"What creep?" Leo asks his sister.

Sawyer jumps in, using the top of his long-neck beer bottle to point toward the corner. "That guy with the shaggy brown hair, right?"

Sammy narrows her eyes at Sawyer. "Yeah, how did you know which one? There are like," she pauses to wiggle her index finger around the room like she's counting, "eighteen creeps in here tonight. Nineteen, if you count my brother."

Leo drags his giant palm over her head, ruffling her blond hair.

"What did he say to you?" Sawyer asks, ignoring her question entirely, probably because he doesn't want to admit he's always watching her.

"He's asked for my number four times so far."

Leo stands. "Be right back."

Sammy grabs his arm, holding him back. "No. Don't."

“What? I’ll just talk to him. He looks familiar.”

She rolls her eyes and tugs him back to the table, using all her might. “No, he doesn’t.”

Leo chuckles, letting her manhandle him despite towering over her. And everyone else.

“He does look familiar,” he lies. “I’m pretty sure I kicked his ass later tonight.”

Sawyer taps Leo on the shoulder. “No, you’re mistaken, Lionheart. He looks like the guy whose ass *I* kicked later tonight.” He glances at his watch. “Oh, and it’s about to happen right now.”

Moving swiftly, he darts from the table, evading Sammy’s attempt to stop him like she did her brother. He turns around and puts his hands up while taking small steps backward. “I’m just going to see if he’s the same guy. I really think it’s him. If it is, I should say hi. With my fist.”

Sammy puts her hands on her hips and stamps her foot. “I work on tips, Sawyer.”

He glances at the group of us at the table. “You know what to do, boys.”

As if on cue, we all pull out our wallets and toss our largest bills on the table for Sammy.

“Hey! Not all of us are boys,” Kri yells at Sawyer’s back after tossing down two twenties.

“Yeah, some of us are men,” Shep adds, throwing down a fifty.

“You wish,” Kri snarks.

Shep stands, extending his hand to Kri. “I accept your challenge. Let’s go.”

“What are you talking about, weirdo?” she asks.

“I’m about to prove how much of a man I am. Let’s go. Don’t make me ask again.”

She rolls her eyes and rises from her barstool while reaching into her back pocket.

Klein's eyes bulge, and his jaw wags. "Wait a second. Hold the phone. Did that work?"

Kri dips her hand into her back pocket. "Nope. I'm just getting something for him." She removes her empty hand from her pocket with her bird finger extended and flips Shep off. Everyone busts out in laughter.

It's funny. But I need to leave. I have to get to Lettie before I crawl out of my skin.

Shep's joke about being a man is the last straw. My father might not have thought of me as a real man, but he was fucking wrong. Tonight, I'm going to man up and face Lettie. And not by stalking her like a fucking creep.

I'll walk up to her with my heart in my hand. Either she accepts me or rejects me. But I'm done lingering in the periphery, hiding from her.

And hiding from my feelings.

"Sammy, can I have my check? I need to run."

"Sure, Tomer. Be right back." As she goes, she looks at her brother. "Go fetch your friend."

Leo cranes his neck to look at Sawyer in the corner with the creep. "He's doing fine on his own, sis."

When Sammy returns with my check a few moments later, Sawyer comes breezing up to the table with the man in tow. He's pinned the creep's arms behind his back in a submission hold. The jerk's face is red, and he's gritting his teeth. Looks to be in a bit of pain.

Sawyer growls in the creep's ear. "What do you have to say to the nice lady?"

The man glares over his shoulder at Sawyer, but it only makes him tighten the hold on his arms.

"Fine, just ease up." To Sammy, the man reluctantly says, "I'm sorry if I bothered you."

“No, that’s not what you wanted to say. Don’t be shy now. Try again.” Sawyer’s grip tightens, as evidenced by the hiss of pain from the creep.

“I apologize for not listening when you told me no. It won’t happen again.” He glances at Sawyer over his shoulder. Sawyer dips his chin at him, prompting him to continue. “And I’d never have a shot with a woman like you anyhow because I have a micropenis.”

Sawyer releases him from the hold but keeps one hand on his shoulder, applying force to a pressure point. “Unfortunately, our new friend is leaving now. Everyone say goodbye to our friend.”

The entire group of us, myself included, holler, “Goodbye” in unison, then devolve into laughter as Sawyer marches him out the front door.

When he gets back, Sammy’s glaring at him. She’s outright fuming with her foot tapping frantically and fists on her hips. “I can’t believe you did that. I’m going to get fired.”

Sawyer scoffs. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Klein chimes in. “That’s right. We’re all witnesses.”

Heads nod in agreement around the table.

Grumbling under her breath, she presses her lips together and steps closer to Sawyer, jabbing him in the chest with her finger. “If I lose my job, you’re going to be paying all my bills. And I expect an extravagant lifestyle.”

Sawyer grins as wide as the day is long. “Weird way to propose, but I accept.”

Even Leo laughs at that one.

A few minutes later, I pay the tab, leaving a generous tip for Sammy. I ignore the grumbles of protests from the peanut gallery and exit in a hurry.

Despite the amusing distraction provided by my friends, I need to get to Bask.

Freya’s right — Lettie deserves to know how I feel.

I'll apologize for lying to her about the no-dating rule and do everything I can to convince her I never saw her as a charity case. Hell, I'll offer to cancel the rope demo if it upsets her. In fact, I should cancel it anyhow.

As I race across town, it dawns on me that I'm not only going to the club for Lettie tonight.

I'm also going for me.

For us.

CHAPTER 30

TAKE ME HOME,
COUNTRY ROADS

LETTIE

I blink four times, narrowly resisting the urge to rub my eyes. Surely, I can't be seeing what I think I'm seeing.

This can't be real. There's no frigging way James is here.

He's *not* standing on the other side of the lobby, waiting to be checked into the club. I reject this reality and banish it.

Be gone, hallucinations!

I need it to be make-believe because I *cannot* handle this shit tonight. Especially not a few hours after I had an honest-to-goodness panic attack. One brought about by the mere *idea* of witnessing him with another woman.

I thought I'd have several days to prepare before I would have to endure it. But *nooo*.

Is a little good luck too much to ask for? What about a paper bag to breathe into when my lungs decide to close again?

Lord, it's me, Lettie. I know it's been a hot minute, and you might be upset about the whole fingerbang thing I did with

that man over there. And all the cussin' and masturbating too. Oh and the porn. My bad on all that. Anyhoo, could you please send down a lightning bolt to strike the club now so we lose power and everyone has to go home before I'm forced to watch him get freaky with another woman? That'd be cool.

I wait three solid seconds. No lightning bolt.

Dammit. It was worth a shot.

Whatever drove him to call me earlier must have sent him here when I didn't answer. But what did he expect? *It was a phone call.* Plus, it was him. I wasn't ready to talk. I need time to prepare.

Time I'm not gonna get, apparently.

Wait. What am I thinking? He's not here for me. I've lost it. Gone cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs.

He was probably just calling earlier to see if I was working before he came in to have a little *fun* with... whoever he intends to top tonight. More than likely, he was hoping I was off to avoid making it awkward. I didn't answer, so he took a chance I'd be off.

Too bad I'm not.

With my heart in my throat and lungs frozen, I shift my focus to the couple in front of me. They're patiently waiting for me to clear them to enter Bask.

My eyes quickly scan them, sweeping from head to toe. The woman is drop-dead gorgeous. She's a petite Asian woman with sleek black hair. Her nails, makeup, jewelry, and clothing are impeccable. She *reeks* of money. The Caucasian man with her, on the other hand, is a disheveled mess. Baggy work jeans, a scruffy beard, and an old Pearl Jam T-shirt. He's wearing construction boots and smells of sawdust. They have got to be the most mismatched couple I've ever seen.

And *that's* why I love this place. It doesn't matter who you are or where you're from. Everyone is welcome here.

After a cleansing breath, I check their credentials and go through my little spiel. James waits his turn patiently in the

corner of the lobby. But I *feel* his eyes on me.

No, that's not right. Not on me, but *through* me.

The intensity of his gaze obliterates my skin, revealing the chaotic emotions permanently residing beneath the surface.

Vivid memories of the pain in his eyes the last time I saw him — pain I put there — make it challenging for me to finish my little safety speech.

“Are we good to go?” the petite woman named Helen prompts after I stumble over my spiel for the fourth time.

Shit ass.

I force a smile at her and wave my open palm toward the entrance to the main room. “Yeah. All set. Have a nice time. Be safe.”

The couple doesn't make a move to enter, remaining planted in front of the desk. Awkwardly, I motion toward the entrance to the main room.

The man with her, Andy, points his chin at my desk. “Can we have our club IDs back?”

“Oh. Shoot. I'm so sorry.”

I scramble to pick them up, dropping them both in the process. Naturally. “Sorry again.”

Stooping to my knee, I retrieve both cards from the floor. In accordance with the Violet Holt Charter, Sections 2-10, I bang the back of my head on the desk when I attempt to stand.

“Oof! Doggone it to hell,” I hiss. The pain makes the room tilt and spin.

“You okay, honey?” Helen asks, leaning over the desk.

Laughing nervously, I rub my head as I stand — successfully this time. “Yep. I'm fine. It's just me being me. Graceful as a baby panda walkin' on a frozen pond.”

With a snicker, Helen consoles me jokingly. “You poor thing. But don't worry. You're pretty enough to be a giant klutz.”

I laugh with her as I extend my hand, returning their cards.

Andy takes both cards and begins shoving her toward the club entrance. “Ignore her. She’s in a mood after finding out she has the same hairdresser as Jaden Smith.”

She swats him in the gut. “Hey, that was a secret. No head for you tonight.”

As they walk off, Andy says, “Come on, little woman. Sit on my face and let me eat my way to your heart.”

My cheeks flame over his joke, but it intensifies when I realize I’m alone in the lobby with James. When I force myself to face him, his expression conceals all traces of emotion.

I stop rubbing the *latest* bump on my head and fake a smile. “Hi, James.”

“Hey.”

He stays across the room as if his feet have grown roots.

I’m surprised he isn’t hovering over me, checking my head, and waving a light in my eyes to check for a brain injury. Guess he’s no longer concerned about my safety and well-being, which makes sense considering I called him trash.

Why did I do that? I swear, my elevator doesn’t go all the way to the top floor.

When the tense silence barges into uncomfortable territory, I gesture toward the door with an open hand. “You can go in. I don’t need to check your credentials.”

“I’m not here for that.”

Hope? Is that you dancing around in my stomach like a hippo wearing a tutu?

Pay attention, friends. My response will be articulate as fuck.

“Oh?” I squeak.

There you have it, folks. I should consider a new career as a poet.

In true James fashion, he doesn't answer with words. Instead, he simply takes a tentative step toward me. Then another.

With his fists clenched at his sides, he presses his lips shut so fiercely that no words could escape, even if he were the chattiest human on the planet. And we all know he's not.

Drawn toward him like gravity, I move around the desk, matching his steps one for one. Unblinking, our eyes stay fixed as if the other will disappear if we look away.

With each step we take, the sounds of the club become more distant, masked by the thumping of my pulse and the whir of blood pumping behind my ears.

As if we planned it, we stop simultaneously, leaving two feet separating us. The tension bounces from his chest to mine, crackling in the air.

The tight seal holding his mouth closed breaks just enough for his tongue to slip out and swipe at his lips. It's not a good idea to stare at his lips. If I see them, I'll remember how they felt on my mouth, my neck, and my nipples. It's best I keep my vision trained on his eyes.

But we all know I've never been one to do the smart thing.

I'm Violet Holt, the founder, owner, and CEO of *Bad Ideas-R-Us*.

I can't turn away from that mouth. Or the glimpse of that heavenly tongue dancing behind his pearly white teeth. It may have been weeks since he kissed me, but I'll never forget how it felt when he first claimed my mouth or the velvety words that caressed his lips on the way to my ears.

Like when he said, "*That's it, sugar bear. Come for me.*"

I *finally* find my voice, but it's shaky and breathy. "If you didn't come to go into the club, why are you here?"

Please say me. Please say me.

He exhales forcefully, and the mask he often wears to hide his emotions vanishes, revealing a fire rivaling my own.

Longing.

Regret.

Desire.

After what feels like forever and a day, he answers my question.

“I came for you.”

Four words never felt so potent.

Couple them with the intensity of his eyes burning into mine, and it might as well have been a never-ending sonnet.

He’s here for me.

Me.

Because he can’t stay away.

Without waiting for my reaction, he removes the distance between us, cups my cheeks, and captures my mouth.

My knees go weak, and the world disappears.

It’s just him.

And barely me.

Our lips move in tandem, caressing each other’s with frantic desperation. My hands drift on their own, completely unguided by conscious thought. I grab his shoulders to hold him close, denying him a chance to retreat.

Although he’s not attempting to withdraw, my body wants to ensure it stays that way.

His hands trail down my body, leaving a path of electricity in their wake as they journey from my cheeks, over my neck and shoulders, then settle on my lower back. His grip tightens, bringing me closer. My back arches, driving my breasts into his chest.

This kiss says everything words can’t. I *feel* his apology. Likewise, I give him mine in return.

Yet... I need the words. And he needs to hear mine.

I break the kiss, making no attempt to pull away. “James, wait. Let me apologize for what I said.”

He shakes his head subtly, sliding his hands up my body to cup my cheeks. “No, I’m the one who fucked up. You didn’t —”

I cut him off. “I shouldn’t have said what I said that night. It was cruel and untrue. It was a reflection of me and not you. I’ve wanted to apologize every day since. It’s been killing me. You have no idea how sorry I am.”

“It’s okay, sugar.” His tone is woven with anguish as he launches into his own earnest apology. “I should’ve come sooner. I don’t see you as weak, and I’m sorry if I ever made you feel that way. I know you don’t need me for anything, but I can’t stay away from you anymore. I should have fought harder to prove that to you. And I’m sorry for lying to you about the dating rule. Can you forgive me?”

“Of course I can.”

Somehow, the reason he stubbornly resisted our connection seems inconsequential now. Because he’s here.

And every second since he walked through that door tonight proves he’s done pushing me away.

He slants his lips over mine again as we quickly get wrapped up in each other. Now that the air is clear between us, a lightness fills my chest like the tiny bubbles in a can of pop.

No more unspoken words or regrets.

After dancing around each other for what feels like ages, we’re giving in. This isn’t the same as the night by the pool. It’s so much more.

That night, I baited him. Drove him to act, taking something he wasn’t planning to give me. I forced his hand.

Tonight, though? He’s choosing me.

Consciously.

Willingly.

There's something special about this man. He's different. A part of him sings to me, awakening the deepest parts of my soul. A dormant piece of myself I've wanted to bring to life for years but didn't know how.

With each swipe of his tongue, he casts away another layer of my shame and guilt.

How could something this right be wrong?

In his arms, I'm nothing but a vessel for pleasure, waiting for him to mold me into anything he desires.

This is the man.

He's the one I've been waiting for. He's the one who can bring out the real me. I know he can. And this kiss tells me he will.

What might have started as some type of hero crush has given way to something more.

With my mind made up, my hormones shift into overdrive, leaving me ravenous for him. I want to explore every inch of his body and let him do the same to me.

As our kiss continues, the pressure between my legs becomes uncomfortable. I'm desperate for relief. Even when I read the spicy books Stella sent me and watched the porn that followed — for research — I wasn't this needy.

The moment he breaks the kiss, I'm ready to beg. For what? I don't know. Just more.

"James, please," I whimper, my lips hovering against his.

I bring my hands up to glide over his face, exploring his cheeks as if I'm reassuring myself he's here.

He came for me.

He presses his forehead to mine, and his warm breath dances over my face. "It's okay, sugar. It's okay. Just don't give up on me when I say the wrong things. Don't quit on me, and I'll never quit on you."

"I promise." I rise on my tiptoes to join our lips again, seeking more of the precious relief only he can deliver.

The anguish I've felt over hurting him slowly bleeds out of me with each second in his arms.

“Ahem.”

My body goes rigid at the intrusive sound. James reacts similarly. His eyes spring open, and he pulls his mouth from mine.

Our racing breaths echo around the room as we gather our composure. But it feels like a losing battle after that kiss.

I'll never feel composed again.

James wraps his arms tighter around my waist as he scans the space over my shoulder where the fake throat-clearing sound originated.

“Having fun, kids?”

Freya.

With a beaming smile, I twist my frame to face her while keeping myself locked in James's strong arms. Arms I never want to leave again. “Hey, Freya. Everything good?”

She sashays to the front desk and retrieves a lollipop. “Yep. All good with me. And how are you two doing?”

“Uh,” I start, then decide not to respond. It's not like she expected an answer. She's just stirring the pot.

James utters a similarly unintelligible retort.

Glad to know I'm not the only one who has been kissed speechless.

After quickly unwrapping her candy, Freya slumps into my chair behind the desk. “Glad you summed that up for me.” Her shoulders shimmy a bit, and her eyes sparkle with mirth. “James, does this mean we can cancel our meeting tomorrow?”

A jealous dagger attempts to prick at my euphoria bubble, but I quickly swat it away.

“No longer necessary, Freya,” he responds flatly.

She tugs the sucker from her mouth and runs her tongue along the inside of her lips overzealously. “Good. Glad you guys talked out your issues without my intervention.”

Talk? Yeah. Sure. I think he said five words to me. Maybe six. But he got his point across, and I’m fairly certain I did.

As her words permeate my thick skull, it dawns on me that his showing up here tonight might not have been unprompted. “Did you call him and tell him about my hissy fit?”

“Guilty.”

“Busybody.” I feign anger, then quickly drop the act. “But thank you.”

She winks, twirling the lollipop in her mouth. “I got you, girl.”

After extricating myself from James’s hold with great reluctance, I smooth the wrinkles of my dress and blouse. No longer sucked into his orbit, my awareness slowly returns.

I’m at work. On the clock. The consummate professional.

Trading glances with him, I expect to see a blissful expression that matches mine. But he’s unreadable once more.

I flash a smile, something simple to reassure him that I don’t regret what just happened. I don’t care if she called him or if he knows I had a panic attack. So long as he’s here, there’s nothing to be upset about.

I’m rewarded with a twinkle in his eyes and a barely-there grin. That tiny spark silences any doubts.

Leisurely, I flounce toward Freya with wings attached to my feet. I’m practically hovering. Is this cloud nine?

Out of nowhere, she waves flamboyantly. “Have a great night. See you at home, Lettie. Whenever you feel like returning.”

With my head cricked to one side, my eyes narrow to tiny slits. “What?”

She kicks her feet on the front desk, crossing them at the ankles, then tucks her arms behind her head, still sucking on

her candy. “Which part didn’t you hear, honey?”

My head wobbles, moving of its own accord. “I have two hours left on my shift.”

Her gaze drifts over my shoulder. “James. Get her out of here, will ya?” She meets my eyes again and waggles her brows. “Unless you’d rather use a room here? I think eight is open and clean.”

“Oh. Oh. *Oh!*” My eyes must look as big and round as the moon.

Oddly enough, I’m not entirely opposed to finding a room, per se. Then again, I don’t want my first time to be in a sex club. Even one as nice as this one.

And isn’t that sweet of Freya to cover for me? But should I leave in the middle of a shift to lose my V-card? Is that the kind of thing a mature professional such as myself would do?

Ha ha ha. Kidding. If he wants to leave with me, I’ll be gone so fast there’ll be a Roadrunner dust cloud behind me.

Swallowing around a newly formed lump in my throat — one that’s roughly the size of my hometown of Climax — I swing my head around to face James.

With three quick strides, he rejoins me and grabs one of my hands. He laces his fingers through mine and turns his full intensity on me. “Whatever you want, Lettie. I’ll wait for you to finish your shift. We don’t have to leave now. Or we can. No expectations about what happens if we leave. I only want to be with you. In any way you want.”

Well, butter my biscuit. Isn’t that the sweetest?

A naughty thought or seventeen crosses my mind. I trail the fingertips of my free hand over his forearm. “Any way I want, huh?”

That tiny grin of his morphs into a full-blown smolder. “You already know the answer to that. Don’t you, sugar bear?”

My core clenches, and sparks dance over my skin.

It's a baffling mystery how he makes such a childish pet name sound sexy. He even adds the slightest Southern twang. It's hidden there, beneath the words in his breathy timbre. It reminds me of home. But only the good parts.

“Yes. I suppose I do.”

He glances from my eyes to my mouth, then bites his lower lip. He's the picture of restraint.

It's sexy as hell to see him this way — full of self-control and patience, mixed with a desire that'll consume us both once he turns it loose. The fire burning in his blue-green eyes makes it known that it's not an absence of hunger for me but an overabundance of control allowing him to carry himself the way he does.

He fascinates me.

I've never known anyone like him. He's guarded with the armor of a medieval knight. Layers and layers of protection from the world. But it doesn't make him any less passionate than others. If anything, it's the opposite.

He's a pile of matchsticks, ready to ignite.

And I'm eager to burn with him.

“Take me home, James.”

CHAPTER 31

**BOSSINESS IS
ENCOURAGED IN HERE**

TOMER

As soon as we're through my front door, my lips are on hers.

She reaches around my waist, untucking my shirt with an impatient yank. I break the kiss long enough to pull it over my head before recapturing her mouth. Immediately, her hands go to work on my belt.

This might be a mistake, but I'm too weak to hold back. I want her.

I need her.

She brings something to life in me I never knew existed. With Lettie, I'm no longer a hollow shell of a man.

I'm more.

All my patience spent, I pick her up with the sole purpose of expediting our trek through my house. She wraps her soft thighs around my waist, and I swear to fuck, nothing has ever felt more natural than that.

When I break the kiss to fill my lungs, she trails kisses along my jawline and neck before licking the outer shell of my

ear. My cock stiffens impossibly harder, digging the head into the back of my zipper.

“Dammit, Lettie. Fuck,” I rumble, the husky sound coming from deep in my throat.

Skin on skin, my palms cushion the swell of her ass as I bolt across the room. Damn these fucking skirts she’s always wearing. I’ve dreamed of having my hands under one far too many times. Before setting her on my bed, I grope her cheeks indulgently, reveling in the perfection of those plump mounds filling the large spread of my hands.

Once she’s on my bed — where I’ve always wanted her — she attempts to scoot toward the center, but I halt her progress with a caveman grunt. Words are getting harder to find as my desire for her crescendos. Grabbing her by the ankles, I drag her roughly back to the edge of the mattress, spread her legs, and kneel between her thighs.

“Oh. Uh. Okay,” she mutters comically. Or is that nervousness?

The sudden way her eyes doubled in size and how she studies our positioning leaves me questioning her comfort level.

My greedy hands skim up her legs and pulse around her supple thighs, but I wait for her to focus on my face before reassuring her. “Relax, sugar bear. I’m gonna take care of you.”

As my promise cascades over her, she visibly relaxes. A sigh dances from her sweet mouth to my ears. “I know you will.” She ambushes me with a dazzling smile that spreads up to her hypnotic blue eyes. “You always take care of me, don’t you?”

“Yes. And I always will.”

The tenderness shining in her eyes and woven into her face threatens to break me.

I know you will, that look says. *I trust you*, it says.

With definitive confidence, she believes my intentions — caring for and protecting her.

I swallow back the fear that simple statement brings forth. If she knew how much I've been taking care of her, she probably wouldn't be here in my bed.

Or would she understand it's my way of showing her how I feel?

Until this moment, I didn't know how badly I needed her reassurance. She might not mean it the way I'm taking it, but I don't care. For now, I'll let myself believe she understands and accepts the way I care for her. The way I look over her, protecting her always.

Tonight, I'm okay fooling myself.

I knead her thighs, licking my lips as I contemplate my next move. So many tempting options.

In all things, not just sexually, I prefer to employ a deliberate strategy. Not this time, though.

Instead, all I have is a goal — pleasure. Tonight, I'll satisfy this ache that's been building since we met and for me, long before that.

Bending from the waist, she reaches for me. "Kiss me, please."

Her words, so polite and demure, while also direct, remind me of my true nature — a man who craves her submission and never takes orders. Not in here.

I rise from my knees, hovering over her. "Soon, I'll fuck those manners out of you. You'll still be begging, but not all sweet like that."

She grins coyly at me. "You don't want me to ask nicely?"

"I want to see you go wild, baby. I'm planning to bring out the nasty, wanton animal inside you. The one you didn't know was there."

"Good luck with that. My manners are hard-coded into my brain," she teases with a flirty eye roll. "So is that a no on the

kiss then? Because I still want one of those.”

I cluck my tongue at her. “From manners to sassy in two sentences, huh? I can fuck that out of you too.”

Her hands rest over my shoulders. “Please, take pity on me. If you don’t kiss me soon, I might explode.”

Although I need her submission, I’m desperate to please her. Denying her this request is a denial of my own cravings. And I’m too famished tonight to fuck around with power games.

I’ll let her think she can call the shots for now. Later, there’ll be time to remind her who’s in control in here.

“Give me your fucking mouth, Lettie,” I grit out.

With a victorious grin, she grabs my cheeks and slants her lips over mine. When our tongues touch, it takes all my strength to resist stripping her bare and ramming my cock into her.

Her kisses are laced with a narcotic. They must be. One hit, and I need more.

Before I snap, I pull back and press her onto the bed with the flat of my palm against her chest. She arches into my touch, complying with my unspoken demand.

“That’s my good girl.”

Back on my knees between her thighs, I resume caressing her legs, studying her pliant body to decide where to begin. I’ve dreamed of how I’d take her so many times, but now that she’s here, my mind is blank.

There’s no scene. No safe words. Nothing planned or negotiated. It’s like my first time all over again.

Only this time, it’s not just physical. At least not for me.

All I know is I want to taste her and sink my cock inside her delectable body until we go blind from pleasure.

Gripping her ankle, I lift one leg and study the black straps of her heels and how they wrap around her lower leg. “These are staying on.” I place a kiss on the inside of her ankle.

Gliding my palms up her legs, I tug her skirt a little at the hem. “This is staying on too. At least for now.” I trail my hands under the wispy fabric of her skirt and lace my fingers in the waistband of her silky panties. “These have to go, though.”

Without hesitation, I drag them down her legs with a touch of roughness.

They’re pink tonight.

My new favorite color.

Before discarding the panties, I bring them to my face and inhale. My eyes flutter closed as I commit her scent to memory.

Delicious.

My new favorite smell.

Raising to her elbows, she watches me closely, eyes ablaze and mouth gaping.

“Get comfortable, sugar bear. I’m going to be down here a while.”

She nods, her breasts heaving with her deep, frenzied breaths.

I flip up her skirt, exposing her pussy to my greedy eyes and mouth for the first time.

Beautiful. Perfection.

Just like the rest of her.

After tossing her legs over my shoulders, I wrap my arms around her thighs to hold her close to me. She’s not going anywhere.

Wasting no more time, I swipe my tongue up her seam, then wiggle the pointed tip through her folds, exploring and tasting.

With a dainty moan, she drops her upper body back to the bed and rasps, “Oh my god, yes.”

As I work my tongue up and down, nuzzling my mouth against her tender flesh, her breaths come louder and moans more frequent. Content to enjoy her pleasure as if it were my own, I don't rush my movements. As desperate as I am to get inside her, I want to see her explode with carnal satisfaction even more.

Not to mention, she was so fucking tight the last time I touched her, I need to ensure she's ready for me.

And she's delicious as fuck.

"You taste like heaven, baby," I mutter against her pussy.

When I locate her clit and pulsate my tongue across it, she sucks in a huge wave of air and holds it, her cheeks puffing up. Is she surprised I found it? A hint of smugness I don't usually experience sacks me in the chest.

As I work her clit in alternating patterns, I pay close attention to her reaction. She's not especially vocal, aside from delicate moans and rapid breaths. With the shyness she's shown so far, she's unlikely to tell me exactly how she wants to be licked and sucked.

That's fine, though. I'm happy to explore and uncover her secrets unaided. Even if it takes all damn night.

Without warning, a tremble rocks through her thighs a few seconds before they go rigid. Stiff as boards. She can't be *that* close already.

My gaze sweeps up her body. She's holding her breath and covering her face.

My mind races, attempting to figure out what could be causing the sudden tension.

"Let go, baby. Relax," I whisper, letting tenderness soak into my tone.

"I'm trying." She hides behind her hands. "This is new for me."

Wait. *What?*

That explains a lot.

Wish I had known. I'd have given her a bit more time to get comfortable with the idea of me between her legs. But unless she doesn't like what I'm doing — not likely — I'm not pulling my mouth from her delicious core until she's a quivering mess or soaks my face. Perhaps not until both happen.

“Look at me, baby,” I order, my tone leaving no room for negotiation. I might be willing to let her toy around with having some control tonight, but I won't tolerate her hiding from me.

With visible reluctance, she drops her hands and looks in my general direction. But she doesn't meet my eyes.

Gentler this time, I urge, “I need your eyes on mine, sweet girl.”

She finally complies. Warmth fills my chest.

Stroking her thighs with my palms in soothing circles, I ask, “Has no one ever licked this sweet pussy, Violet?”

With her teeth mashed and cheeks blushing like a rose, she shakes her head. “No.”

“That's a crying shame. This pussy deserves to be worshiped.” Holding her eye contact, I flatten my tongue and drag it through her sensitive pink flesh. “See how much I love it? So damn delicious.”

Her only response is a whimper and a nibble of her lip as she watches me.

Clearly, the men she was with before were not men but boys. Can't wait to show her how a queen should be treated.

“Don't worry, sweet girl. I'm going to eat this pussy so often you'll barely remember a time when my mouth wasn't right fucking here.” I lap at her center again, groaning at the taste of her essence as it explodes on my taste buds. “Licking you.” Another swipe of my tongue. “Sucking this clit.” I zero in on the sensitive pearl and give it a strong suck, then thrust my middle finger into her pussy at a slow, steady pace. “Fingering this tight hole.” I crick it upward. “Tapping your G-spot like this.”

Her back bows. “Holy shit, James. Yes, yes, yes.”

I flinch at the sound of my fake name on her lips. But it can only sour the mood for so long because as my finger works her further into a frenzy, her moans, pants, and chants drown out all other thoughts but making her climax.

I dive back in, sucking her clit and rolling my tongue around it in tight circles while my finger pulses, steadily increasing the pressure and pace.

Despite the erotic sounds she makes, her hips remain locked, frozen in place. Her quads are twitching, and I suspect it’s because she’s expending so much effort to hold still. Like she’s afraid to move.

I pause my movements, lick her taste off my lips, and patiently wait for her to open her eyes. Once she does, I calmly ask, “Lettie, is there a reason you’re forcing yourself to hold still?”

“Um. I-I,” she stammers but never answers.

“Are you nervous? Be honest.”

I know she is, but I need her to admit it.

“Yes. Terrified, actually.”

A grin I fail to hold back slips free.

She’s so fucking adorable. And innocent.

It’ll be my fucking pleasure to corrupt her.

With my tongue ready to pounce, I ask, “Do you like it when I do this?” Three strong licks swirling around her entrance before I drift up to tease and flick her clit. “And this?” I suck it into my mouth, pulsing a few times. “And how about this?” This time, I draw her clit between my teeth and bite down with the gentlest pressure.

“Mmm,” she moans, chest heaving.

“Lettie, do you like that?”

“Yes. So much.”

“Good. I can bring you to climax this way. Fuck, I’m *dying* to make you come with my tongue. Again and again until you can’t take it anymore and beg me to stop. You’ll feel so damn good. But it’s not going to happen if you don’t relax for me, my sweet girl. You do want to come, don’t you?”

Her answer is barely a whisper. One so quiet I almost miss it. “Yes.”

If we were *playing*, I’d force her to speak up and punish her if she didn’t. But she’s far more timid than I expected. Especially considering how frantic she was to strip off my clothes when we got in the door. The fly on my pants is still dangling open from where she was desperately trying to get them off me.

But now she’s like a whole other woman.

Innately, something tells me she needs me to bring out my dominant side. Not all the way, but enough for her to relax and give in to her pleasure. I don’t know what’s holding her back yet, but it’s probably because the boys who came before me had no idea how to please her.

“Lettie, would it help you relax if I told you exactly what I want you to do?”

“Oh god yes. *Please* do that.” Her relief is palpable from the tone of her voice, let alone the way she exhales and lets her entire body go limp.

Rewarding her honesty, I nuzzle into her delicious pussy again, pulsing my tongue briefly over her clit until her breathing accelerates again. “Okay, sugar bear. Here’s how this is going to work. Are you listening?”

Her eyes flutter open, and she trains them on me. She’s so fucking stunning. “Yes. I’m listening.”

“That’s my good girl. I’ll tell you exactly what to do, and you’ll have three seconds to comply. If you don’t do as I instruct, I’ll stop.”

“What if you tell me to do something I’m not able to do?”

Knowing how much she likes sarcasm, I attempt a joke to calm her. “Violet, I’m not going to ask you to do calculus or hack into the US Treasury Department’s server.” Through a teasing grin, I place a peck against her mound, aiming to get her comfortable with me being down here.

She laughs with me, and it feels genuine. It seems what I’m doing is working.

“I promise, baby. Anything I order you to do will be something you’re perfectly capable of doing. Okay?”

“Yeah, but how is that going to help me relax?”

“Because I’m taking all the pressure off you. The responsibility to please you rests on my shoulders.” I shift my body, pressing my shoulders into the backs of her thighs, embracing the unintentional pun. “If you do exactly what I tell you to do, there’s no need to be nervous or worried. Get out of your head and listen to me. All you need to do is follow my instructions. That’s it. Let go and let me please you.”

She nods and nibbles her lip. “I see. Okay.”

I blow a puff of warm breath over the apex of her thighs. “Are you ready, sugar?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Step one. Grab my head with one hand. Run your fingers through my hair.”

She doesn’t move right away, so I arch an eyebrow. “Three seconds.”

Without further delay, she juts her right hand out and caresses my head.

“Good girl. Now shove my face exactly where you want it.”

A look of indecision muddles her features, but she complies before her time is up, gently nudging me against her pussy.

I reward her with a series of rapid flicks of my tongue. Her ribs expand and collapse with her labored breathing.

“Take your shirt off, my sweet girl. Bra too. I want you topless so I can see more of your perfect body.”

She lets go of my head to remove the unnecessary coverings. Her breasts are as perfect as I remember them being from that night at her hotel.

I return my attention to her pussy as she collapses onto her back, the garments hanging off the edge of my bed. Now the only clothing remaining on her delectable body are those *fuck me heels* resting on my upper back and the skirt hoisted around her waist.

She is a vision, an utterly ravishing beauty.

Exquisite.

And for tonight, she’s all mine.

While I work my mouth over her wet pink flesh and spear her pussy with my fingers, she resumes stroking my hair and massaging my scalp in tender circles. This entire act is supposed to be for her pleasure, but I soon find myself in a state of euphoria.

Her touch on my head, her taste on my tongue, and her breathy mewls fill a part of me that’s long been vacant.

How is she doing this to me? No other woman has even come close to giving me this much satisfaction. And I haven’t even gotten inside her yet.

After devouring her for several minutes, I pause to tell her, “Now I want you to buck your hips up or swirl them around to chase your pleasure.”

“I-I,” she starts.

I cut her off with a stern warning. “Three seconds, Lettie. Thrust these fucking hips and drive your pretty pussy into my mouth. One.”

Before I say two, she nods and tentatively swirls her hips, testing the motion. Although far too timid, it’s a start. As I make a meal out of her body, her movements gain confidence.

Sensing she needs a bit more encouragement, I toss another command. “Hold me in place with one hand while you drive your pussy into my mouth. Other hand on one of your nipples, pinching and squeezing.”

She moves her hands as I instructed, but her hips are still barely moving.

“Last chance, Lettie. Fuck my face, or I’ll stop. Writhe and grind all over me. Come all over my face like a dirty girl. That’s what I want you to do. For me. Right fucking now.”

By the time the sentence has passed my lips, she responds with a deliberate intensity. I growl and moan into her pussy as she thrusts her hips. “Yes, precious girl,” I praise her, my words coming out in a garble due to the way she’s obediently grinding against me.

I’m in fucking heaven.

Her pussy floods for me, growing wetter and wetter as she rocks into my face.

She screams out, “Oh my god. Fuck. Yes, yes, yes.”

I moan my encouragement, refusing to take my mouth off her. Sucking and tugging her clit between my lips, I apply increasing suction. When I slip my finger back inside her, she’s so fucking drenched that I’m finally able to add my index finger.

It sends her careening over the edge. Her thighs slam inward, squeezing my neck and face. I’m locked in place, but there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

Her moans spike in volume, and her hips buck wildly. As she starts trembling, the grip she has on my hair tightens, sending spikes of pain through my scalp.

Yes, fuck yes, let go, Lettie.

“Oh my god. *Oh my god,*” she wails, not holding back.

She finally gives in and comes beautifully, her tight channel fluttering and clenching around my fingers as she cries out in pleasure.

I continue sucking her clit and fucking her with my fingers until she's ridden it out. When she grows oversensitive, I release her clit and withdraw my fingers, while keeping my mouth against her pussy so she can keep bucking against me if she needs to.

She does.

Like a good fucking girl.

Four subtle thrusts against my mouth and chin, then her entire body softens and sags deep into my mattress. The hold she has on my hair finally loosens. Before she lets the strands of my hair go, she rubs my head in soothing circles.

So fucking sweet. That's why she's my sugar bear.

"You did so good, sweetness."

After I rise and discard my pants onto the floor, I crawl up her body slowly, enjoying every blissful moment of her post-climax haze as much as she is.

By the time my face is over hers, one thought screams through my mind at decibels so loud it'd cause pain if it were outside my head.

She's not supposed to be mine. Yet after tonight, there isn't a force on earth strong enough to take her away from me. I'm never letting her go. Never.

Violet Anastasia Holt is *mine*.

LESSON TIME

LETTIE

How did I ever, for one second, think this man was devoid of strong emotions?

James's eyes hold more passion than I've ever known. Especially as he stares down at me, silent and stoic as always but abounding with desire and something else. Reverence maybe? Adoration?

I've never seen a look like that before — not on TV, in the movies, or in real life. For damn sure, no one has ever gazed at me the way he is now.

Intense and carnal, the fire in his blue-green irises burns a hole deep into my soul. The mark he's made there will never be healed, nor will it be covered, mended, or patched.

It's not painful. Not like a wound or a scar.

It's a branding.

Almost as if he's laid claim to a part of me.

And once he enters my body, I suppose he will have done just that.

When the earnestness of our connection becomes too powerful to keep my eyes open, I tilt my head, close my eyes, and offer him my lips.

When he claims my mouth, the taste lingering on his lips surprises me.

Is that what I taste like? I wouldn't know since I've never put my fingers inside myself, and if I had been so brazen, I'd *certainly* never have tasted or even smelled it. That would have been a first-class ticket to Hell.

My initial reaction to the unexpected flavor, in true Lettie fashion, is involuntary, and I pull back from the kiss with a yank of my head.

James gruffly denies my retreat, snaking his hand between us to squeeze my jaw. "No chance, sweetness."

His tone could melt the arctic, leaving the dwindling penguin population without a home faster than global warming ever will.

Gah. That makes the forty-seventh random Lettie thought since I've been in his bed. The only time my brain shut off was when he was ordering me around. Maybe he'll do that some more so I can get lost in the heavenly way he makes me feel.

As if I just asked him to boss me around out loud, he demands, "Taste yourself on my lips. Enjoy it the way that I do."

My brain powers off like he pulled the plug.

This time, when he slams his mouth to mine, I open for him and let him stroke my tongue with his.

The flavor of my arousal mixes with the taste of his kisses that I'd grown accustomed to in a heady cocktail. It leaves me wanton and craving more. When he attempts to withdraw his tongue from my mouth, I suck it back in, needy for more. It's as if our combined tastes unleash something carnal in me.

Much like he does.

He deepens the kiss, tilting my head to one side and thoroughly fucking my mouth with his tongue. There isn't

another way to describe what he's doing to me right now.

I love everything about the way he's making me feel — like a sexual being, embracing her desires and giving into her urges. A woman using her body the way it was designed to be used.

Lick by lick, nibble by nibble, he breaks down my walls.

As the kiss goes on, I find myself grinding my weeping pussy against his very naked lower body. When did he take off his bottoms?

Oh my gosh. This is happening.

Like *really happening* happening.

And judging by how I'm writhing against him, my body has decided it's about damn time.

Oh hell. The Lizzo song of the same name jumps into my mind, distracting me once more.

Aaand that makes the forty-eighth time ADHD has attempted to ruin this moment for me.

“James, I want you to keep telling me what to do.”

He grins against my lips. Between kisses, he responds with words I never thought I'd hear come out of any man's mouth. Let alone *this* man. “Lettie baby, if you don't stop giving me orders, I'll have to fuck that sinful mouth of yours to shut you the hell up.”

This polite, quiet gentleman in the streets is an erotic, filthy force of nature in the sheets.

I gulp. Then gulp again. And a third one for good measure.

“Okay.”

It's entirely possible I just flooded the bed with arousal. That's a touch embarrassing. But it's his fault. So... yeah. His sheets, his problem, and his fault.

No clue where his hands were a second ago — because he scrambled my brain like eggs in a pan when he threatened to shut me up with his dick — but he's suddenly cupping both

my breasts roughly. *Oh I like that.* His deft fingers squeeze and pluck my nipples, then he pinches them... with increasing pressure.

Like an overabundance of pressure.

Filling my lungs with a giant wave of oxygen, I throw my head back, overcome with a confusing mix of pleasure and pain. Do I love it or hate it? I don't know. But my hips keep right on rocking against his erection as it prods and pokes through my folds. My body seems to be fully on board with the pain.

“Do you like that, sugar bear?” he rumbles against my neck between licks and featherlight kisses.

The way he's playing my body is both confusing and overwhelming. He's groping my breasts with ferocity, kissing my neck tenderly, and speaking to me with a mixture of both. All at once, he's hard and soft, ice and fire, commanding and begging.

“Uh huh. I think so.”

He pinches my nipples harder. “How about now? Are you sure yet?”

My jaw goes slack, hanging open, while I scream silently until I find my voice. “Okay, so no. I don't think I like it. But I also *know* I like it. This is confusing.”

He chuckles, but it's not his normal lighthearted laugh — the kind he tries to hold back when I do something stupid or dorky. This laugh is darker and has an almost menacing quality. Oddly, it doesn't worry or frighten me. It turns me the hell on even more than whatever baffling thing he's trying to prove with my nipples.

“Then I'll stop for now, baby.” He releases his tight grip on them, substituting it with soothing circles. “Just remember who's in charge tonight. Got it?” He seems to accentuate his words with a pump of his hips, making the tip of his cock poke at my entrance, nearly slipping inside me.

I gasp to stifle a moan. If sex feels half as good as *that*, I can't wait for the main event.

I'm tempted to beg him to get inside me already, but given the reminder he just gave me and my nips, I'll bite my tongue.

For now.

He kisses his way back up my jaw and captures my lips. Acting purely on instinct, I hoist one of my legs to the side to prop it over his hip. The tips of my high heels must be jabbing against the lower part of his ass at this angle, but it doesn't seem to hurt him.

Perhaps he likes the pain.

In fact, when his mouth was between my thighs, proving heaven exists, he groaned and sucked harder at my core each time I accidentally dug my heels into his back.

The fact that I sort of enjoyed the way he was torturing my nipples might not be as weird as I feared. And many of the people at Bask seem to like pain. Maybe I'm normal after all.

He breaks the kiss, fixing his smoldering gaze on me. "You ready for my cock, sugar?"

Am I ready?

The head of his dick rubs against my clit, answering the question for me in an instant. "Yes. So ready."

"Thank fuck. Because if I don't get inside your tight little pussy soon, I might die."

"Never took you for the overdramatic type," I tease, unable to bite my tongue.

"That's because you drastically underestimate how fucking enticing you are."

He raises to his knees, then reaches into the nightstand, pulling out a strip of condoms. Once he's opened the package and removed one, he offers it to me.

I shake my head, remaining silent.

"No?" he asks.

What the fuck do I know about putting on a condom? They didn't teach that in Sunday school or youth group. It wasn't on

the SATs or covered at college either.

“I don’t know how,” I confess, my cheeks warming.

“Never had a man eat you for dessert and never put on a condom.” He shakes his head, but not with disappointment or disgust. Unless I’m mistaken, that’s a look of satisfaction.

His next words confirm my suspicion. “Call me greedy, but I love the idea of claiming some of your firsts.”

“Well, I aim to please,” I jest, hoping to avoid talking about how many of my firsts he’s claiming.

Essentially all of them.

Resting on his heels between my parted thighs, he narrows his eyes at me, lowering his chin inquisitively. “Has a man ever made you come before?”

“Yes,” I announce, unable to contain my proud smile.

He puckers his lips into a pout — so unlike him. “Damn. I was hoping to claim that too.”

I laugh softly. “Oh you did.”

He quirks his head to the side.

“A few weeks ago and again tonight. First and second are yours, James.”

Instead of beaming back at me as I expect, his budding smile slips away. I want to ask him what’s wrong, but before I can formulate the words, he takes my hand and puts the condom in my palm.

“Here’s your first condom lesson, Lettie Holt, and then I’ll claim your third climax too.” His eyes dance with a touch of mirth, wiping away my earlier fear that something was wrong. “You don’t want to put it on inside out, so make sure it looks like this.”

He explains a little more, including how to grasp it properly and position it over his tip.

Before we slip it on, he engulfs my other hand with his and guides my movements, wrapping our combined hands around

his hard cock. Together, we stroke his length up and down in long, firm tugs. Keeping his hand over mine, he controls the pace and the force of the motion.

He's teaching me how to jack him off without telling me what he's doing or mocking me for my inexperience. Considering my failure to grab his dick thus far, he must realize I have no clue what I'm doing.

Fuck that's hot.

Not only our hands moving over him but also the way he's being so kind to me. I must be the luckiest girl in the world to have him for my first time.

In high school, I had enough sexually active friends to know that most girls aren't so blessed with their first lovers. Until my senior year, none of my girlfriends had a guy go down on her. Even friends who weren't saddled with religious guilt like Stella and me — the ones who were free with their bodies — didn't *ever* talk about that. And believe me, they flapped their jaws enough to tell me every other damn thing their boyfriends did to them. That includes anal, which Ginny Rodgers thought didn't count as sex. Idiot.

A groan rumbles from his chest, drawing my mental focus back to the way we're stroking his cock. Unable to look away, my eyes stay locked on the movement until he hisses through his teeth, finally stealing my gaze away from his rather impressive dick. And since I've now seen porn — high five to me — I can say so without a doubt.

Oh damn. Does that mean it's going to hurt worse?

Only one way to find out.

His intense stare burns my skin, practically devouring me as his eyes sweep over my face down to my chest. It's only then I remember I'm fully exposed to him, without anything to hide me from his scrutiny. My skirt is the only scrap of clothing that remains, but it's all bunched up around my waist.

Before I clam up with fear, he takes my other hand and wraps his fingers over mine like before. Together, we roll on the condom.

Another first for his little book. Hand to Bible, I'll eagerly give this man all my firsts. My seconds, thirds, and hundredths too.

A twinge of guilt pricks at my chest, and for a split second, I wonder if I should tell him I'm a virgin.

But I quickly decide against it out of fear that he'll refuse to have sex with me. No clue why he would do that or if he would, but my fears aren't always logical. Besides, it's my secret to tell or to keep. It'll be irrelevant after a few more seconds.

Back between my thighs, he lowers his body to mine, letting some of his weight rest atop me. As much as I adore the feel of his frame aligned with mine, it's becoming clear that my time as a virgin is about to expire.

My breath hitches, and a tremble of unease rocks through me.

Afraid he'll see the panic I'm struggling to hide, I grasp his cheeks and kiss him. To my relief, the kiss redirects his attention from my face and quickly soothes my mounting anxiety. Soon enough, I'm wrapped up in him and no longer stuck in my head or riddled with self-doubt.

This time, when my breathing picks up, it's not because I'm scared, but because I'm desperate for him to get on with it.

Speaking of which, what's taking him so long?

I pull back to meet his eyes, hoping I can silently communicate how badly I want him inside me without talking. For one, what are words when your body is on fire like this? And for two, he told me not to boss him around. So my begging eyes are my only weapon.

"Getting impatient, Lettie baby?" he taunts.

This fucker.

He read my begging eyes loud and clear.

"Yes," I whine with a huff.

“Is that how you ask? Where are those Southern manners?”

Again, this fucker.

“Please.”

“Please, what?”

Yet again, this motherfucking fucker.

I know what he wants me to say, but he has no idea how hard it’ll be to get these words out. My cheeks are flaming Cheetos level hot.

“*Please* get inside me.” When he doesn’t respond or make a move, I add a whimper and pout for good measure.

The teasing glint in his eyes fades, giving way to more of that ardent passion from earlier.

Right before he kisses me, he whispers across my lips, “You have no idea how hard it was to wait for you to say that. I’ve been aching for you for so long, Violet.”

Once his mouth is back where it belongs — sealed to mine — he coaxes my lips open and tangles our tongues in languid strokes. With deliberate slowness, he reaches between us, grips his cock, and nudges it into my body.

All the rush and frenzy of our earlier kisses give way to a different kind of intensity. It’s less harsh and frantic but no less consuming or passionate. A poignant tenderness blossoms inside my heart, making this moment all the more special.

He’s so damn perfect.

He can’t possibly know I’m a virgin, but the way he’s being so loving and gentle, it seems like he does.

As he starts to slip inside me, he breaks the kiss, opting to stare into my eyes instead. With our foreheads pressed together, our breaths mingle. Despite the hammering of my pulse and nerves, I don’t break eye contact. *I’m not shy anymore.*

My racing thoughts are silenced as I lose myself in his eyes. They hypnotize me.

Inch by inch, he drives his hips forward, then pulls back before advancing again. His breath hitches, and a ghost of a moan comes from somewhere deep in his chest.

Although it seems like he's struggling, he manages to get deeper with each forward pulse. The farther he goes, the more it hurts, though. I grit my teeth when the sting becomes overwhelming and approaches the point where pleasure stops drowning out the pain. And this isn't the good kind, like with my nipples. Sadly.

Does it *always* hurt like this?

I should have made Stella tell me more about her first time instead of sticking my fingers in my ears like a damn child every time she attempted to *educate* me — her words, not mine.

Every muscle in my body tenses at his intrusion. Consciously, I know he's not ripping me open, but it feels that way.

“Fucking hell, baby. You're too tight. Relax.”

Not sure *relaxing* is the problem here, but I can't tell him that.

Reminding myself this is likely a temporary pain that will soon pass — otherwise, women would avoid sex like I avoid doing laundry — I command my vagina to soften and let him in.

As you'd expect, it ignores me. Probably because it's a vagina. And I'm no vagina whisperer.

James rises off me enough to allow his hand to slip between my thighs. Like he has eyes on his fingertips, he finds my clit almost instantly. It's insulting since it took me longer to find it for myself the first few times I mustered the courage to attempt a little self-loving.

As he drags the thick pads of his fingers over the tiny bundle of nerves, he's able to slip his cock farther inside me, and a moan escapes me along with a warm puff of air. *Oh, that's much better.*

Maybe his fingers are vagina whisperers.

Unfortunately, the deeper he goes, the harder it becomes to control my facial expressions or censor the sounds flying out of my mouth. Instead of dainty moans and girly gasps, I've graduated to colorful expletives that would make a truck driver look at me cross-eyed.

He's only been inside me for a handful of seconds, but it feels like an eternity. I don't know how much farther James needs to go before this is over, but it *cannot* fucking come soon enough — no pun intended. My hands might as well have been cast in stone where I'm gripping his shoulders.

"Hold on, hold on," I blurt out when it becomes too much. "Stop, stop. Give me a damn second."

He pauses without hesitation and slips out of me. Despite the physical relief of his withdrawal, my heart hurts at not being able to please him.

Scooping my hair back, he tucks it behind my ears and looks at me without judgment or disappointment. Only concern and kindness. "What's wrong, Lettie? Did I hurt you? I thought you were ready."

Tears fill my eyes from out of nowhere. I can't answer him. I want to. But if I tell him the truth, it'll make him feel bad. And if I don't, I'm a liar *and* a V-card concealer.

"Oh sugar bear. Why are you crying? Did I do something wrong?" He kisses my tears away, literally and figuratively. "I'm sorry, baby. Are you okay?"

"No, no, no. *I'm* sorry. It's not you. It's me. I'm-I'm..." My sentence dies because I have no clue how to finish the sentence.

I'm a virgin.

I'm an idiot.

I'm a mess.

But wait. Hold up. I'm not a virgin anymore.

He was inside me. Although I don't think he enjoyed it much or got all the way in, I'm pretty sure it still counts.

"Stop that. Don't finish that sentence. You're perfect." He kisses me, a gentle peck, then another. "I thought you might have this reaction again, but I got carried away and forgot to go slower. I should have checked in more." He shakes his head, gnashing his jaw tight like he's mad at himself.

Oh this sweet man.

A fresh wave of tears spills down my cheeks, dripping onto the pillow. "It's not your fault. If you were going any slower, you'd be moving in reverse. And this isn't like last time. I swear."

He frowns, then pulls away. I grip him tighter, refusing to let him go. If he leaves me right now, I won't be able to handle the sting of my failure. My aching vagina will have nothing on the pain from my rejected heart.

"I'm just getting you some tissues, sweetness. I'll be right back." He kisses me again, and when he pulls away, I release my death grip on him.

While he dashes across the room, I attempt to gather my composure. After three deep breaths, a shred of calmness returns.

And then it's shattered.

"Lettie, umm... care to explain this?"

I bolt upright and am met with a dumbstruck James staring at me from across the room. He holds a box of tissues in one hand, and his other hand points at his condom-covered penis.

As much as I'd love to admire the view of his lean, toned body in all its glory, this isn't the time.

Odd. I do *not* recall the condom being red before we put it on him. It was a lovely cream color. However, now, it's decidedly streaked with red.

Oh boy. That's my hymen blood.

Ah ha! I'm no longer a virgin — officially. *Hurrah!*

My mental celebration is cut short as I realize my secret is no longer *my* secret.

“Well?” he prods, compassion woven into his tone. His shock seems to have reduced from a level eighty to more like thirty-five.

I attempt a somewhat light-hearted yet factual response since he’s always Mr. Logical. “That appears to be... blood. And I would assume it is mine. Sorry about that.”

Using a tissue from the box, he removes the condom from his dick and tosses it in the wastebasket.

Stella told me that it was possible I’d bleed when I lost my virginity. And thinking back to high school, about half the girls said they bled their first time. Weird.

Shaking his head and mumbling, he approaches the bed and sits beside me. After removing two more tissues from the box, he dabs at my cheeks, wiping away the remnants of my tears.

Reaching up, I cup my palm over the back of his hand, holding it and the tissue to my cheek. My eyes telegraph an apology I’m too chickenshit to use my voice to convey.

The expression on his face is undecipherable. There’s virtually nothing left of the passionate man I saw earlier.

Shit, shit, shit. I really blew it this time.

More tears flow, but these aren’t from physical pain. They’re guilty tears, fueled by gut-wrenching regret. And fear that I may have lost him by concealing my virginity. Ironically, I was afraid telling him would send him packing.

He resumes wiping my face. When he speaks, his tone is kind but reserved. “Since my face was between your thighs for a good long time, I know you’re not on your period. So that only leaves one thing.” Lowering his chin, he wordlessly implores me to confirm what we both already know to be the truth.

I put my head down, shielding myself from his probing eyes and wrapping my arms around my midsection.

“Yes,” I answer in a shaky whisper.

I’m not sure why I clench my entire body while waiting for his response.

After a weary sigh, he sets the box of tissues on the nightstand and moves to the foot of the bed. Without speaking, he unstraps my heels, removing them from my feet. Once he’s done, he slips into bed, rolls me onto my side, and spoons up behind me.

When he wraps his arm over my waist, he pulls me back against his chest and gives me the most soothing embrace I’ve ever had.

Our bodies are motionless except for our calm breathing as we cuddle in complete silence for a long time.

He’s not angry. At least, I don’t think he is. But I need to know how badly I fucked up this brand spanking new relationship.

“Are you mad at me?”

He loosens his tight hold on my waist to move my hair out of the way. Burrowing his head into the curve of my neck, he inhales deeply. “I’m not mad at you, baby, but I’m upset. Not sure whether that makes sense or not.”

“It does a little.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you’re a virgin?”

“Technically, I’m not a virgin anymore,” I hedge.

“Violet,” he scolds, but there’s a slight laugh in his tone.

I swallow around a newly formed lump in my throat. “I was afraid you wouldn’t want to have sex with me if you knew.”

The bed shakes, and his chest bumps into my back.

I crane my neck for a glimpse of his face. “Are you laughing at me?”

What was silent laughter becomes boisterous, bringing a lightness and flutters of hope to my chest.

This man doesn't laugh enough. I want to make him sound and look like that as much as possible. But next time, perhaps not because I said something that's apparently as stupid as the day is long.

"Sorry to laugh, Lettie," he murmurs against my neck as his hilarity fit dies down. "It's just... well, that couldn't be further from the truth."

"What?" I roll over so I can fully see his handsome face. Is he fucking with me? He's not a jokester, but I suspect I'm being pranked.

Once I'm facing him, he kisses me, wearing a broad smile he's powerless to suppress.

"Explain what's so funny, please."

"Sugar bear, did you not notice how rock hard I got when you told me I was the first to make you come? Or when I got to teach you how to put a condom on me?"

Turns out I didn't just get hit with the idiot stick, but I was whooped with the whole dang forest.

"You like it?"

He cups my cheek so lovingly, his thumbs massaging my skin. "If you're asking if I like being the one who gets to take your virginity? The first one to be inside you? The first one to claim your body? The one you've chosen to give this gift? Fuck. Yes." His expression hardens a touch. "What I don't like is that I hurt you. If you'd told me, I'd have spent more time getting you ready."

"Get me ready? What do you mean?"

"I'd have given you a few more orgasms first to ensure you were relaxed. Added another finger or two. Maybe even used a slim toy to stretch you out first. I'd have had some lube ready to go, although I don't think that was a problem for you." His hand caresses my cheek down to my neck. "But most of all, I'd have been gentler with you."

I search his face for any signs of deceit. "Really? I honestly thought you'd want nothing to do with me because of

my inexperience. Especially since you're... you know." My eyes flutter backward in a half-roll.

He grins, dragging his teeth over his lower lip seductively. "Since I'm what?"

"Are you going to make me say it?"

A single nod is his only response.

"Fine," I huff. "You're a Dom. A kinky sex expert. A sexpert, if you will. Why would you want someone who doesn't know what she's doing when you could have your choice of experienced women?"

My gut sinks at the thought. I'll never be able to catch up to what he's used to having in a lover.

"Sugar, I want you so fucking badly nothing short of you saying no was going to stop me from getting inside you."

"Even if I don't know what I'm doing?"

"Lettie, there is nothing I need from you — and I mean abso-fucking-lutely nothing — that you aren't capable of giving me. I'll happily teach you anything you want to learn. In fact, I can't wait to show you what your body can do. I'm hard just fucking thinking about it."

My nervousness fades, giving way to tendrils of anticipation. "So I didn't fuck this up?"

He raises his brows and pulls me close. "This what?"

"Us."

"Not a chance, gorgeous. I'm not going anywhere unless you're coming with me."

I can't speak; my voice has been trampled by a herd of rhinos.

"If you'll let me, I'll teach you how to receive pleasure. How to please yourself. And how to please me. How does that sound?"

"Yes, please," I beg.

"Always so polite."

He clicks his tongue at me, then dives in for a toe-curling kiss. One overflowing with desire and easing every last fear.

“How sore are you right now?” His soft words brush across my lips.

Until he asked, I hadn't noticed, but all the earlier pain has vanished. “I feel fine.”

“Do you want to try again tonight or wait?”

I open my mouth to respond, but he halts my words with a finger resting against my lips.

“Don't tell me what you think I want to hear. Tell me how you *feel*. Be honest. Tonight is all about you. I want to make your first time special, and if that means we wait, then we wait.”

After studying his face for a few seconds, getting lost in those turquoise pools, I answer with complete honesty. “I want to try again.”

“You'll stop me if you get sore, right?”

“I promise.”

“Good girl.” Capturing my mouth once more, he tangles our tongues, quickly ratcheting up my arousal. “Lettie, baby. Get on your hands and knees. Put that sweet ass in the air.”

CHAPTER 33

**YOU'RE MY, MY, MY, MY...
LOVER**

TOMER

Lettie visibly swallows, then narrows her eyes in response to the order I gave her. She looks as if she's unsure whether I'm serious. To remove any doubt she may have, I raise my brows and intensify my gaze as I rise to my knees.

She must remember my three-second rule because she springs into action. Once she's rolled onto her stomach, I grip the skirt that's still wrapped around her waist. I yank the fabric upward, helping her to her hands and knees.

"Oof!" she squeaks and giggles at my less-than-gentle handling, then cuts a pointed look at me over her shoulder.

"Did you think I'd treat you like you're made of glass just because I found out no man has been inside your tight pussy?"

"I see why you wanted to leave the skirt on."

"One thing you'll learn about me, Lettie, is that almost everything I do is by design."

"And what's the *design* for the skirt other than acting like a hoist?"

Releasing my grip on the skirt, I skim the supple skin of her hips and dig my fingertips into her plump ass. “I guess you’ll have to wait and see, sugar bear.”

She licks her lips as the rouge in her cheeks spreads like wildfire.

I spend a few seconds enjoying the view of her svelte body in my bed. *Damn.* That’s a welcome sight. One I never thought I’d see outside my dreams.

I’ve fucked my fist dozens of times in this bed with visions of her traipsing through my mind. And now she’s here in the flesh.

There’s an almost imperceptible quiver in her voice when she asks, “What are you going to do first?”

“First, I’m going to clean you up. Then I’m going to eat your pussy again. And after that, I’m going to get you ready for my cock. How does that sound?”

She shrugs, feigning indifference. “I suppose it’s acceptable.”

My hand raises, hovering over her ass as I prepare to give her a smack for the sass. But I quickly remember that we have no arrangement. There’s no safe word, and we haven’t discussed what she’s willing to try.

Something I’ll rectify after tonight.

Slowly, I bring my hand down, returning it to her waist. I squeeze her gently, losing myself in the way my hand looks on her body and picturing all the things I could do to her if I had her consent.

She recaptures my attention with her breathy words when she whispers, “You wanted to spank me for what I said, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you? Because virgins don’t get spanked?”

Using the skirt to guide her movements again, I raise her up and pull her backward. “Come here, sugar bear. Bring your

back to my chest.”

Once we’re both on our knees, I sink onto my ankles, bringing her with me so she’s resting on my lap. I wrap one arm around her waist and tuck her hair to one side with my free hand.

“You’re not my sub, and we haven’t talked about your limits or what you’d like to try.”

She skims her palms lovingly over my forearm at her waist, holding me in place. “If I’m not your sub, what am I?” Like her question, her voice is as innocent as the first bloom of spring.

A dozen answers die in my mouth and tumble down my throat, threatening to choke me.

My forbidden fantasy.

Too damn beautiful to be real.

My greatest mistake.

My dream come true.

My obsession.

And unfortunately... my boss’s secret daughter.

Instead of giving her one of those responses, I opt for something less overwhelming. “You’re my lover.”

“I love that song,” she says through a grin.

Nuzzling into her neck, I begin working my way down her stomach with one hand, keeping the other wrapped around her. “Maybe you can sing it for me later.”

“You know the song?”

I’ve heard her sing it before. She doesn’t know that, though.

My fingers find their way to my target, parting her silky flesh until I locate her clit. “Yeah. Taylor Swift, right?”

Her breathing accelerates. “Wow. You were attractive before, James. But you just kicked it up a half a dozen notches.”

That fucking name falling from her lips stabs me in the chest again. Thankfully, she distracts me from the discomfort by bringing up one of her arms to tenderly cup the nape of my neck.

I close my eyes, soaking in the perfect feel of her body against mine and the enticing way she massages my hairline. When I kiss her neck, she tilts her head to the side, exposing more of her silky skin for me to lavish with attention.

At the club, I'm not known for being overly affectionate. After all, that comes from emotions, which I've worked my entire life to mask. So much to the point I rarely feel them anymore. While I always take care to ensure my sub's comfort, I've found I'm better suited for those who don't need all the cuddling and soft touch from their Doms. I'll do it when necessary, especially in an aftercare situation, but it's never been natural for me.

But with this woman, it's as effortless as breathing.

All I want to do is touch her, caress her, kiss her, and hold her. Even if she never wanted to have sex, I'd be content as long as she was in my arms.

Her soft moan vibrates against my chest as I swirl my fingertips around her clit languidly. There's a tentative sway in her hips that I want to encourage.

"It's okay to chase your pleasure, sweetness. Rock your hips or put your hand over top of mine to guide my movements. Or you can tell me what feels good." I kiss her neck. "Just say so if you want me to touch you harder or softer. Faster or slower. You have my permission to ask for anything you want. *Anything*. Don't be shy with me."

"I'm trying. It's not that I'm uncomfortable with you because I'm not. But I feel... I don't know. It's like shame or embarrassment I can't quite explain."

"You've been at the club for a while now. You must have seen enough to know there's no shame in taking your pleasure."

“I know. But it’s different for other people than it is for me.”

“Don’t worry, sweetness. You’ll get there in time. I’m a patient man.”

“You’re amazing. Thank you, James.”

That’s it. I can’t fucking stand it another second.

“Lettie, don’t call me that when we’re being intimate.”

Her hips, which had gradually begun rocking into my touch, grind to an immediate halt, and her entire body tenses.

“I’m sorry,” she blurts out.

I grit my teeth, cursing myself for snapping. How do I fucking explain?

Attempting to reassure her, I keep strumming her clit and kissing her neck. “Don’t apologize. I’m not mad. I just don’t care for that name at times like these.”

Never had a problem with it at the club. Not once.

But I’ve never been intimate with a woman I actually cared for before.

“*That* name? It’s your name, but okay. I’m no sexpert, so what do I know about what gets your rocks off?” She utters a nervous giggle, stopping her adorable rambling. “What should I call you? Do you like sir? Master? Something else?”

“No. Those aren’t for me either.”

Think, think, think. I need to come up with something believable. But the only thing I want her to call me is Tomer. I want my real name on her lips when she’s naked in my arms or shaking with pleasure.

But that’s one dream that’ll never come true.

With a questioning lilt in her tone, she asks, “Uhhh... *Daddy?*”

I laugh quietly and kiss her neck again, dragging her delicious scent into my lungs. “No, baby. I don’t have a daddy/little girl kink.”

The tightness in her frame subsides, and she resumes rolling her hips. “Well, what do you want me to call you?”

“Hmm. I enjoy calling you sugar bear, sweetness, and baby. Those just come to me when I look at you. They feel right to me. What comes naturally to you?”

“Oh boy. Now the pressure is on, huh? I better make this good.”

“How about nothing until you have something fitting?”

She scoffs. “I’m not going to call you *nothing*. That’s a terrible pet name.” Her voice softens to barely a wisp. “To me, you’re the opposite of nothing.”

My chest expands as her meaning sets in, but before I get myself carried away, I refocus on pleasure.

Sex. Her body. That’s it.

Enough fucking feelings.

I’m not entitled to take those from her, and I wouldn’t know what to do with them.

“Enough talk,” I snap, a touch of gruffness in my tone.

“Oh, you’re bossy again. That’s sexy.” She inhales sharply. “Ooh! That’s it. I could call you *sexy*.”

Wearing nothing but a grin she can’t see, I loosen my grip on her waist and push her down with one hand. “Hands and knees. I’ll be right back.”

She complies, and I jump up to get everything I’ll need. When I return to the bed, she’s positioned exactly as I told her.

“You look stunning like that,” I tell her with unwavering sincerity while I circle the bed. “Like something straight out of my fantasies.”

Her only response is a tiny wiggle of her ass and a cheeky grin.

I lose sight of her beautiful smile when I move behind her, holding a warm, wet cloth. She tenses when I clean her of all

remaining blood.

“Too sore, baby?”

“No. It’s fine. No pain at all.”

“Then why did you flinch?”

“Because you surprised me.”

“Oh.” I resume massaging her with the towel, being as delicate as I can. “I’m going to check in with you often. I need you to tell me if you feel *any* pain. Can I trust you to be honest with me?”

Hypocrite.

I’m a despicable fucking hypocrite.

“Yes. I promise.”

“That’s my sweet girl.” After finishing with the cloth, I toss it across the room into the laundry basket.

“Nice shot, sexy,” she teases.

“I’m not only a Dom. I’m also a professional basketball player,” I deadpan.

She looks over her shoulder with a barely contained laugh. It breaks free when she sees my smirk.

Not sure I’ve ever smirked, grinned, and smiled so much as I have in the short time since I’ve known her. Hell, I barely recognize myself anymore.

Her unreserved laughter fades into a moan when I cup her pussy from behind. Her neck jerks, whipping her head around to face the headboard.

“Feel okay, Lettie?”

“Yes.”

Testing her reaction, I apply a little pressure and begin stroking her pussy up and down with the flat of my palm. Her breathing gets louder, and her head lolls forward. Slowly, I increase the firmness of my motions. Instead of shying away, she pushes back, thrusting against my hand.

“That’s a good fucking girl, moving those hips like I told you. Chase your pleasure.”

She moans when my fingers slip through her folds and come into contact with her clit. I hold my hand under her, letting her ride it. Each time her clit passes my fingertips, I add a wiggle to tease it. In response, she moves faster.

Jesus. Fuck. Watching her on all fours with her legs spread just enough for her to fuck my hand is hot as hell.

The way she seems to enjoy this position gives me an idea about what we’ll do after this. “You like dragging your pussy over my hand, don’t you, Lettie?”

As she nods her head repeatedly, she whimpers something resembling verbal agreement.

“Good. Keep going. I like watching you like this.”

“I like having you watching me.”

Oh... if she only knew how much I’ve watched her.

“No pain, baby?”

As if answering me with her body, she grinds harder into my touch. “Not even a little.”

“Good.” My breathing is choppy as she moves faster, and her moans pitch higher. “Fucking beautiful, Lettie baby. Make yourself come on my hand. Soak every inch of my skin with your arousal.”

Through panting breaths, she says, “I can’t believe. You. Managed to get me. To hump. Your hand. With my ass essentially in your face.” She moans, then adds, “Miraculously, I don’t feel a lick of shame.”

“That’s because there’s nothing to feel shame over. You’re a beautiful, sensual woman who’s enjoying the pleasure her body is made to experience.”

Her hips rock in tiny, rapid thrusts, and her thighs tighten and release again and again. Those delicate, breathy moans crescendo into frantic mewls.

Unable to resist, I wrap my free hand around my throbbing cock and begin stroking while I watch her make herself come. She's so damn hot.

I don't even care that the hand she's grinding on is getting tired. Witnessing her break free from her shyness and claim her body is worth it. And it's only just begun.

"Go ahead, Lettie. It's okay. Let go. Just like when you were fucking my face earlier. Now, come for me, sugar."

She stiffens and screams out, "Oh my god! Shit, shit, *shit*."

Her upper body collapses onto the bed as she succumbs to her climax. I force myself to take my hand off my dick so I don't join her. *Fucking hell*.

After I remove my hand from between her thighs, she flops to the bed. I join her, laying on my side, facing her.

Once she's caught her breath, she hits me with a lopsided grin. "Did you really like watching me do that?"

"Fuck yes. Without a doubt."

"I think knowing you were watching relaxed me enough to come. I really like it when you watch me."

"Complementary kinks."

"Oh, because you like to watch." Her grin spreads. "We're a good pair."

I can't answer that. Not the way I want to. So I don't.

Instead, I order her to ride my face.

ALL MY FIRSTS

LETTIE

Tingles of electricity dance all over my body as I rock back and forth over his mouth, spiraling rapidly toward orgasm number... I don't know how many.

The first time he had me up on his face, I was too shy to relax for some dumb reason. But he broke me of that pretty friggin' fast when he spun me onto my back and pushed my legs toward my head, folding me like a damn lawn chair. Using his mouth and that devilish tongue, he brought me to the edge of orgasming about six times, maybe seven.

But wouldn't let me finish.

Instead, he started with his fingers, sinking one and then two in and out of me in a tantalizing rhythm. Aside from when he initially added the second finger, I felt no discomfort. And the pain I did have was short-lived. Once I got used to how it feels to have something inside me, he brought me right to my edge again.

And yet, he *still* refused to make me come.

Once he had me begging for relief, he rolled over to his back and told me the only way I was allowed to come was if I fucked his face.

So I did.

My climax was so fucking epic he insisted I do it again. Twice.

And here we are once more.

Despite the way I'm riding his face like he's a bucking bronco, he manages to lock his lips onto my clit, sucking it firmly. His head jerks and wiggles in time with my movements. Even without a frame of reference, I'm certain he's exceptional at this skill. Full marks.

A coil of pleasure settles in my lower stomach, threatening to detonate. "Oh my hell. So good. So good."

He moans like he's enjoying it as much as me. I glance down my body to catch another glimpse of his handsome face nestled between my thighs. His brilliant turquoise eyes are wide open, locked on me, like the naughty voyeur he is.

I might be just as bad. I want to watch him climax too. And I'm quickly becoming obsessed with knowing he's hard as a rock because he's *watching me*.

Embracing a touch of the inner sex kitten he's unleashing in me, I give him a little show, cupping my breasts and squeezing my nipples.

As I soak in the naughty excitement of performing for him, his eyes tremble, threatening to roll back into his head. It's intoxicating to know he's pleased by what he sees.

Knowing he can't take his eyes off me is the most enjoyable part of this entire night. And that's madness considering how euphoric everything has been — except for the few seconds when I thought he was ripping me in two.

All memories of that pain vanish when he moans again, this time longer and louder. The vibrations from his mouth ricochet throughout my body.

And that's it. I'm coming.

My hands shoot out in front of me, gripping the headboard so I can hold myself upright. I grind and swirl my soaking wet pussy over his mouth as my orgasm sparks to life. That coil in my belly explodes, sending jolts of pleasure to every cell of my body.

“Yes, yes, yes, shit. *Yesss.*”

On the way down from my climax, my thighs quake, and I sag backward, unable to maintain my position. He helps me off him, guiding me to my side.

We’re both breathing heavily, staring at each other like we’re in a cloud of ecstasy.

But wait. He hasn’t come yet. I’ve had... four? Five? And he’s had zero. So why does he look like he’s punch-drunk on watermelon moonshine?

Once my muscles no longer resemble a sack of Jell-O, I make a bold move and grab his cock. Well, it’s probably not bold for most people, but it is for me.

I encircle him tentatively, eyeing his face to gauge his reaction.

He hisses through his teeth, bites his lip, and pulls me closer. “Your touch is fucking perfection.” A deep groan follows as I intensify my movements, stroking him like he taught me.

That’s hot. *I did that to him. Little ol’ me.*

Maybe I can become a sexpert after all.

His hips shift, driving his cock farther into my fist. Emboldened by his reaction, I rise to my knees and settle beside him so I’m looking down on his body as I work my hand in slow and steady strokes. My eyes trail over his frame, taking in every freckle, corded muscle, and patch of hair. He’s so damn hot.

As I study him, I find myself stroking him harder and faster. I’m itching to lean over him and swirl my tongue over the head of his cock. Perhaps I can treat his dick like Freya

treats her lollipops. Lord knows I've seen her go to town on those things enough that I should be able to mimic it.

Slowing my strokes, I lick my lips and lean forward.

"Lettie, what are you doing?" His unexpected question breaks me out of my stupor.

Why do I feel like I've been caught stealing?

"I was going to give it a little lick. Maybe suck it." I raise my brows at him, silently asking for permission.

"As much as I'd love that, we're not doing that now."

I pout like a petulant child. "Why not?"

"Tonight is all about you."

"Well, what if I *want* to suck your dick?"

He grins wickedly, his expression dripping with depravity. I love everything about how he looks at me. "Have you ever sucked a cock before, sugar bear?"

My face contorts into a grimace. "What do you think?"

"We're not having that lesson tonight."

I glance toward the window, noticing the inky darkness behind the shades has brightened with the first light of dawn. "What about tomorrow?"

"Fine."

My shoulders shimmy, trying as I might to stop them. "It *is* tomorrow."

He laughs, and it sends a shot of lust to my core.

"Not now, sweetness. We have other plans for tonight."

"I think I'm ready then. For... uh, you know."

He sits up, bringing his mouth inches from mine. "Say it, baby. Tell me what you want."

Looking into his hooded-eyes, I say something I never thought I'd be capable of saying to a man. And I don't even hesitate. "I'm ready for your cock. I want to feel you inside me. I need you to fuck me."

Reaching around my head, he grabs a fistful of my hair and pulls me the rest of the way to him, slamming his lips to mine.

When he stops, he asks, “Are you on birth control?”

“No.”

“Damn. I’d have loved to take you bare.”

“I think I’d like that too, but I have no idea why or what it would feel like.”

“Your honesty is fucking adorable.” He kisses me again, his mouth hard and unyielding.

With our lips joined and tongues intermingling, he falls backward onto the pillow, taking me with him. Once we’re both flat on the mattress, he moves us so he’s on top again. After a few seconds of kissing me stupid, he attempts to pull away from me. But I hold him tightly by his neck, unwilling to let him go.

His laughter feathers across my lips. “I need to get a condom on, sugar bear.”

“Okay, but hurry.”

Narrowing his eyes, he shakes his head as he pulls away. *Slowly.*

Like a herd of turtles stuck in traffic behind a mess of slugs. In fact, he might not be moving at all.

Fucker.

I groan and stifle a grin. “Okay. *Fine.* You made your point. I’m not the one in charge. By all means, take your sweet ass time. I’ll just be here waiting impatiently to be filled by your cock.”

His brows draw in tight, and he cups my jaw, puckering my lips. “Fucking hell, baby. Where did this dirty mouth come from in one fucking night?”

“Didn’t you want me to be less polite?” I force out, despite the hold he has on my jaw.

“I haven’t had the pleasure of fucking the manners out of you yet.”

“Maybe your tongue did it for you,” I quip.

I think the orgasms have removed all traces of my customary shyness. Here I am, naked as the day I was born. The light creeps in through the curtains, leaving nothing to hide me from him. And I don’t feel the slightest bit shy.

Not a bit.

He’s a miracle worker, wiping away years of religious trauma in one orgasm-soaked night.

Then again, I know the shame is still there. It’s below the surface, but I’m too wrapped up in him to care. That’s a problem for me to worry about tomorrow.

He doesn’t offer the condom to me this time. Instead, he slips it on with expert precision and impressive speed.

Me thinks he’s eager to get inside me.

After reaching over my head to grab one of the extra pillows, he tucks it under my hips. “This should help some.”

Aww, that’s sweet. My heart tingles almost as much as my clit did when I was riding his face.

When he settles back between my thighs, no nerves pepper my thoughts like before. I’m so fucking relaxed. I’m more chill than the time I ate half a pan of brownies that Joanne Cote Felaccio baked for Stella. I had just gotten my period, so the chocolate craving was raging. Turns out, they were *magic* brownies with an extra ingredient — one that was Stella’s first act of rebellion.

I loved everyone that night. And I had the best conversation with my TV remote.

James stops my errant thoughts in their tracks when he cups my breasts, flicks my nipples, and aligns our bodies like earlier.

My breath stutters as electricity floods my insides. But it’s not the anxious type. It’s more like lightning bugs at sunset,

flickering in and out, reminding you that the day has come to an end. A night of possibilities awaits you.

My hands trail along his strong back and settle over his shoulders. He studies my face like he's cramming for a test, and I'm the crib sheet. A sassy comment about the intensity of his gaze tickles my tongue, but he kisses me before I get it out.

Soft and tender at first, the kiss deepens quickly, making my core throb with need. I'm two seconds from begging him to get inside me when I feel the head of his cock pressing through my slit and nudging into my body.

"You ready for me?"

"Yes. I'm so ready," I answer, my voice needy and breathy.

"I'll go slow, sugar bear. You tell me if it hurts."

Instead of acknowledging him with words, I skim my palm along his back to his ass. With a handful of his firm tush, I bring his lower body closer to mine, silently urging him to fill me. The tip of his cock begins slipping in. There's no pain so far.

He keeps his mouth just out of reach as he works himself farther, advancing at a maddeningly slow pace. I want to kiss him, but he's determined to watch my face the whole time, and I know it's because he'll stop if he sees me wince. Given how I reacted before, I shouldn't be surprised at how careful he's being with me.

But I'm needy as hell. So I tip my hips up, assuming the angle might help.

It does. Score one for physics.

As he sinks in more, a quiet whimper falls from my lips. My breathing ratchets up.

"You okay, Lettie?" he rasps, lowering his forehead to mine. His restraint is impressive.

"So much better than okay. You feel amazing. Keep going, please."

“You’re softer this time,” he grates out, teeth gnashed. “Feel so fucking good.”

I realize my nervousness may have caused the pain before. All that panic, fear, and trauma from my childhood was manifesting as a vaginal clench determined to keep out intruders.

Not this time, though.

I bury my face in his neck and moan. “Mmm. It’s so much better this time, babe.”

He withdraws, then pushes back in. Although he picks up the pace, he’s not going hard and fast like he did with his fingers earlier.

Resting my hands around his shoulders, I hold him close to me. I don’t want any space between us.

With his next thrust, he kisses me hard and deep. My hips pulse in concert with his, matching his rhythm.

Holy shit. We’re having sex. It’s finally happening. And it’s heaven on earth. I now understand why people obsess over this.

“I’m gonna press the rest of the way in, baby. I think you’re ready.”

My eyes bulge. “*What?* You aren’t all the way in yet?”

“Not yet, sugar bear.” His smirk turns devilish as if a demon possessed him right before my very eyes. A hot as fuck demon, hell-bent on making my toes curl and throat go raw from screaming in ecstasy.

Bring it on, Satan.

A renewed burst of nervousness threatens to pop my *I-thought-you-were-all-the-way-in* high, turning it into an *oh-shit-maybe-it-will-hurt-after-all* low.

Before my worries make my brain spin out, he asks, “Are you my good girl, Lettie?”

His velvety tone calms me instantly.

“Yes, I am.” I nod frantically, desperate to be his *anything*. His sub. His lover. His whore. His good girl. His auto mechanic. His barista.

I don't care what he calls me as long as I'm his.

His mouth hovers over mine, and our lips brush against each other with every sultry word he utters. “Then be my good girl and let me claim every inch of that perfect fucking pussy. Relax and take my cock, sugar.”

My core floods with arousal with his filthy and possessive words.

He slams his hips forward, driving his rock-hard dick inside me until he bottoms out, pressing his pelvis flush against mine. “That’s it. Take it, sweetness. Fucking take it.”

My head falls back, eyes slamming shut as my cries of ecstasy free themselves. “Oh my god, yes, yes, babe, yes.”

He holds himself there, deep inside me, for several beautiful seconds. “That’s my good girl.”

When my eyes finally open, he’s savoring me like I’m priceless art, and his fingers comb through my hair. My throat thickens, making it hard to swallow.

“Checking in, sweet girl. Any pain?” Tender compassion overflows from those few syllables.

I smile, running my hands through his short-cropped blond hair. “Only delicious fullness.”

He pumps his hips, delicate pulses at first, then harder, longer strokes. “Good. That’s good.” He rests his weight on his forearms and *really* starts moving. “You’re doing so fucking good, Lettie baby.”

As we rock together, I wrap my thighs around him, locking my ankles behind his back.

There’s never been anything as right as him inside me.

Nothing.

I rub my hands up and down his back, enjoying every sensation. From the way he fills me up to the warmth of his

skin on mine. His weight on top of me and his taut muscles. And the delicious sounds he makes — all those gasps, grunts, raspy breaths, and deep groans.

Everything about this moment is perfect.

It's flawless.

He rises to his knees, pulling himself away from my upper body but keeps us connected where it counts. Using my skirt, he hefts my waist to the ceiling, making my ass rise while he shuffles his knees under my backside.

“Keep your head and upper back down. Relax and let me guide your movements.”

I offer a tentative nod and watch him work.

He grips my skirt tighter, using it as a belt to drag me harder onto his cock and then shove me away. Again and again.

My eyes roll to the back of my head as he bucks into me, heaving my lower body around like I weigh nothing.

“There are so many positions I want to put you in, but I can't keep my mouth away from yours. I *have* to fucking kiss you.” Moving again, he lets go of my skirt and falls back forward. “You're doing great, baby. So proud of you.”

And then he kisses me.

It starts out sweet and adoring but soon intensifies until he's ravaging my mouth.

“Sugar, you feel so damn good wrapped around me — your hands around my shoulders, your thighs around my hips, and your silky pussy around my cock. Your body was made for me.”

My hips buck harder as my arousal spikes at his proclamation. He responds to my body's plea, driving himself faster and harder. He adds a grind at the end of each downward thrust, dragging the base of his cock over my clit.

After only a few seconds of that enchanting move, a telling flare of warmth starts in my core, spreading outward in

intoxicating waves.

My voice pitches as pleasure overtakes me. “Shit, shit, *shit*. Just like that. Don’t stop, babe. Please, don’t stop.”

“Yes, sweetness. Fucking come for me.”

I sink my nails into the flesh of his back, unable to control myself. As my climax spirals outward from my core, I cling to him like he’s tethering me to earth.

“That’s it, Lettie baby. Give it to me.”

When I crest the peak of my orgasm, something new happens. My channel spasms and clenches around his thick cock. With something for my walls to grip onto, my climax reaches new heights.

So full. So fucking full.

Lights dance behind my eyelids, and my legs go rigid as I come harder than I ever have.

Speeding up his pace, he buries his head in the pillow beside my head. His grunts, so close to my ear, are positively erotic and feral sounding. Snaking his arm under my shoulders, he holds me tight. It’s like he needs me closer. It’s all I can do to hold on as he thrashes into me like a wild animal.

It’s *my* body that brought him to this point.

Suddenly, his movements become jerky, losing the steady rhythm. He bottoms out with one final stroke, holding himself deep while he tenses and quivers.

Holy shit. He just came.

Not sure why I’m surprised. Orgasm is pretty much the point, isn’t it?

He sags against me, all the tension gone from both our bodies. My fingertips trail over the nape of his neck, and I hold him close to me.

Contentment cascades over me like a dusting from a pleasure pixie.

I soak up the stillness and peace of the moment, knowing it's the only one I'll ever have. You only have one first time. And what I've given him I can never get back.

I wouldn't take it back even if I could. *No takesie-backsie.*

A raucous laugh bubbles out of me with that thought. My cheeks flame red with my embarrassing outburst.

James lifts his head from the pillow, shooting me a bemused look. His face is lit up with a dopey smile I've never seen him wear. *I love it.* I want to see him smile like that all the time. Every day.

He presses his lips to mine for a brief kiss. "What's so funny, sugar bear?"

"It's silly," I reply, wishing I could crawl under the bed to hide.

Shifting off me, he positions himself beside me with his leg thrown over mine. "That's probably why you're laughing. Silly things tend to have that effect on you." He props the side of his head on his palm. "What was making you laugh moments after you lost your virginity, Violet Anastasia Holt?"

My full name never sounded so beautiful.

"Wait a damn blastin' second. How do you know my middle name?"

His smile slips. "You told me."

"Did I? I don't remember that."

"Yeah. I'm sure you did." His throat bobs. "Anyway, what made you laugh?"

I must have told him. ADHD strikes again, sucking my memories away. Oh well.

Beaming at him, still in my cocoon of satisfaction, I drag my fingers over his forearm, where he's holding it across my chest. "You remember the day we met?"

"Of course."

“Do you remember what you said when I tried to give you the money back?”

“Judging by the grin you’re wearing, it must have been something awkward. And that’s sort of my specialty.”

My grin blooms. “It was adorable.”

“What was it?”

“You said, ‘no takesie-backsie,’ which was the cutest damn thing a grown man has ever said to me.”

He rolls his eyes. “Ah, so it wasn’t awkward but idiotic and juvenile. Super. But why are you thinking about that now?”

My head flops back onto the pillow as a silent giggle pinches up my cheeks. “I was thinking that I’d given you my virginity, and it’s something I can’t get back. But I wouldn’t want it back, even if that were possible. Then I thought... *no takesie-backsie*. Hence the laugh.”

His smile widens, but he doesn’t laugh. Steadily, his expression grows serious.

Leaning close to me, he whispers directly in my ear. “Sugar bear, you’re never getting that back. I’m keeping it. And just so you know, I plan to keep all your other firsts too.”

CHAPTER 35

CLOWN MAKEUP AND
CAMEL TOE

LETTIE

Sitting cross-legged on my bed, I tuck a pillow on my lap, cuddling it to my waist. “I’m video calling ya, girl. I got somethin’ very important to ask ya.”

I’m so freaking cranked on sexdorphins — sexy times endorphins — that my accent is flying its Southern flag as proud as Stella waves a rainbow flag in June.

She groans in jest. “Not sure why that requires a visual, but you never were all that bright. Bless your pea-pickin’ heart.”

While snort-laughing through a toothy grin, I tap on my camera and wait impatiently for her to do the same. As soon as my screen lights up with her image, she looks to be in bed. Her face is hidden behind her finger. You know which one.

“Always a lady, Stella Bella,” I chide her.

She drops her middle finger, her face filling the frame. I try to hide my gasp of shock but don’t come close to succeeding. “Stella Jean! What in the world happened to your face?”

Black streaks coat her cheeks, and blue and red smudges shoot in all directions.

She pulls the phone close to her face, probably to see her own reflection. “Well, fuck. It’s only makeup. Calm your biscuits, woman.”

“You look like you been rode hard and put away wet. Have you been crying?”

“Lettie, it’s what... nine in the morning? You know I don’t cry until after ten.”

She must not be upset if she can still joke.

My nose twitches as teasing thoughts begin stacking up, just itching to fly out of my mouth. “Well, if you haven’t been crying, then did you get abducted by a clown posse on a bender last night? Or is there an open casting call for the circus?”

She purses her lips at me, narrowing her eyes to slits. “Ha ha. You’re hilarious.” She props her phone up on her nightstand and rolls onto her side. “I feel like a can of mashed assholes, Lettie bear.”

“Was it margaritas or moonshine?”

“I plead the fifth.”

“If I told ya once, I’ve told ya thrice. Miss Paula don’t play with that stuff. If she’s pouring, you best be careful. Otherwise, you’ll wake up lookin’ like a toddler did your makeup and set you out in the rain to dry.”

She grins through a yawn, rubbing her eyes, which spreads more makeup all over her tragic excuse for a face. “What is this ultra mega important question you couldn’t text?”

My knee bobs with excitement. I raise my chin, showing her my profile. “Do I look different?”

“Nope. Same ol’ idiot.”

I turn my head to the other side. “What about now?”

“Did you cut your hair or something?”

“Nope.” I bring my face right up to the camera and smile like a serial killer pulling over to pick up a hitchhiker. “Look closer.”

“Violet, I do not have the time, patience, or head space for a fucking quiz. You look beautiful. Same as always.”

Feigning confusion, I rap my fingertips over my chin. “Hmm. That’s odd. I thought it’d be obvious. Huh.”

She puts her hands in a prayer position and mumbles, “Sweet baby Jesus in the manger. Please give me the strength to get through this phone call without jabbing a fork in the electrical outlet. Amen. Oh, and thanks for the gift of a working clitoris.”

When she opens her eyes, I’m flat on my back on my bed, legs akimbo, with the camera pointed toward my *penis fly trap*, which has finally had its first meal. “How about now?”

Don’t worry. I’m wearing yoga pants. She didn’t get a full cam girl show.

“Violet Beauregard Cornelius Winslow Guthrie, why are you pointing your phone at a camel’s lower extremity?”

I bring the phone up to my face, cackling like a hen laying a dozen eggs. “A camel’s what now?” As soon as the question is out, her meaning hits me, and we bust out laughing.

The bitch just said I had a camel toe.

Once we’ve stopped behaving like classy, mature ladies of high society, she asks, “Why are you flashing me your vagina, Lettie? Are you that lonely that you’re finally trying to get your bisexual BFF to notice you in *that way*?”

“I was just wondering if it looked any different.” I waggle my brows suggestively.

It takes somewhere between eight and twelve seconds before she starts connecting the dots. I blame Miss Paula’s watermelon moonshine for Stella’s processing delay. She’s usually much faster on the uptake.

She jerks upright, grabs the phone, and holds it way too close to her face. “Shut up, Violet. You didn’t. You. Did. Not.”

Blinking, I shrug and keep my lips pursed, acting like I can't be bothered to respond. But my insides are spinning around like they're trying to get me a spot in the showcase showdown on *The Price is Right*.

“Violet! Answer me! Did you?”

I buff my nails on my shirt, right over my heart. “Did I what?”

“Stop messing with me, Ms. Holt, or I'll drive down there and personally cream your corn. Don't fuck with my emotions like this when I'm hungover.”

Lowering my chin, I look deadass in the camera and slowly let my smile free until it slides up my face like it's melting in reverse.

Standing now, she holds the phone at a reasonable distance and waits for verbal confirmation.

Wearing a wall-to-wall, face-splitting grin that radiates pure joy, I finally answer, “Yes, I did, Stella. I had sexual intercourse. I'm no longer weighed down with the chastity belt of childhood trauma.”

We squeal together like we're two hogs high on slop.

When we can talk again, she asks, “Are you happy? You look happy.”

“I'm over the moon. I'm floating in the clouds. My feet aren't on earth anymore.”

She puts her hand on her chest and closes her eyes. After a few shakes of her head, she looks at me with the proud face of a mama bear watching her cubs fall into a honey pot. “Oh sweetie, I'm so dang thrilled for you. I'm so glad you took my advice. Please tell me it was with a pleasure Dom, and he gave you *all* the orgasms.”

My head kicks back. “Wait. What are you talking about?”

“Are you that high on the sex buzz? We were just texting about this last night. You were all upset about James, and like the helpful bitch I am, I suggested you find a Dom to make it better.” She narrows her eyes, reacting to my sagging face.

“That’s not what happened? Did I hallucinate that? Damn you, Paula!”

Shaking out of the haze of disgust brought on by the mere idea of having slept with another man, I chuckle at the way she’s shaking her fist at the sky.

“Stella, I did have that conversation with you, but I totally forgot all about it. Not that it matters. It was James.”

She falls back to the bed, scrunching her shoulders up by her ears. “Really? Oh my gosh,” she squeaks, her face going dopey. “You gave your virginity to someone you actually care about. Oh that makes my heart all fluttery. I love that for you.”

Unable to talk, I sit there, blushing like a fourteen-year-old and share the moment with my best friend, despite her being in another state.

After a few seconds, her face loses some of that doting glow. “But wait. I thought you hadn’t seen him in weeks. How did we go from you having a panic attack to you forking over your V-card to him? Did you trip and fall onto his penis or something? Considering where you work and how klutzy you are, it’s not out of the realm of possibility.”

“Ha, ha, ha.” I roll my eyes. “Last night, I was keeping my shit together and breezing through my shift. Then, around midnight, he just waltzed in.” The memory of how he looked flutters across my mind. The way he stared at me, so stoic and reserved, but with passion simmering under the surface.

I must pause too long for Stella’s patience level. “Okay, so he strolls in, and that’s when you fell onto his dick?”

“Gah! Shut up for a second,” I tease. “Let me relive this.”

She flicks her wrist at me in a *go-ahead* gesture.

“He waited silently until I was done checking in this couple. After they cleared the lobby, he and I just stood there like statues. When the silence got awkward, I told him he could go on in or something like that. But he said no.” I close my eyes and shake my head. “No. That’s not right. He said, ‘I’m not here for that.’ Then I asked him what he came for. And Stella, the man said —”

She cuts me off; damn her. “He said you. He said you. Right? Tell me he said you!”

I nod and sigh like a smitten schoolgirl. “He said, ‘I came for you.’ And then I died. Right there in the lobby. Left my body and floated into the clouds. Bye-bye, Lettie.”

When I focus my eyes on my friend, she’s the physical embodiment of the melted face emoji.

Same, girl. Same.

“I assume it was epic.” She somehow makes it sound like a statement and a question.

“So much yes. It was... *gah*. He was perfect. Kind, gentle, and so focused on my comfort and pleasure. Fuck. He gave me so many orgasms. And Stella Bella, you’d be so proud of me. I rode his face twice. No. Thrice.”

“Proud doesn’t begin to cover it, honey. That’s my girl. Makin’ Mama Bear proud.”

Once we stop gushing, she peppers me with rapid-fire questions and squeals along with me at all the best parts.

By the time I’m done, she asks, “Wait. So you just got home this morning?”

“Yeah. We never slept. When we weren’t doing all the orgasm-causing things, we talked and talked. He’s funny and smart as a whip. He told me about growing up in South Carolina, and we traded stories about small towns. I could have stayed all day and tonight again. But he had to go to work. He’s got a day job.” My brows do the wave, and I lower my voice. “And he ordered me to get some sleep. To rest up for later.”

“You beautiful sinner. You’re seeing him again, huh?”

I nod eagerly. “Yeah. Tonight, he’s teaching me cowgirl and reverse cowgirl.”

“So romantic,” she teases.

I ignore the jab. “I can’t wait to see him again. I like him so much, Stella. So damn much.”

“I’m glad for you, hun. Just take it slow. Don’t get all crazy. There’s no such thing as love at first fucking.” She wags her finger at me. “But yeah... enjoy it. You deserve this high.”

After trading a few more inappropriate jokes, we say our goodbyes.

I head to the kitchen for some water. Secretly, I’m hoping Freya’s awake. I want to gush more about James. And I should also thank her for covering the front desk for me last night. But she’s still asleep. Dammit. Working that night shift is a bitch.

Once I’m settled in bed with the blackout curtains drawn — those were one of the many generous gifts I’ve gotten from Freya since moving in — I cuddle my pillow to my chest, pretending it’s him. But nothing could come close to the bliss of being wrapped up in his arms. Until tonight when I see him again, it’ll have to do.

As thoughts of him stand at the edge of my consciousness, patiently waiting to see me in my dreams, I drift blissfully to sleep.

WILDEST DREAMS (TOMER'S VERSION)

TOMER

“Come on. Come on,” I grumble to myself while I wait for the program to load.

“Relax, T. It’s like they say,” Klein rests back in his chair with his arms crossed behind his head, “a watched dough never rises.”

I cut a glare at him, nose wrinkled and lip curled. “That’s not the phrase.”

His irritatingly cheery face gets infinitely more annoying as the corners of his mouth rise until his grin resembles the Joker’s. “A watched pie never bakes?”

“Not better.”

Tilting his head in my direction, he makes a third attempt to coin a new phrase. “A watched oven never preheats?”

“What’s with all the baking references?”

He shrugs, his eyes falling to his desk. “Started taking baking lessons.”

I'm *nearly* tempted to ask him to elaborate. It's not every day that one of my Redleg brothers shares something that's grounds for teasing. And a former Army Ranger turned bodyguard taking baking lessons would be fair game around this place.

But I don't care to learn more about Klein baking, nor why he's exposing himself to possible ridicule. And I'm not the type to tease someone. I'm the butt of the jokes around here, not the instigator. I know my place.

It's probably related to his mother's recent diagnosis. Truth be told, I shouldn't know about that since he hasn't volunteered the information. But I overheard a phone call with his sister the other day. He tried to code his words and muffle his voice, but I figured out enough to connect the dots.

We're too fucking slammed to devote valuable working hours to talking about heavy shit like that. He can confide in Leo, Sawyer, or one of the emotional guys if he needs support. It's not something I'm able to provide. Knowing me, I'd only make it worse.

I check my phone again, growing increasingly frustrated that I don't have an answer for Lettie yet. She messaged me three times asking when I'll get to Bask tonight. I promised her I'd watch her sing at Kinky Karaoke, and it's killing me that I've already missed the first hour. But unless the new surveillance program loads properly this time, I'm not going to make it tonight.

And that'll piss me off to no end. Not only am I desperate to hear her sing — in person this time — but I don't want to let her down.

We've grown close over the few weeks since we crossed the line and became intimate. Every night after work, I visit her at the club, usually getting there around the end of her shift. If I get out of work early enough, I'll rush home to catch a nap before meeting her. She comes to my house when she's done working, and we spend the next few hours wrapped up in each other. It's not only sex, although that's amazing. She's an

eager student. But we also spend hours talking about everything and nothing.

Me. Talking. *For hours.*

Insanity has never felt so good.

I've never had a girlfriend in the official sense. But I'm fairly certain she thinks we're a couple. I'm not inclined to correct her. In fact, I'm starting to believe it as well.

This is the third night of Kinky Karaoke, but I haven't made it to see her sing yet. Way too fucking busy around here for me to get out before midnight. It's hard enough for me to get an entire evening when she's not working at Bask.

Big Al had a check-in with me today about Klein, and as much as it sucked, I had to be honest. Klein's not at the level I need for a full-time partner. I'd need three of him to keep up with all the shit we're handling.

My fist clenches under my desk at the vision of her singing her heart out while looking out into the crowd for me, only to be disappointed when yet another night goes by where I don't make it.

In a relationship for such a short time, and I'm already fucking it up.

She offered a deal-sweetener tonight. She said she'd let me tie her up if I got there in time.

So far, I've kept things mostly vanilla, and we've not engaged at the club. I figured it'd be best to get her comfortable with the standard stuff before we start checking off things on her ever-growing kink list. There have only been a few exceptions. She wanted to be spanked, which made her wet as fuck, but I only used my hand, so we have room to explore more there. And she wanted to test out her voyeurism kink by watching me jack off.

She fucking loved it, which made me far too excited for my own good. Needless to say, I didn't have much of a refractory period that night. Since she wanted to try it both ways, she started masturbating in front of me as soon as I finished. I was inside her before she was halfway to orgasm.

It's beautiful to witness her come out of her cocoon. A metamorphosis.

Fucking hell. I'm getting hard just thinking about it.

Frustration sinking in, I push to my feet. "Hitting the restroom while this finishes loading."

I stomp out of the lair while contemplating walking past the bathroom and out of the building.

This thing with Lettie is turning me into a shitty fucking employee. I need to get it under control. Maybe I should tell her I can't make it and suggest we take a few days apart so I can get a grip on my obsession. The longer this goes on and the deeper it feels, the harder it'll be for her when I'm finally in a position to come clean with her.

I want to tell her everything. To ease the guilt brewing, but also so I have a chance in hell of keeping her after it all comes out.

I know it will. Eventually.

Unless I fuck it up before it comes to that.

When I get to the bathroom, I'm alone. Given the late hour, I'm not surprised.

Checking my phone, I lean against the wall. The last text she sent jumps out at me, challenging my resolve.

As I click on it again and the image fills my screen, I already know I won't be able to put distance between us.

In fact, the opposite happens, and I make a decision I never thought I'd make.

Even if the latest load doesn't work, I'm still leaving. Fuck it.

She doesn't even have to send me an exposed breast or anything dirty to make me fold. It's just one of her forearms, lying on the front desk at the club. She has two types of ropes resting against her peach flesh as if she's offering me my choice between hemp or jute.

Son of a bitch. I can't resist that offer. Not to mention, I'll get to hear her sing.

Yeah, fuck the new install.

When I walk back into the lair, Klein's eyes are closed; he's resting. That's the perfect out.

"Whether this works or not, I'm calling it for tonight. We need to get some rest."

His eyes remain closed, but a tiny smile quirks the creases of his mouth. "Oh thank fuck."

Fifteen minutes later, we walk out of HQ, leaving the failed system load behind us. Maybe tomorrow, I'll figure out what's wrong with the install. Or maybe I won't. But my plans for tonight are firm.

After I jump into my car, I fire off a text telling her my rope preference. As soon as I disable my car's GPS tracking, I race straight to the club.

Honestly, the ropes aren't what have my heart pounding. It's seeing her. Being there when she sings. Making her happy.

The bouncer greets me, same as always. "Hey, James. Good evening."

Instead of my typical silent acknowledgment, I clap him on the shoulder. "Evening, Tim. Nice to see you."

His head draws back. "Yeah, uh... you too."

I'm smiling as I enter the lobby — teeth showing and all. My steps falter when I find Freya at the front desk instead of my girl.

She glances at me, barely taking her eyes off a magazine she's reading. "Hey, James."

I tip my chin at her, my expression slipping. "Hi. Where's Lettie?"

Freya puts down the magazine and stands. "Getting ready to sing. She's up next. Glad you made it." She lowers her forehead, giving me a stern glare. "Finally."

I narrow my eyes at her in warning.

She steps in front of the door, blocking my entrance to the main room, and crosses her arms. “Listen up, *sir*. Before you go in, I need a word.”

There was nothing respectful or playful about her tone. Brat.

“What?” I snap.

“Look, James, I’m getting a little worried about her.”

Hackles rising, I pin her with a concerned look. “How so?”

“I know that you guys have some insane chemistry, and that’s all fine and good. I’m glad you finally stepped up. But I think she’s getting attached. Like... *really* attached.” Her eyes widen, and she lowers her chin to her chest. “So if you aren’t serious about her, it’s time to cut the cord. I don’t want to see her get hurt.”

There are so many things wrong with this conversation. The tone. The warning. And the fucking idea that I’m not serious about her.

But it does give me pause.

I’m lying to Lettie.

Every day that goes by that I don’t tell her who I am or who her father is, is another bullet in the chamber, poised to fire into my chest.

And I fucking hate where that leaves me.

“What makes you think I’m not taking her seriously?” I deflect.

“Well, this is week three of karaoke. She’s expected you to show up every time before. And the disappointment on her face after her first song tonight fucking gutted me.”

I’m thrown instantly into defense mode. “I planned on coming every time, but work has been demanding.”

She purses her lips at me and shakes her head dismissively. “Not buying it. It’s not as if this is a middle-of-the-workday

activity. Make her a priority. And if you're running around on her, I'll fucking lose my shit on you."

"I'm not, and it's just karaoke," I toss out flippantly, although knowing it's not insignificant to Lettie.

Her eyes widen, and her nostrils flare. "Do you know her at all?"

The sound of muted applause coming from the main room distracts me. "Yes."

"Then you'd know how much music means to her and how excited she gets about singing. She talks about karaoke all damn week."

Fuck.

I put my head down. "You're right."

"She's such a sweet fucking kid, James. And if you hurt her, I can't be held responsible for what I'll do to you. Take that threat any way you want. I'm dead serious."

"I have no intention of hurting her."

Although, intentions aren't everything. I never intended to get this wrapped up in her. Never intended to sleep with her or take her virginity. Never planned on getting my heart involved.

But it happened, nonetheless.

Freya's scowl lessens gradually. "Good. Now I suppose you can go in. She'll be tickled pink to see you."

"Me too."

Wait. Did I just admit to being tickled pink? Whatever.

I breeze past Freya, taking three large steps into the main room. It's packed. Standing room only.

Brushing through the masses, I work my way toward the wall, hoping to get a better view. The stage isn't elevated; it's more like a cordoned-off area toward the corner of the room. I make out the back of her head as she approaches the stage.

With my head down to avoid stepping on toes, I weave through the crowd.

And then I hear her voice coming from the speakers. My heart speeds up, thumping wildly beneath my rib cage.

From just the sound of her fucking voice.

“This song is by request. I’ve never sung it before in public, so I hope I don’t screw it up.”

“Impossible, Lettie!” a male yells from the crowd.

My head whips toward the source of the voice, but there are too many people here to decipher who that was. A few others join in — males and females — all echoing similar sentiments about her. They love her.

I barely resist the urge to bodycheck people out of the way so I can see more than the tip of her head. “Excuse me.”

The music starts before I get my first full glimpse of the stage. And when I finally make it to a clearing at the side of the room, my heart fucking falls to the floor, right along with my jaw. But my dick shoots in the opposite direction.

My Lettie, once innocent and shy, is dressed like a vixen straight out of my wildest dreams and brashest fantasies.

Fishnet thigh-high stockings held up with garter straps. Silky maroon panties and a dark maroon corset around her waist and chest, pushing her bust up like it’s on display. Steampunk jewelry to match. Her hair is tied up in an intricate braid, held up with some type of decorative chain and leather piece that accents the corset.

That’s *my girl* up there.

Mine.

Everyone in here is riveted by her voice and how sexy she looks. They all want her.

But she’s fucking mine.

My chest swells, heartbeat racing. Arousal pulses through every cell of my body.

When she leaves here tonight, she'll be going with me. Her hand will be in mine. Her body will be electrified with desire for me. When her head hits the pillow tonight, it'll be beside mine. She'll be wrapped up in my arms as she sleeps. I'll be the one she dreams about.

Me.

The man no one gives a second thought about. The unfeeling robot, void of emotions. The broken man, hollow inside. The Tin Man. The man nobody ever cared about — until her.

I'm the lucky one who gets to hold her tonight.

Unfortunately, it won't be my name she screams when she succumbs to the pleasure I give her. It'll be a lie on her lips.

Yet she'll still be with me, which is more than I ever dared to wish for. She's more than I deserve on every level.

But that doesn't stop me from craving her, down to my marrow.

Resting my back against the wall, I let her performance pour over me.

Up there, she's in her element, confidence seeping from her soul.

This song is another one I don't recognize, but hell if I care.

Our eyes connect at one point. A smile ambushes her face, catching her off guard and causing her to stumble over the lyrics for a moment before composing herself.

Like a spreading warmth, satisfaction sets deep in my bones at knowing my appearance affects her — in a good way. I brought her joy for that moment. *Me*. Because I'm here.

I didn't have to save her from the enemy. There was no system to hack. No secret mission or code to crack. I didn't have to use my brains, military training, or powerful connections. Hell, I didn't even have to be her Dom to please her.

All I had to do was look at her. To show up for her.

My head falls back against the wall, and my mouth opens to let a trembling gasp escape.

No one has ever looked at me the way she does.

For the first time, I understand the soul-fulfilling satisfaction that most people probably take for granted. The bliss from knowing someone craves your presence the way you crave theirs. Someone wants you by their side. And who's happy — genuinely happy — to see you.

Such a simple thing. And until now, I didn't know I was lacking it. But I have been. My entire life.

My shirt feels tight as if my chest has swollen to accommodate my jackhammering heart.

As the song goes on, it becomes more familiar. Elton John's "Someone Saved My Life Tonight." I heard her sing it before. In the hotel room on the day she arrived in Florida. The first time she enchanted me with her voice.

One lyric, in particular, stands out above the rest — *Sugar Bear*. Each time she sings that part, her gaze burns into mine, a dawning of realization. My endearment for her is immortalized in a song.

Is that why the nickname came so naturally to me? I don't know.

Each time we connect over the crowd at that part of the chorus, the corner of her lip tugs upward as if she's telegraphing... *yeah, we have a song of our own now*.

When the sensations running through my midsection overwhelm me, I scan the crowd. No one, except a few subs servicing their Doms, takes their eyes off the stage.

Nobody speaks. No wonder the club is this fucking busy. Everyone came to see her.

And I missed this over the last two weeks.

Her voice and stage presence aside, she's a sultry vision. Has she always dressed up in fetish wear when she sings?

Where the fuck did this confidence come from?

Each time I pick her up after work, she wears normal clothes. Mostly those dick-hardening sundresses, skirts, and blouses. But sometimes jeans and casual wear.

I've never seen her dolled up like this.

If she's willing to wear this shit here, I wonder what she'd be willing to wear for me in private.

I can't fucking wait to find out.

Before I lose her, I'm going to make every moment with her count.

Starting tonight.

OPEN UP AND SAY AHH

LETTIE

After my second song of the night with no James in sight, my heart was nearly shattered.

And as I finish my third, it's ready to explode. But with joy instead.

He's here.

My pulse thrashes so wildly I feel the telling jolts of energy in my neck as I finish the song. A twinge of nervousness ripples through me, and it has nothing to do with the raucous applause as I hand the microphone back to the KJ.

James has never seen me dressed like this.

Will he be upset? Jealous that other men can see me wearing this?

Freya reassured me at least fifty times today that he'll be turned on by it. Jealousy and possessiveness tend not to work that well around kink clubs. And this is his element.

Given she's experienced in the lifestyle, I trust her judgment. But as I approach him, there's a tentativeness in my

steps. My lip is caught between my teeth, distracting me from the dancing butterflies in my stomach.

He's got his knee bent with the sole of his foot propped up against the wall. His arms are crossed at his chest. As usual, his face is somewhat unreadable.

But some of my nerves fade after a quick glance down his frame. That bulge in his pants doesn't lie. Freya was right.

He's hard. *For me.*

All the apprehension of the last twenty-four hours since Freya and I went shopping for this getup is worth it.

This outfit isn't merely outside my comfort zone, it's light-years from it. I talked myself out of dressing up no less than a hundred times. I *might* have broken club alcohol protocol by having a smuggled shot of tequila in the locker room when Freya shoved me in there to get dressed before karaoke started. It's called liquid courage for a reason.

Modest is hottest, huh Mama? Tell that to how James is devouring me with his eyes. This moment was worth all the panic and second-guessing.

When I'm a few steps away, he presses off the wall and strides up to me with a determination I've not seen from him outside the bedroom. Grabbing my neck with both hands, he tilts my head up and slams his lips to mine.

I'm momentarily stunned, but my shock quickly fades into excitement. I squeeze his shoulders to pull him close. *Damn.* I've missed him since I left his bed this morning.

His kiss overflows with possession and lust. Instead of waiting for me to open my mouth, he demands entrance, his tongue forcing its way past my lips.

My knees tremble, and my core clenches. *Holy shit.* If he didn't have such a tight hold on me, I'd fall.

The music of the next song fades to nothingness, and the noise of the rowdy crowd seems to disappear. All my senses are keyed into James and the ferociousness of this kiss.

He's laying claim to me.

In much the same way, I'm claiming my body with this corset and thigh-highs in front of the whole club.

One of his hands leaves my neck and skims my back, coming to rest right above the curve of my ass. He yanks my lower body to his, and my back arches reflexively. His erection digs into my lower abdomen, causing my channel to flood with arousal.

Despite the crowd of onlookers, I'm seconds away from stripping and begging him to fuck me.

He growls into my mouth as if he's reading my dirty thoughts.

When the need for a deep breath finally forces our lips apart, he keeps his face directly in front of mine. "Am I fucking you at the club or dragging you out of here right now?"

"I have to finish my shift," I answer through quivering breaths.

"Here then," he grits out.

Before I can offer an objection, he scoops me up in a bridal carry with my knees bent over his forearm and the other arm supporting my backside. Everyone clears a path for us as he obliterates the space between the main room and hallway in long, hurried strides.

I'm hit with a huge wave of giddiness, so I bury my face into his neck to hide my reaction.

We've never had sex at the club. The few times he's been here since we got together, he's mostly hung out at the front desk with me or relieved the other floor monitors while he waited for the club to close.

All this time, a horribly insecure part of me feared he was ashamed to be seen taking me into a room. It's insane because he's never given me a reason to think he'd act that way. But I'm constantly worried that my lack of *sex*perience will soon catch up with me, and he'll be bored with me.

And my damn heart is terrified it's right around the corner.

That fear might be part of why I told him he could tie me up if he came to see me sing. I know he wants to rope top me, and I was desperate for him to see me sing. Despite not being ready for bondage, I put it out there in a pathetic attempt to keep him interested in me.

The fact that he showed up here after my offer only increases my worries that he's ready for more than I can offer him. *Yet.*

Regular sex or a plain old fuck wasn't enough to get him here. But I mention ropes, and he's here with bells on.

I don't know how to feel about it, but I'll dissect it later. That kiss has me all kinds of distracted, anyhow.

"James, you didn't sign up for a room," I tell him as he moves us swiftly from closed door to closed door. "It's busy tonight."

"I don't give a fuck. Dante will give me a pass if someone complains. He owes me." He glances down at me and grins devilishly. "And, of course, it's busy tonight. Your enchanting voice has this place packed. Everyone wants to hear my girl sing."

My girl.

A tidal wave of pride fills me, but my negative inner voice has me doubting it regardless of the proof I've seen with my own eyes.

The first night was a lackluster turnout, at best. By the second week, the size of the crowd doubled. And tonight, Dante told me he was concerned we were over the building occupancy.

But my mama ensured I'd always doubted myself, so I play off James's comment. "Nah. I'm sure it's always busy for karaoke."

"Bullshit. You don't believe that for a second, do you?"

I shrug as he gets to the end of the hallway and grumbles in frustration at the lack of open rooms. There's only one available.

He freezes in the doorway, looking from the bed to me and back three times. He nibbles at his lip, contemplating something.

I twist my neck for a better view. Nothing looks amiss in the room. “What are you waiting for? Change your mind?”

His jaw clicks. “This is the voyeur room.”

“And? I thought that was one of your top two kinks?”

“Yeah, but I’m not going to yank you out of your comfort zone. You’re not ready for that.”

My shoulders stiffen, and it’s on the tip of my tongue to snark at him. Then I remember how he’s asked me to correct him when he says something he shouldn’t. Something tells me this is one of those times.

“James, you should ask me before deciding something like that.”

His head slants, and he studies my face closely. “Are you ready for it, Lettie? Are you comfortable with me fucking you while people watch on the other side of the mirror? You won’t know who is in there, and they’ll probably be masturbating or having sex while they watch you come for me. Is that something you’re ready for?”

Gulp. Hot, hot, fucking hot.

“I can’t tell from your tone if you’re challenging me because you want me to say yes or trying to make it sound unappealing so I’ll say no.”

He shifts his hold on me, jostling me a bit. My body weight must be catching up to him. “I’m not sure either.”

I love those little glimpses of vulnerability he shows me. “Put me down, please.”

He gnashes his teeth but complies with my request. Once I’m on my feet, I grab him by the hand and tug him into the room.

One step.

“Sugar bear, you don’t have to do this for me.”

I go for coy and flirty, licking my lips and batting my lashes at him. “Do what?”

He drops my hand, closes the door, flips the switch to mark the room occupied, then takes another step. He never lets his eyes drift from mine.

“You don’t have to agree to have sex with me in here just to satisfy one of my kinks. I’m good with vanilla as long as it’s with you.”

My heart pitter-patters with those words. They make me want to please him even more.

I take another step toward the bed, adding a crick of my finger to beckon him closer. “Who said I’m doing it for you? You know it’s on my list too.”

Two more steps.

“Yeah, but we agreed to ease into your list.”

My legs hit the back of the bed, and I sit on the edge, nervousness and excitement accompanying my every movement.

He prowls closer, but given his slower pace, he’s still a few feet away. I inch toward the center of the mattress, keeping my eyes locked with his.

Once I’m in the center of the bed, I lower to my back, bend my knees, and spread my legs. “Consider me eased, babe.”

His expression turns molten as he reaches the edge of the bed and drinks in my provocative pose. “You sure, sugar bear?”

“Mm-hmm. Why don’t you check to see how sure I am?”

Emboldened with the confidence of an experienced kinkster — which we all know I’m not — I snake my hand between my thighs and move my panties to one side, exposing myself to him.

And whoever might be on the other side of the glass.

Why does that make it even hotter?

Pulse thrumming, I nibble at my lip. “Does it look like I’m sure or not?”

His sparkling eyes glance at my pussy, and he tilts his head to one side for a better look. With his palm cupping himself over his pants, he stares openly at what I’m offering. I know I’ve got him hooked when he licks his lips, his throat bobs, and he lets his jaw sag low.

Emboldened by the desire etched into his features, I brazenly drag my hand through my soaked flesh. I spread my fingers into an upside-down *V* to give him a little show.

Shit, this is empowering. I’ve never been so alive.

My body is mine — sexuality, desire, and all.

With a breathy whisper, I ask, “What’s the verdict, James? Do I want to do this in here or not?”

His chest expands with ragged breaths. “You fucking want it. And I’m going to give it to you, sweetness.” The grittiness in his tone alone would have flooded my core if I wasn’t already drenched.

Before I blink, he pulls his shirt off in one smooth motion. “Touch your clit, Lettie.”

Wearing a sly grin, I do as he says, excitement lighting up my skin. I mash my lips together to stifle a moan when my first two fingers come into contact with my clit.

James’s eyes are fixed on the apex of my thighs as he bends down to remove one shoe. “Does it feel good, Lettie?”

No longer trusting my voice — because this got real, *really* freaking fast — all I can do is nod.

He slips off the other shoe, slow and methodically. “As good as when I do it?”

“No.”

It’s true. He’s better at pleasing me than I am at pleasing myself. According to Stella and Freya, that’s uncommon. Lucky me, I guess. Or not.

He tugs on one end of his belt, slowly pulling it through the hoops of his pants. He's always so in control. "Rub your clit faster for me."

Again, I comply instantly. I'm too much of a chickenshit to glance away from his face, but a large part of me wants to stare at the glass, pretending I can see whoever is in there.

Watching us.

Once his belt hits the floor, he drifts his hand back to the fly of his pants. "That's a good girl. Now roll your hips."

Too turned on to dream of disobeying him, I swirl my hips in a circle as my fingertips dance over my clit.

He tugs his pants down over his hips, leaving him in only his boxers. My greedy eyes travel up and down his fit body and pause at the erection stretching out the material of his boxers.

"You sang like an angel and look like a goddess, Lettie."

A sliver of doubt tickles the back of my throat. "You're not mad that I'm wearing this?"

He shoves his boxers down, his cock springing free. He wraps his fist around the shaft. "Why would I be mad?"

"I was worried you might be jealous of other men seeing me like this."

"Not a concern for me, baby."

No artifice or deceit laces his words. He's not the least bit jealous.

Why does that sour my stomach?

If he's not jealous, does that mean he doesn't consider me *his*? I don't know why I'm surprised by this. We've not labeled our relationship beyond that first night when he called me his *lover*.

Yet, a part of me wanted him to be jealous. And that's ludicrous.

But he called me his girl on the way in here. Does he mean it the way I hope he does?

He moves to the side of the bed, standing at the edge. “Come put your head over here. Feet down there.” He points to the spot he wants me, right in front of him. “Face up.”

Dominant James really does things to me. So fucking hot.

Doing as instructed, I move into position and wait for direction. I have no idea what he’s got planned. He remains standing over my head, leaving me between his legs, facing up as he looks down at me.

The only hole he can access in this position is... my mouth.

Oh, this is going to be interesting. How the hell is this position going to work? Are upside-down blow jobs a thing?

I swallow past a lump in my throat, hoping to hell I don’t embarrass myself in front of whoever might be in that room.

“Scoot closer to me. Let your head hang off,” he orders.

I dig my heels into the bed and shove myself toward him, dangling my head a few inches off the bed.

“Perfect. Now open your mouth,” he orders, moving his cock over my face. “I’m going to fuck your throat before I take your pussy.”

My throat? Not my mouth? Oh fuck.

We’ve dabbled in blow jobs over the last few weeks. I was terrible at first, even if he won’t say so. But I’ve improved, thanks to his expert tutelage. And now I enjoy them quite a bit. It’s arousing as hell to be able to make him feel good like that. But he’s always been gentle with me.

Fucking my throat doesn’t sound gentle.

He must sense my hesitation because he steps back, lowers his head to mine, and cups my cheeks tenderly, upside-down Spiderman style.

At a volume so low I have to strain to hear him, he whispers, “I’ll never hurt you, sweetness. Don’t worry. Wrap

your hands around my hamstrings to hold on. And if you want to stop, just pinch me. Okay?”

Oh this man.

There are speakers that pipe the noise from this room into the observation room. He's being quiet because he knows I don't want the voyeurs to realize I'm inexperienced.

“Can I have a kiss first, please?”

“You can have anything you want from me, sugar bear.”

My heart is going to explode if he keeps saying things like that to me. Stella warned me to go slow and hold back some of my heart. But I don't think I'm capable of that.

He kisses me, soft and sweet, reassuring me with each stroke of his tongue. In this upside-down position, it's a whole new experience. His lips feel different. His tongue delves into my mouth in new ways.

A random thought hits me. There's so much I haven't done sexually that even something as innocuous as an inverted kiss is a new experience.

And he's hell-bent on making sure he claims every one of my firsts. He wasn't kidding when he said that on the night we first made love.

When he pulls away, I beam at him like he's handing me a dozen roses instead of preparing to fuck my throat while I dangle off the edge of a bed in a kink club with voyeurs on the other side of the glass.

“Open that mouth, sweet girl,” he says in a smoky tone, tugging my lips open with his thumbs.

My thighs press together as I open for him. He holds his cock by the base of the shaft and presses the tip against my extended tongue. After swirling it around a few times, he uses his free hand to adjust my neck.

He enters my mouth with a slow, gentle stroke. With so much about this encounter being new to me, his familiar taste is comforting.

“Good girl. Just like that,” he coos at me, sultry and low.

After retracting with the same deliberate tenderness, he slips forward again. “Perfect, baby. You’re doing perfectly. Just breathe through your nose.”

His words soothe me, wiping away all doubts and fears about my performance.

He thrusts again, a bit harder. My hands reach out behind him to grab his hamstrings like he told me. But I don’t pinch him. I’m not tapping out; I’m holding on.

“Fuck, baby. You have the most exquisite mouth.”

I’m internally beaming like the sun and preening for him. I had no idea I had a praise kink, but I sure as hell do. Definitely my number one. Something tells me James also has one, because he loves to heap affectionate words on me.

His strokes steadily increase in tempo and depth, and his balls occasionally graze my forehead and eyes. And he keeps right on lauding me through it.

“Be my good girl and open that throat for me.”

Melting. I’m melting into a puddle.

Taking a deep breath through my nose, I force my throat muscles to relax like he taught me. His next stroke goes deeper, drawing a slight gag from me. But it doesn’t bother me. Especially when he showers me with compliments.

“Mmm. Yes, sugar. *Fuck*. Just like that.”

I moan when he hits my throat the next time and am rewarded with a hiss of pleasure.

Time fades. All I can focus on is the velvety feel of his cock slipping over my tongue, teasing the entrance of my throat. My eyes water, and I gag a few times here and there. Each time I do, he pulls out completely and waits for me to signal I’m ready for more.

After a while, I stop gagging and start sucking with every deep pass, intentionally drawing him deeper. And the better I do, the more honeyed words he heaps on me.

One of his hands reaches under my jaw, and his thumb skims up and down the top of my neck. It strikes me as an odd place to caress me.

On his next downward thrust, I realize why his hand is there. As the head of his cock dives into my throat, he presses down on my neck with his hand. Essentially, he's rubbing his dick from the outside of my throat.

His flattering words turn into a verbal essay of curse words and deep moans.

I'm *beyond* aroused by this whole fucking scene. The amount of lubrication coming out of me is absurd. If I weren't holding on to the backs of his thighs, I'd likely slip off the bed.

It's not just the blow job and the praise he's pouring on me that has me lubed up like an oil slick. Rather, it's knowing that someone is on the other side of the glass, watching me bring him to this point where he's about to spill down my throat.

If it's possible to orgasm without being touched below the waist, it's likely to happen to me any moment.

Without a warning, he pulls all the way out of my mouth. "Fuck, Lettie. You almost made me come down your throat." He lowers to a kneeling position, his head hovering over mine.

"You could have. I would have swallowed it down." I stick my tongue out in offering, wiggling it tauntingly.

Truth time. I'm full of shit, and he knows it. The few times he let me suck him to climax, I had to spit it out. Not sure how anyone manages to swallow it. I gagged more with that taste in my mouth than with all the throat fucks he just gave me.

Stella says it's an acquired taste. Not sure I'll be acquiring it anytime soon.

Instead of standing up and resuming the blow job, he slants his lips over my pointed tongue, sucking it deep into his mouth. My thighs slam shut again, giving me something to grind against.

"Mmm," I simper as he breaks the kiss.

My eyes flicker open, and he's still hovering over me. Since he's upside down, or maybe I am, I can't read his expression.

Before I can contort my neck to get a better view, he prowls to the other side of the bed where my feet are. He grabs my ankles and yanks me toward him, spreading my legs in the process.

Hot.

“You look so fucking beautiful tonight. I hate to take anything off you. But I need better access to your gorgeous pussy so I can properly thank you for that epic fucking blow job.”

He reaches forward and unsnaps the garter clasp on the front of my stockings, one side, then the other. “Roll over.”

I turn onto my stomach, then feel the snaps of the garters releasing against the backs of my thighs. He slides his large palms along my outer thighs and hips and slips his fingers under the waistband of my panties before tugging them down my legs.

The bed shifts, but since he didn't tell me to roll over yet, I don't. I've learned that when he's in Dom mode, he expects me to wait for instructions. And I'm driven to please him.

I'm a certified simp for Dominant James. A card-carrying member and president of his freaking fan club.

He straddles my lower legs and trails his hands over my now naked butt cheeks, sending a trill of exhilaration through me.

“You're going to let me take your ass one day, aren't you, my sweet girl?”

Unable to respond, I gulp and shove my face deeper into the mattress.

Like he knows how rosy he just made my face, he leans forward and drapes his frame over mine. “Don't worry, Lettie bear. I won't fuck your ass tonight. The first time will be just for us and only when you're ready.”

“Thank fuck,” I mumble through a relieved sigh.

His weight shifts off me, leaving me bereft until his hands grope my outer thighs. The unexpected snap of the garter belts momentarily confuses me.

“What are you doing, babe?” I ask timidly.

“Reattaching these. I like how they look. Is that okay with you?” The teasing quality of his tone sets off a flurry of butterflies in my belly. I freaking love when I can make him playful. It’s like winning the lottery.

Out of nowhere, he smacks my ass, making me flinch and giggle. “Roll over, sugar bear.”

Obedient and jonesing for praise, I eagerly comply. Once on my back, I prop myself on my elbows to watch him reattach the garters to the front of my thigh-high fishnets.

Once they’re fastened, he studies me with covetous eyes. “You’re the most exquisite creature on earth. I’m the luckiest man on the damn planet.”

His fingertips dig into the flesh of my thighs like he can’t get enough. The way he’s studying me makes my heart speed up. It’s like he’s under a spell. His eyes are glazed, and his mouth hangs open, revealing his tongue dancing behind his lower lip.

Aching for more of his touch, I reach forward and cup my hands over his. “Please, babe. I need you.”

My request seems to pull him from his trance. He blinks a few times and warmly meets my gaze before shifting our positioning. Wordlessly, he spreads my legs, putting himself between them, and lowers his mouth to my core.

The first swipe of his tongue nearly does me in. Having been aroused this entire time, I don’t need a warmup like normal. Almost instantly, I start grinding against him and moaning. He only teases me briefly before sucking my clit between his teeth and nibbling tenderly. My hips buck and thrash as pleasure travels to all my nerve endings.

“Oh my god!” I yell in between keening whimpers.

In what seems like no time at all, my orgasm detonates. It's almost violent, leaving me quivering and shaking in ecstasy. It all happens so fast I don't have a chance to be ashamed of my loud reaction, especially considering our viewers behind the glass.

"Fucking hell, baby," James grits out as he rises to his knees and wipes his face. "You weren't kidding about being ready for this room, were you? That's got to be a record."

Smug as a bug on a rug, I quip, "I told ya so."

"Up on your hands and knees, gorgeous. Face the fucking mirror."

As I shuffle into position, he grabs a condom from the basket beside the bed and suits up. When he returns, I'm preening like a show pony, but I haven't been brave enough to look in the mirror.

I'm afraid of what I'll see.

Me.

Dressed like a slut and giving my body to a man.

Regardless of how strong my feelings are for him or how much I love our intimacy, there's a deep-seated shame I haven't been able to shake. All the orgasms in the world won't release me from the hold it has over me.

I'm beginning to think I'll never break free of it.

Unaware of my sudden mood shift, James kneels behind me on the bed, running his palm along my spine. As he instructed, I face the front but immediately close my eyes.

Coward. Slut. Sinner.

CHAPTER 38

MY GIRL

TOMER

As I line up my throbbing cock with Lettie's perfect pussy and begin to enter her, I glance at the mirror, expecting to see her studying me with that sneaky grin she often wears when I catch her watching.

It's such a fucking turn-on that she's a voyeur too.

But her eyes are closed, and her face no longer exudes utter bliss. She looks... tense. But there's something more. An unreadable emotion that causes my chest to tighten.

Not that most emotions are *readable* for me.

Without hesitating, I withdraw from her body. She shoots a concerned glance at me over her shoulder.

I drop to my ass and rest my back against the headboard. "Come here, sugar bear."

She freezes, her eyes the only thing moving. They sweep around the room, almost pointedly avoiding mine.

Glad I trusted my instinct. Something is undoubtedly wrong.

With that thought, my erection softens.

When she doesn't snap out of it on her own, I inject authority into my tone. "Lettie, I said come here. Now."

She brushes off her indecision and crawls over to me. "Where do you want me?"

"Sit on my lap, facing me."

After she straddles me, I tuck the single loose strand of hair that escaped her fancy hairdo and offer her a hint of a smile, hoping it comforts her. I settle my hands around her waist and study her carefully.

She wraps her arms over my shoulders, lacing her hands at my nape. "Did I do something wrong, babe?"

I love that she calls me that now. It falls off her tongue so easily.

"No, sugar. I saw something shift in you. What's wrong? Are you overwhelmed? Second thoughts?"

"No, it's just..." Her words trail off, and her eyes fall to my chest.

I rub circles over her low back, where it peeks out from the bottom of the corset. "Take your time, Lettie. Just breathe. I've got you."

Her chin quivers. A sinking feeling settles low in my gut.

"Sugar bear, we should go to an aftercare room so we can talk without anyone hearing us. Are you okay with that?"

She jerks her head back up. "But you didn't... uh... finish."

"Do you think I could come knowing my girl is on the verge of tears?"

One side of her face twitches, and she blinks repeatedly. "That's the second time you said that tonight."

"Said what, baby?"

"You called me *your girl*."

My head cricks to the side, confusion addling my brain. “Well, aren’t you my girl?”

She licks her lips. “I *feel* like I am, and I want to be. But before tonight, you never said it that way. We haven’t put a label on this yet or had *the talk*. I guess I’m looking for clarification about what you mean when you call me that.”

People. They make no damn sense.

Clearly, I’ve done something wrong if she’s unsure of my intentions. Not sure why I’m surprised by that. Did I really expect to do any of this right?

Putting an official label on our relationship is unnecessary to my way of thinking. What’s it going to change? I have no plans to be with anyone else, and I’d bet my life she doesn’t either. I don’t need a verbal discussion to reassure me of that.

Freya’s warning from earlier runs through my mind.

The last thing I want to do is hurt Lettie.

“Let’s go to the other room, baby. We should have privacy for this talk. I don’t want to share this moment with anyone else.”

She nods and shifts her weight off me. I remove the condom and quickly throw on my clothes. She pulls her panties on, this time slipping them over the garter. On our way out, I flip the switch, signaling the room is vacant but needs cleaning.

Once we’re in the hallway, I wrap my arm around her shoulder and tuck her close to my side. Before we hit the main room, we take the side hallway that leads to a bank of cozy aftercare suites. As soon as I find an empty room, I pull her inside and close the door.

It’s a small space with muted lighting, soft gray walls, and a small table with a few basic supplies — bottled water, tissues, lotion, and other things that might be needed after a scene. A giant plush bean bag chair sits in the center of the room, easily large enough for three adults.

I crawl onto the bag, motioning for her to follow me.

“You don’t strike me as the beanbag type,” she says as she joins me.

We lie on our sides, facing each other. I prop my head on my fist and trail my other hand over her cheek and down to her shoulder. As if we’re thinking the same thing, we simultaneously shift our bodies closer.

She buries her face in my chest, and I wrap both arms around her, letting my head fall to the beanbag. Her legs weave with mine.

My heart swells with affection for her. It’s taken some time for me to process my emotions to identify that sensation. But it’s becoming more apparent the longer I’m around her.

I adore her.

It terrifies me how much she’s come to mean to me since she arrived in Florida a few months ago. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her.

Except tell her the truth about myself, apparently.

The guilt over the secrets I keep threatens to break me. It’s getting worse every day. And the longer this ruse goes on, the bigger the hole I dig.

It’s already too late.

If I tell her now, I’ll lose her. Too much time has gone by. She won’t forgive me. I’m fucking stuck in this lie until I figure a way out.

I distract myself from dark thoughts by asking, “If I’m not the beanbag type of guy, what type am I?”

“You’re more like a wooden chair type of guy.” I scoff, but before I can protest or ask her for elaboration, she says, “Actually, that’s what you were when I first met you. Stiff and closed off.”

“And now?”

“Now you’re a comfy recliner. But only for me. You’re a metal folding chair for everyone else.”

Never thought a metaphor about chairs would hit the nail on the head like that. But she's spot on.

Remembering that earlier she sought reassurance about her place with me, I confirm her statement by attempting a joke. "Lettie, you're the only one I'd ever let call me a chair." I kiss the top of her head. "And I'll happily be your comfy recliner. Sit on me all you want. And not just my face, but you're always welcome up there too."

She giggles softly against my chest and tightens her embrace. Soaking in every second of this closeness, I stroke her shoulder with my knuckles and patiently wait for her to open up.

"Whenever you're ready, you can tell me what happened. No rush. I'm not going anywhere."

Her hold on me intensifies.

Although I don't expect her to speak so soon, she replies almost instantly. "Well, before we get to what made me freeze back there, can we address the other thing?"

"What other thing?"

Her head flops back, and I look down to see her scrunching her nose at me. Adorable.

"The thing where you call me *your girl*."

"I thought we just settled that."

"We did not."

"I'm your recliner," I tease.

"I never thought I'd have to say this to you, but please be serious."

I laugh silently. "Okay, fine. Let's see." I swallow and focus on my words to avoid saying the wrong thing. "When I call you my girl, I mean it exactly as it sounds. You're mine."

Even though I have no right to claim you.

"I'm your what? Your lover? Your girlfriend? Your sub? Your friend with benefits? What?"

“Lettie, I told you before that I’m a straightforward man. I don’t think in those terms. I’m yours. You’re mine. That’s it.”

She grins at me. “You’re mine too?”

“Of course, sugar bear.”

One of her immaculately groomed eyebrows arches. “*Exclusively* mine?”

“Oh I see what’s happening. You’re worried about other people.”

She nuzzles back into my chest. “Well, sort of. I mean, yeah. I don’t want to share you.”

“I thought it was clear that wasn’t going to be a concern when I had Freya take me off the schedule for the shibari demonstrations.”

Her head pops back off my chest. “That’s why you canceled? I thought it was because work was so busy for you.”

“Well, it’s always hectic there, and that won’t change anytime soon. But I would’ve tried to make the demos if that was the only factor.”

Her chin wobbles, and her eyes sparkle with unshed tears. “You told her no because of me?”

“Yeah.” I cup her cheek. “I couldn’t stand the idea of upsetting you or touching another woman like that — even if it wouldn’t be sexual — and I know you aren’t ready to bottom for me.”

“Oh my goodness. That’s so... sweet,” she quavers. “It means so much to me, James. So damn much.”

That fucking name is a poison-tipped dagger to my heart. Especially now, when I’m so close to confessing my feelings for her. But as her mouth presses against mine, her kiss becomes the antidote.

I allow her lips to soothe me, foolishly pretending that we have a future that doesn’t end with a pair of broken hearts, ripped in pieces by the deceit that’s already trying to bury me alive.

Although I know it's not possible to be happy with Lettie forever, I can imagine what life would be like if it were.

What if I really were James Harris and not Tomer Stillman? Could an average man who works in some corporate IT gig find forever with someone as remarkable as her?

As I pull back from the kiss and study her perfect face, breathtakingly beautiful as always, I realize no version of me would ever be deserving of Violet's love. Not even the carefully curated persona I choose to show her could capture her heart for very long.

It'll end soon. She'll get tired of me, or I'll fuck up one too many times.

My father was right. No one could ever tolerate me for long. Not even someone as kind and accepting as her.

So what's the harm in living inside the fantasy a little while longer?

I press her cheek back to my chest, tucking her head under my chin, and resign myself to make the most of this while it lasts.

After a few more minutes of blissful silence, with only the muted music from the club drowning out the sound of our breathing, she clears her throat. "The reason I clammed up is the same reason I cried that night at the hotel."

A jarring memory of her calling me trash attempts to yank me from the stolen peacefulness of this moment, but I force it away. Given how she's treated me ever since then, she didn't mean it that night.

"What's the reason, sweetness?"

"You know how I mentioned before that I was raised by a very religious family?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it was mostly my mama, *err*, grandmama, I should say."

What does her grandmother have to do with her crying the first time I made her come? Rather than rush her to answer, I'll let her guide the conversation.

She doesn't make me wait long. "So she was much more than merely strict with me because of her evangelical religious beliefs. I didn't see it at the time since it was all I knew, but as an adult, I realize the way she treated me crossed over into abuse territory."

My mind reels as I think about what she might mean by that. What type of abuse? Was it sexual? Physical? Emotional?

What the fuck happened to her?

I inhale sharply, trying to rein in my initial reaction — which is to pelt her with questions until I know enough to exact revenge on her behalf. There'll be plenty of time for that later.

"The way I was raised probably wouldn't be considered abusive by most people, so I'll understand if you don't agree with me when I'm done explaining. Aside from my best friend, I don't talk about it with anyone because I know they'll think I'm being overdramatic or a snowflake."

I can't let her continue that train of thought a second more. "Lettie, it's not for me to judge whether it's abuse or not. If you saw it as abuse, I'll see it that way too. And if anyone ever challenged you on that, they were wrong."

Like earlier, her hold around my waist tightens. It reassures me that I said the right thing.

"It boils down to this. Misguided and extreme religious beliefs were used as a tool to exert total control over me. And in response, they formed a type of heightened state of anxiety in me. *Always*. I lived in constant fear. Everything I did could potentially jeopardize my eternal soul or bring shame to me and my entire family. I could lose my way with just one errant thought. One action could set me on a course to loneliness and suffering. And this pressure wasn't only from Mama, but from

the rest of the church, community, and the institution as a whole.”

Unable to form words, I stroke her shoulder and kiss the top of her head.

There’s a tiny hitch in her voice when she continues. “The number of times I was threatened with eternity in hell for being a *normal* child was absurd. It was drilled into my head that anything that feels good is dangerous. Not just sex, but even things I couldn’t control.”

“Like?”

“Aside from things most Christians see as sins — drinking, smoking, drugs, adultery, and so on — it was things like being aroused, fantasizing about kissing a boy, or anything beyond holding hands. Hell, I remember waking up after having a dream about a boy I liked, and I cried all morning. I couldn’t go to school because I was so disappointed in myself for being unclean. From a dream. *A dream.*”

“Unclean?”

“The way I was raised, girls — and boys, but to a lesser degree — were taught that our purity was sacred. We were supposed to save ourselves for our future husbands. If we were tainted, no one would want us. You wouldn’t eat the cookie that someone else licked. That’s what we were. Cookies. Consumables for someone else to enjoy. Only worthwhile if we were fresh out of the package. No one wants a dirty cookie. Or the gum that’s been chewed. That was another lovely metaphor.”

“And even dreams would make you less clean or pure?”

“Purity isn’t only about our bodies, but our thoughts too. After all, God knows our hearts and minds better than we do. Now, as a rational adult who left the church and got educated, I know it sounds crazy. How could I be so foolish to believe something like that? Biology and hormones are real. They’re not something I could have controlled. But I was brought up to see *anything* sexual as dirty. My body’s cravings were not to be trusted. If the threat of hell wasn’t enough of a

deterrent, there was also the pressure of losing my family and friends because I was weak, unable to preserve myself or love God the way I was supposed to.”

“Damn, Lettie. That must have been awful.”

“It was all I knew back then. And to some degree, we were almost encouraged to suffer. Suffering earns favor with God or purifies your soul. I accepted it as a fact of life, embracing my suffering.”

If suffering earns us favor, I’m due for rainbows and unicorns.

“How did you escape that way of thinking?”

She takes a deep breath before answering. “It was because of Stella. She sort of saved me just by being herself. Ironically, the way God made her is what paved a path for me.”

“How so?”

“She came to me one day in tears, begging me to pray with her. We went to her house after school, and she confessed some of the thoughts and urges she was having and how nothing she did could stop them. She was so terrified she would lose me by telling me, but she had no one else to turn to. I was her last resort.”

She pauses to gather her composure. I embrace her through it, my fingers making soothing circles on her supple skin.

“That was when she realized she was attracted to girls as well as boys. And she was so damn certain that nothing was going to save her soul. She was prepared to kill herself to save her family the embarrassment if we couldn’t figure out how to *cure her* of those urges.”

“Shit, baby. That must have been scary. How old were you?”

“Fourteen. And yeah, I was terrified. We both were. She was my best friend. We were closer than sisters and still are, despite living hundreds of miles apart. To think that she was less deserving of God’s love because of something she couldn’t change didn’t feel right to me. I hated that she lived

in fear of someone finding out her secret. Hated everything about what was happening to her. And a part of me knew that praying wouldn't fix it. After all, I'd been praying to stop fantasizing about sex since I first felt a funny feeling in the swimming pool when I accidentally got too close to the jet. I knew how badly I wanted those feelings to go away, but they remained no matter what I did. I assumed it was the same for Stella."

"What did you do?"

"The internet is a beautiful thing. I used a computer in the school's library to do research because I'd never be bold enough to use our shared family computer. I researched views on homosexuality besides those we'd been taught in Sunday school, bible study, youth groups, and so on. I found some scientific articles and learned it wasn't something she could control. My beliefs got muddled, thoughts discordant. If God created her that way, it couldn't be wrong. And I was going to be certain she didn't take her life because of it. But it all started from there. Once I realized that not everything we were taught was true, I looked at other beliefs more critically. It snowballed until I couldn't be part of it any longer. It took another three years before I was strong enough to bail, but I finally did."

"So you left the church, I assume? How did your family take that?"

She laughs humorlessly. "Papa didn't mind it. He was only part of the church to please Mama. He was a bare minimum Christian. Secretly, he was happy I figured it out on my own and only wanted me to be happy." There's a tremble in her voice. I know she misses him. He sounds like he was a decent man.

Not sure how they ended up lying to her about her real father, though. But I can't exactly call him up and ask him. Nor can I ask her.

"Papa told me once that watching me walk away from the church and stand up to Mama is what gave him the courage to leave her. And he didn't mean it in a bad way — not like

you're the reason we're divorced. He said I inspired him to find his own happiness.”

“He didn’t love her anymore?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I never asked. Before he died, I spent a lot of time taking care of him. We had good talks about all kinds of things, but we didn’t discuss her much. I don’t think either of us wanted our last weeks together to be marred by her toxicity. The only exception was when he admitted he wasn’t my real father. He told me that when my birth mother died, Mama was in such a deep depression. She turned to faith to make sense of it all. And she got sucked in. Over the years, she changed. She wasn’t the same woman he married. I think I was a constant reminder of the daughter she lost. My mother wouldn’t have died if not for premarital sex and sinning since that got her pregnant with me. She was determined to save me from a similar fate. The church provided her with what she needed to make that possible.”

She laughs again, and this time it sounds lighter. “Ironically, the path she chose for me drove me to Florida, where I work in a kink club. If she hadn’t tried to manipulate my entire life, instilling so much guilt and shame I almost drowned, I might still be at home, living a more traditional life.”

“Well, now I’m torn.”

She faces me, propping her cheek on her palm. “Over what?”

“I was contemplating what kind of justice I could serve up to her and anyone else who made you feel guilt or shame over your body’s natural urges. But now I also want to thank her for sending you to me. So... yeah, I’m torn.”

A smile gradually settles on her face, growing brighter until it reaches her eyes. “You would get revenge for me?”

“Absolutely.”

“How would you do it? What does an IT analyst do to someone who wrongs *their girl*?”

It dawns on me how little I've shared with her about my skills. She has no idea what I'm capable of. The things I've done. That's probably for the best.

But the desire to let her in rises inside me like the tides. I could wait for it to ebb again.

Only shielding myself isn't as appealing as it once was.

I want — no — I *need* her to know me.

“For starters, I'd destroy their credit or have them audited by the IRS. Install malware on their devices to plant information, thus making it appear that they're working with terrorist organizations. After that, I'd tip off Homeland Security and the CIA about their *activities*. Those are a few basic things off the top of my head. With some extra time, I'd come up with more creative justice.”

Her soft chuckles grow into deep guffaws.

It's precious how she thinks I'm kidding.

“I assumed you were gonna maybe send them a bunch of pizzas they didn't order.”

“Nah. That's amateur shit.” I narrow my eyes, pretending to be deep in thought. “For religious zealots, I'd sign them up for sex toy subscriptions, give them profiles on porn sites, and set them up with very robust Fetlife accounts. After that, I'd leak all that information to the local media, their employers, blast it out to all their contacts, and display it on the church's website.”

“Holy shit. What an imagination you have. Remind me to *never* get on your bad side.”

When our laughter dies down, she offers her mouth to me for a chaste kiss, which I accept greedily.

“Lettie, thank you for sharing that with me. Although I've never felt guilt or shame over sexual pleasure before, there have been plenty of times when guilt hung over my head.”

Like every moment I spend with her without being my true self.

Maybe I can ease a bit of that.

Right fucking now.

“I want to tell you something about me.” My voice fails to mask my trepidation, my words sounding like sandpaper.

A dash of excitement lights up her face. “What?”

As she waits for my response, she licks her lips innocently, leaving a moist sheen on the pillowy pink flesh.

Before I tell her, I kiss her again.

Just in case it’s the last time.

“About those things I just said. The things I could do...”

Her expression pinches faintly, still coated in amusement. “The revenge stuff?”

“Yeah.” I gulp. “I could do those things. I would do them for you.” Her face blanches so I quickly amend, “I mean, I would if you wanted me to.”

Her intelligent gaze prods and pokes at me while she considers my confession. “Are you serious? You wouldn’t do that. You can’t. Right?”

Words die on my tongue, poisoned by the acid erupting from my gut.

Extricating herself from my arms, she shifts upright. Although she doesn’t pull far away, she does stiffen. Her eyelids crescent into a squint. “You’re not joking, are you?”

I can’t speak yet, frozen in fear.

Fear of her judgment.

Fear that I’ve just fucked up the best thing to ever happen to me.

Something shifts behind her eyes, warmth effusing from her to me.

“Lettie, what if I wasn’t joking?”

Her nervous laughter rings melodically around the small space. When I don’t share her response, she fidgets with the

laces of her corset under her breasts.

After exhaling through perfectly rounded lips that beg to be kissed, she shakes off her bewilderment. “Well, if you weren’t joking, I suppose I’d ask where on earth you learned that? I don’t pretend to know much about the IT world, but that doesn’t sound like the type of skills the average analyst possesses.”

I sit up to get closer to her. The lighting is muted, and I don’t want to miss any reaction that may cross her face.

“You’re right. They aren’t, but I’m not exactly the average analyst. I was Special Operations in the Army — military intelligence. I could do all those things and more.”

The grooves crowded on her forehead gradually lessen as she appears to adapt from a concerned posture to... impressed?

Inching closer to me, she lowers her chin. “Have you done any of those things?” Those breathtaking blue orbs that haunt my dreams spark with heightened intrigue.

She’s fucking impressed.

This woman.

“Some of them.”

“For other women?”

“No,” I respond flatly. “There’s never been another woman I’d do that for.”

Her throat bobs right before she licks her lips again and leans closer. “But you’d do it for me?”

“If someone hurt you or if you asked me to, I wouldn’t hesitate.”

Possibly even if she didn’t ask.

Scratch that. Not possibly, but definitely. I did it already.

Her cheeks and nostrils twitch as a dazzling grin frees itself. “Why is that hot? It shouldn’t be hot.” She mockingly fans her face. “Sexy hacker soldier defending my honor. *Oof.*”

“I was afraid to tell you about this part of me,” I admit before I think better of it.

“Don’t be afraid to tell me anything. I want to know everything about you. Absolutely everything. Good or bad.”

She can’t mean that.

“Lettie, what if there’s more bad than good?”

Rising to her knees, she cups her hands at my nape and links our gazes. “Listen to me right now. I realize we haven’t known each other that long, but I’m certain you’re a good man. Do you wanna hear how I know?”

Nodding, I wrap my hands around her waist and pull her toward me. The way I crave her closeness has become a physical need.

For as long as I can remember, I never needed to be touched. Never sought out comfort and longed to give it back in return.

Until her.

She responds to my unspoken request, straddling my thighs and removing the space between our chests. “When you found me cryin’ at a gas pump, you gave me all the cash you had in your wallet and got me something to eat. That was a selfless, generous, and good-hearted thing to do. You got me a job, which means you’re resourceful, determined, and look out for others.”

I remain silent. She didn’t ask for a response.

“When I broke my toes because I’m a first-class klutz, you literally carried me to an urgent care, even paying for it. Then you took me grocery shopping since you knew I wouldn’t be able to drive for a while. That was damn thoughtful and compassionate.” Her smile widens until it brightens the room. “Despite being a bit of a stalker, you followed me to the hotel at night because you’re protective and concerned for my safety. And since we became intimate, you’ve never once pushed me to do anything I wasn’t ready to do, putting my comfort and consent above your own pleasure every damn

time. You even did it tonight when you denied yourself and brought me in here instead. Right?”

I nod, finding no objection to her assertions thus far.

“And since you were in the military, you’re obviously brave and honorable. Plus, I’ve never known anyone who makes me feel as special, beautiful, and free as you do.”

My sinuses sting.

Before I have time to worry whether I’m coming down with a cold, she cups my cheeks and hovers her mouth over mine. Her words feather across my lips. “Now tell me. Does that sound like someone who’d do more bad than good?”

She paints a different picture of me than the one I see in the mirror each day.

And she believes her vision of me wholeheartedly. It makes me want to believe it too.

Instead of answering with words, I capture her mouth.

And I kiss her.

I kiss her with all I am and everything I’ve longed to be.

I kiss her because I don’t have the words to express how much her faith in me means.

And I kiss her for what she said. For who she is. For how she sees me. For how she makes me feel.

This beautiful woman makes me fucking *feel*.

More and more each day.

Succumbing to the fantasy, I let her belief in me scrub away the stains on my soul.

I let her fill the emptiness, knowing full well that when this ends — and it will — the man she sees in me will exist no more.

And he won’t ever return.

Until then, I’ll take comfort in knowing that not only do I have a heart, but it was blessed to beat alongside hers for one sweet moment in time.

CHAPTER 39

POSTPONE THE SEXIVERSARY

Three months later

TOMER

Big Al barges into my office without knocking — not that he needs to, given it's his company. He's usually a little bit more reserved, often hovering in the doorway and rapping on the frame before popping his head in. Not the case tonight.

His expression is one I've seen often. But that was when we were in battle, and everything was about to go to shit.

“Stop everything you're doing. We've got an emergency. Sammy Mason has been abducted.”

Did I hear him right? Leo's sister, Sammy Mason, has been abducted?

That means someone is fucking with our Redleg family.

My spine goes ramrod straight. “What do we know?”

I shove myself, chair and all, across the lair to my primary computer. The three screens come to life, ready to do whatever the fuck I need them to.

Boss's voice is steady, barely masking his alarm. "Lionheart just called. He and Sawyer were at the Sassy Parrot. Sammy was supposed to be working, but they never saw her. When they grew concerned, they asked around for her. Her coworkers hadn't seen her for approximately thirty minutes. The only trace of her was her cell phone, found on the ground in the alley behind the bar near the dumpster. No other sign of her."

My brain processes the details, shuffling action steps into a logical order.

He cricks his wrist to check his watch. "It's been three to five minutes since I ended the call with Leo. After that, I contacted Sammy's mother to have her lock down her house, notified Chief Heller at CPD, and walked down here. That's all we know. What do you need?"

Because he knows how I think, he laid out most of the timeline for me. Except one thing.

"Did Lionheart call you *immediately* after they found her phone?"

"Affirmative. From the alley."

"So that means she was taken between," I glance at the clock and do a quick calculation, "1845 and 1915, give or take."

While tapping frantically across the screen of his Redleg tablet, he mutters, "Agree. See what footage you can find during that window."

And then he's on the move again.

On his way out of the lair, he announces, "I'll scramble resources and inform you when I head to the bar to help the guys."

"Copy. Searching for feeds now."

Despite the gravity and tension of the situation, my training takes effect immediately, enabling me to block out everything but the most crucial tasks.

Diving in through back door channels I've used for past cases, I access multiple traffic camera sources in the bar's vicinity and begin spooling their feeds for analysis.

While that runs, I identify five other businesses that might have helpful surveillance feeds. I don't have an easily accessible route to most of these. It'll be easier if we can get in legally.

Without delay, I dial Leo.

"T, do you have anything for me yet?"

My mouse continues clicking as I set up filters and narrow parameters in my analysis programs. "Negative. Does the bar have cameras viewing the rear of the building?"

"No, they don't fucking have any out there," he seethes. "I can't believe this is happening. Help me find her, *please*. We can't lose her again."

Shaking off his unhelpful emotional response, I redirect our conversation. "I'm compiling traffic feeds now. Given you're at the scene, it'll be faster for you to visually inspect the alleyway and direct me to which businesses might have cameras facing the dumpster area. Get out there and tell me what you can see in the vicinity. I'll let you know if I find anything on traffic cams."

"Copy."

"Update me with anything you find or any new leads."

"Got it."

He hangs up, allowing me to return to my growing task list.

Minutes later, I've got the most relevant traffic footage pulled up on three screens. Popping my head out of my office, I look toward our remote monitoring team. I need a warm body.

"Listen up, team. I need two of you with me. Now. Top priority. The rest of you will need to team up to cover their stations."

I return to my desk, hearing them chattering about who's doing what. Two minutes later, I have the voluntolds poring over footage to find anything that'll help us locate Sammy.

Leo sends a message with bad news shortly thereafter. No cameras with a view of the area. *Shit.*

Maybe I can get more intel if I go to the scene. I might see something that can help.

Grabbing my phone, I call Boss to give him an update.

“Go, T.”

“No cameras facing the back alley. But I'm pulling traffic cam footage in droves for review by my team. There's a fuck ton of footage, so it'll take a while for it to spool. They're reviewing it as it comes, but even with my filters, it'll take time to assess it. Unless you have something else for me now, I'll meet you at the scene to assist with recon as soon as I'm at a stopping point. I need another three or four minutes before I'm stuck in limbo.”

“I'm still at HQ. Just got off the phone with Sammy's mother. Henderson is en route to her for protection. Shep will assist us tonight on scene. Grab what you need to work remotely and meet us downstairs in five.”

“Good call on Mrs. Mason. If someone targeted Sammy, her mother could be next.”

“Not on our fucking watch.”



BY THE TIME we arrive at the Sassy Parrot, Clearwater Police Department is on scene. Boss and Shep jump out of the SUV.

As I exit to join them, I get a message on my Redleg phone from one of the guys scanning the footage. “Head in without me, guys. I just got a message from HQ. Be right behind you.”

I read through the technical question, opting to call them back with my response to expedite everything.

Once that's done, my hand inches toward the handle to open the SUV door. I stop again when my personal cell buzzes

in my back pocket. What the fuck now?

It's a text from Lettie.

SUGAR BEAR

What time are you getting here? Supper's almost ready!

FUCK. I forgot that she's making dinner for our four-month anniversary. I should've been there by now.

ME

Sorry, sweetness. Need to reschedule. Problem at work.

SUGAR BEAR

We can't reschedule our sexiversary. The calendar changes for no man. Are you sure you can't leave? Bring your laptop and work here while I blow you under the table.

ME

Damn, sugar. That's tempting. But I'm mobile with Boss right now. It's an emergency. Unclear when I'll be done.

SUGAR BEAR

<gif of confused woman>

SHIT. I shouldn't have said that.

Why would someone in corporate software have an urgent assignment at night that puts them out of the office? Working late on a project or an install? Sure. But out of the office with your boss, working an emergency this late? Not likely.

She's small-town and innocent, but she's far from stupid.

Maybe I should tell her I work for a personal security company so she'll stop wondering about this shit when it happens. So far, I've tried to keep as many details as possible from her, but she's asking more and more questions lately. The gaffe I just made is only going to add to her curiosity. I'll have to come up with something believable without mentioning Redleg. All I need is for her to start poking around the company or showing up one day to surprise me.

Great. More lies. More dirt that'll collapse on me soon from the hole I'm digging myself.

ME

I'll explain later. I promise to make it up to you.

SUGAR BEAR

Fine. Be advised I'll be pouting until you do. And I can't promise not to hold this against you on our next sexiversary.

I HIDE the smile that threatens to sweep over my face as I slip the phone back into my pocket and shift back to work mode.

As soon as I exit the car, I catch the team heading toward me. And they're hustling.

I jump back into the driver's seat, ready to roll.

Boss is the first to the vehicle. "They found her alive. Get us to the hospital."

Thank fuck.

Leo jumps in the front seat since he's a giant fucker. Sawyer, Shep, and Boss pour into the back.



THE BRIDGE of my nose is irritated from where my glasses rest. I took out my contact lenses a few hours ago when the

burning intensified.

When all non-essential machines are powered down, I shut off the lights in the lair and trudge to the front door.

That's all I can do tonight. Might as well get some rack time. I suspect the next few days will be busy as hell while we track down whoever targeted Sammy.

She was treated at the hospital and released. Until further notice, Sawyer will guard her and her mother overnight, and Leo and Henderson will take the days.

For now, the Redleg family is safe and sound.

Unfortunately, the perp remains at large. Sammy doesn't know who snatched her since they attacked her from behind, knocked her out, and threw her in a trunk. Once she regained consciousness, she escaped when the car stopped at the traffic light by pulling the emergency trunk release cord.

Resourceful girl. Lucky too.

I'd have removed the cord if I'd taken her. Not that I'd ever abduct an innocent woman. But if I needed to toss a bad guy in a trunk, they wouldn't be escaping, that's for damn sure.

I wonder if Lettie would have thought of doing something like that. A ball of nausea scratches at the back of my throat like steel wool.

She kept popping into my mind all night long, interrupting my intel gathering. I'd check one of the dozen trackers I have on her, verify she was safe at home, and only then could I refocus.

My attention should have been exclusively on helping my Redleg family solve the case. But it wasn't. Hopefully, after I get my customary three hours of sleep, I'll regain control of my thoughts.

Tomorrow, the team will reconvene at HQ to strategize the next steps. We'll find out who took Sammy.

For now, I need sleep.

But as I get in my car, it doesn't take me to my house. It brings me to my girl like it has a mind of its own.

And I know why.

Watching Leo and Sawyer panic over what happened to Sammy tonight hit me hard. Fortunately, I was able to be the calm in the storm for them. That's how I support the team. In a way, it's how I show them how much they mean to me.

But what if the roles were reversed and Lettie was in danger? I'd be a mess.

Endless military training and experience or not, I'd crack under the pressure.

And that terrifies me.

As much as I need shut-eye, I won't be able to rest until I reassure myself of her safety.

Sure, I could break one of my recently instituted privacy rules by accessing the security cameras at her house or her cell phone's camera, but it's not enough. Not tonight.

Besides, I won't be that guy again. She means too much to me. I'm done invading her privacy.

The GPS trackers and cameras are for her security and nothing more. To my mind, it's no different than what we do for our high-value clients as a worst-case-scenario measure.

Tonight, I'm going to her for myself.

I need to see her, smell her, and feel her. I want to wrap my frame around hers, letting her warmth soothe me to sleep.

When I arrive at her and Freya's place, I use the key she gave me to enter. After removing my shoes, I pad toward Lettie's room.

The lights are off, and it's silent. Since it's after 0300, they must be sleeping. The smell of garlic still permeates the air, lingering from the homemade lasagna Lettie made for our anniversary dinner.

Never thought I'd have anyone to rush home to. Damn sure never thought someone would make me a meal to

celebrate an anniversary.

And I missed it.

I wish I could tell her why I wasn't here earlier. If she knew it was for my family, she'd understand. And she wouldn't feel like some corporate job was more important to me than her.

As I crack open her bedroom door, the tension in my jaw subsides. There she is, sleeping peacefully on her side with one leg sticking out of the covers and her cheek resting on her folded hands.

The closet light casts a warm glow over her side of the bed. She says she can only sleep in the dark when I'm with her.

After stripping down to my boxers, I crawl into bed as stealthily as possible to avoid waking her.

For a few glorious seconds, I simply watch her sleep from over her shoulder. I study the slope of her neck and the way her nose turns up at the tip. The faint black smudges under her eyes where she didn't take off her mascara again. She blames her ADHD for forgetting.

Maybe I should get her makeup remover wipes from the bathroom and clean her face. Nah. It'll wake her up, and she looks so peaceful.

I spot the faint bruise on her upper shoulder from where she banged into the towel rack the other day. A grin tugs at my mouth because she's easily the klutziest person on the planet.

The urge to hold her becomes too powerful to resist, so I take off my glasses and set them on the nightstand. Wrapping my arm around her, I bring her against my chest, spooning her from behind. All remaining tension flees my body as I soak in her scent and the feel of her skin.

With her in my embrace, my heart starts beating again.

Rousing slowly, she takes a deep breath and glances over her shoulder. When she spots me, her sleepy smile strangles my chest, robbing me of my breath.

What if I lost her?

“Hey, babe,” she whispers around a yawn. “I thought you weren’t coming tonight.”

“Hi, sugar bear. Sorry, I’m late. I missed you.”

“Is everything okay at work?”

“For now. But I’m going to be busy the next few days sorting through all the shit.”

She spins around and burrows into my chest, slinging her leg over mine. My pulse steadies, and my breathing regulates.

“That sucks. I was hoping we could spend some time at the beach. The weather is supposed to be nice this week.”

“If you go without me, be safe, okay? And don’t go out alone. Never at night.”

“Yes, *Daddy*,” she snarks, rolling her eyes at me.

“I’m serious. This isn’t Climax, Georgia — population three hundred. It’s peak tourist season, and there are sick fucks all around. Just be careful.”

Tomorrow, we’ll start going over some safety precautions. I’ve been remiss in that. After what happened to Sammy, I’ll do everything in my power to protect her.

If only I could protect her from my lies.

She reaches up and scratches the back of my head in small, soothing circles. “Where did this come from? Was there something on the news?”

“No. I just worry about you. Sometimes, you’re too trusting.”

“So what you’re saying is that I shouldn’t talk to random sexy strangers at gas pumps?”

I change the subject, aiming to focus on what’s right instead of what could go wrong. “Did you save me some lasagna? It smelt good in there.”

“No. I fed it to the hog since I was mad at you for breaking our date.”

I hear a smile in her tone.

“The hog?”

“The mechanical pig under the sink that eats anything you throw at it.”

My hands sink down to cup her plump butt. It feels perfect in my palms. “That’s definitely something my pretty little silly ass would say.”

Her shoulders shake with her silent laughter. After a minute, she rears her head back to look at me. “Of course I saved you some supper. Are you hungry?”

“A little, but I’d rather stay in bed with you than eat.”

“Why choose when you can have both?”

I barely manage to stifle a groan. “Good point. Now take your panties off, sweetness, and I’ll make a meal out of your mouth-watering pussy.”

“I was thinking maybe you’d grab some snacks from the pantry, and we’d have a picnic in bed.” She reaches under the blankets and begins to remove her bottoms. “But I like your idea better.”

Throwing the covers off us, I pile them at the foot of the bed. “Take your top off too, sugar bear. I want to watch you play with your nipples while I enjoy my meal.”

Happily between her thighs, I go to work, lapping at her center and driving her rapidly into a frenzy. I know exactly what she likes, and bringing her to the edge never gets old.

As I suck and nibble on her clit, she suddenly grabs my head with both hands and threads her fingers into my short hair to buck up into my mouth.

Although I fucking love when she shoves my face into her pussy, I ordered her to play with her tits. She’s been testing me recently, and I think this is one of those times.

I pin her with a sharp glare. *Well*, as sharp as I can, considering how worried I was about her all night. “Didn’t I tell you to play with your breasts?”

Wearing a sneaky grin, she removes her hands from my hair and wiggles her fingers in front of me before slowly cupping her breasts. There's a challenging glint in her eye that I recognize immediately. She's going to remove her hands the second I look away.

Keeping her locked in my stare, I return my tongue to her clit, slowly building her back up. Her eyes flutter closed, and she pulses her hips in tiny circles.

“That’s my good girl,” I mumble against her core.

When I slip two fingers inside her silky channel and start pumping, she reaches for the headboard with one hand and grabs my head with the other.

I stop immediately, drawing a huff of protest from her.

She rolls her lower lip into a pronounced pout. “I want to touch you while you’re down there. Please, babe. Let me play with your hair. It’ll help me come faster if I can connect with you more.”

“Who said I wanted you to come faster? This isn’t fast food. You’re a gourmet meal that’s meant to be savored. Now keep teasing your nipples, or I’ll tie your hands to the headboard.”

She complies, but that taunting glint is still there. Brat behavior.

Although it’s not my specialty, she needs taming sometimes. Not that a brat can ever truly be tamed. More like handled.

When she lets go of her nipples for the third time — like I knew she would — I get up without a word to search for something to use as an improvised restraint.

My belt.

I need to bring some ropes over here.

Grabbing my belt and my shirt from the floor, I return to the bed and straddle her waist. “Cross your wrists and hold them up for me.”

With an even bigger pout than before, she complies. I fashion a cuff-like restraint using a figure-8 pattern with my belt and slip it over her hands. Once it's secured to her lower forearms, I watch her skin carefully for any color change.

I tap her fingertips one at a time. "Feel this?"

"Yes."

"They all feel the same?"

"Yes."

"Good girl. Roll over flat on your stomach. Grab the rails of the bed frame."

She's not a rope bottom, and I don't know if she'll ever be. But she's slowly becoming comfortable with some light bondage.

I haven't been inclined to force the issue or test her. I'm so crazy about her that any way she shares her body with me leaves me more than satisfied. I don't need kinks to feel arousal or gratification with Lettie.

She's perfect, exactly how she is. And I don't see myself *ever* needing more than she can give.

No idea what she's doing with a man like me, but even if I was forced to, I couldn't walk away from her.

It's going to fucking break me when she leaves.

Leaning my torso across her back, I loop the shirt over and under her belted arms, securing her to the wrought iron headboard rails. I should thank Sawyer for choosing this bed design. It's perfect.

With my mouth beside her ear, I husk out, "There. Now you can't disobey me."

"I also can't play with my nipples like you wanted."

Shifting to my knees, I rest on my heels while straddling her beautiful nude form. I swat her ass cheek lightly with my palm, loving the sound of the smack and the sight of her decadent rippling. "Lettie, you lost the privilege to touch

yourself when you wouldn't listen after being warned. The only pleasure you can have is what I decide to give you."

"Joke's on you. I love the pleasure you give me more than I like touching my nipples."

I grab her ass cheeks roughly and spread them apart. She tilts her hips, presenting herself to me. "Your body wants to obey, sugar bear. But that mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble."

"Maybe you should put something in it to teach it a lesson," she taunts, wiggling her hips to make her ass jiggle in my hands.

Her snark earns her another playful smack. She moans softly into the pillow, and I bite my tongue to prevent myself from taunting her back to draw more sass from her. She's baiting me into spanking her, topping from the bottom.

"I'm not fucking your sassy mouth tonight. Now, are you going to feed me more of this delicious pussy, or do you want me to fuck it?"

"Fuck it, please," she whimpers, her hips grinding into the mattress.

"With my fingers, your vibrator, or my cock?"

She bats her eyes at me from over her shoulder. "Can I choose more than one since you missed our sexiversary supper?"

Powerless to deny her, I nod.

"I want your cock and my vibrator, please."

"At the same time?"

Nodding tentatively, she nibbles her lower lip and closes her eyes like she's embarrassed.

The vibrator was another of her firsts that I gladly claimed. I can't believe she'd never put anything inside this silky pussy. My fingers and my cock were the first to be inside her. Not even a tampon or her own fingers.

How unfortunate for every man who's ever wanted her. But all the better for me, being the only man she gives this gift to.

Slowly, these last few months, I've helped her get comfortable with her body, attempting to move her past her childhood issues. But at times, the shame is still there. She tries to pretend it's not, but I've caught her crying in the bathroom after we've been intimate. And her face goes blank and she freezes occasionally like it did that night in the voyeur room.

Every time it happens, I hold her and tell her she's perfect.

Because she is.

I've never witnessed anything more beautiful than when she frees herself, letting the pleasure consume her. She's exquisite. If only she saw herself the way that I do.

Wait. I wonder if...

"Sugar, I want to try something. Feel free to say no. This isn't an order. It's a question."

"What, babe?" There's no fear or nervousness in her tone.

She trusts me.

That's both beautiful and tragic at the same time.

I have to find a way to tell her the truth.

But then she'll leave me.

When I don't answer because I'm buried in my self-recrimination, she prompts me to continue. "What do you want to try, James?"

I should ask her to call me Tomer. Just once. Perhaps I could tell her it's a roleplay thing.

"Babe?" she prods again.

I shake off the fog. "Sorry. Lost my train of thought." I clear my throat. "I want to record us. Just for us. Not to post anywhere. I'll ensure it's not on the cloud. You can have the only copy on a jump drive, or we can destroy it afterward."

“You want to record us having sex?”

“Yes.”

“For your voyeur kink?”

“No. It’d be for you, not me. You should see how gorgeous you are when you’re overcome with pleasure. I know watching in a mirror still intimidates you. So perhaps if you saw yourself after the fact, it’d be easier to accept how natural and right it is. Help you get over the shame. Like another step closer to owning your sexuality.”

She takes a moment to ponder my suggestion. I don’t rush her.

Rubbing her back, I tell her, “Don’t decide now. It’s an idea for you to chew on. I only thought of it now, so I figured I’d tell you while it was on the top of my mind. Let me get your vibrator. Stay still.”

Maybe it was creepy to ask her that while she was tied to her bed and face down. And since it’s the middle of the night. I’m such a fucking idiot.

I remove a few toys from the silky bag she keeps in her nightstand and hold them out for her to choose.

She bites down on her lower lip as she decides. “The purple one.”

I attempt a joke to lighten the mood since I inadvertently tanked it with my dumb suggestion. “Excellent choice. Your vagina has a sophisticated palette.”

After I return the bag to the drawer, she stares off into space.

I was sure to secure her arms to the headboard so she could rest them flat on the bed or raise them higher by simply moving the T-shirt along the vertical post. Although she looks comfortable, the way she’s zoning out gives me pause.

Bending at the waist, I lower myself to her face. “Lettie, are you comfortable? Do your arms hurt? Wiggle your fingers for me.”

She blinks, her eyes coming into focus. “They feel great. It’s a nice position since the pillows are supporting my arms.”

“That’s good. Same as last time, tell me right away if you feel any tingling.”

“I know, babe.”

I claim her lips, quickly getting lost in how her sweet flavor mixes with the lingering taste of her arousal on my tongue.

By the time I break the kiss, my cock is throbbing with need. Before climbing into bed, I shed my boxers and rip open one of those trusty little foil packets to suit up.

As much as I’d love to take her bare, she’s conflicted about birth control. No way am I going to make her feel worse by asking. I’d sooner get a vasectomy than force her to make that decision when she’s still unpacking her religious baggage.

“Babe?”

“Yes, sugar?”

“I want to do it. *Now.*”

“I’m moving as fast as I can. I still need to get a condom on since your hands are busy, and we haven’t perfected you slipping it on with your mouth,” I deadpan.

She doesn’t laugh at my failed attempt at humor. Her face is waxed over with fierce determination.

Maybe I should clarify what she meant.

“You want to do what now?”

“Record us. I think I can do it.”

She *thinks*? That’s not enough consent. And since I’m situated behind and on top of her, I feel her muscles clenching with tension.

She’s not ready.

“Okay. Not tonight, though. You should think about it more.”

“Why wait? I think it might help. It’s a good idea.”

“Of course it is. I came up with it.” Firmer now, I add, “But not tonight.”

Her mouth opens to object. I click on the vibrator, preparing to divert her attention.

“Don’t think you’re gonna distract me with that, ya smart-ass.”

I drag the tip of the vibrator over her butt, snaking it between her cheeks. “Speaking of ass.”

She whips her face away from me, burying a sparse giggle in the pillow.

Proving her wrong about my ability to distract her, I rub the shaft of the vibe along the crack of her ass, then drag it through her wet folds. Once she starts rocking her hips along with the motion, I pull it away.

“Up on your knees. Keep your head and chest on the pillows,” I order, breathing the command in a gravelly rasp.

Once she complies, I run my hand between her thighs, rubbing her slick pussy roughly with the flat of my palm. She rolls her hips, rapidly getting caught up in the sensation.

She’s so damn wet I won’t need lube for the toy.

But my cock gets her first.

Removing my hand, I swipe my condom-sheathed tip along her seam, teasing her. She whimpers and mewls, growing more vocal as her desperation heightens. Using my other hand, I reach around to run the vibrator over her clit.

“Please,” she begs.

“Please, what?”

She pushes her ass back, trying to impale herself. “Please fuck me.”

“Getting desperate, Lettie baby?”

I keep wiggling my cock through her folds, indulging in the building tension and anticipation.

“Yes. I need to feel you inside me. Fuck me, please.”

After I line up my cock, I nudge forward, then quickly reverse. I repeat the motion a handful of times, never letting more than my tip slip inside.

Her hands yank on her restraints. “*Please*, give me all of your cock, James.”

The vibrator falls to the bed beneath her so I can smack her ass. “What are you supposed to call me?” Another smack.

She’s slipped a few times before, and I can’t fucking stand it. Everything about it is wrong.

“Sorry, babe. I can’t think straight. I’m dying to feel you.”

Remorse coats her tone, making guilt twist my gut over my reaction.

It’s not her fault I’m a fraud.

With my free hand, I caress the supple skin where I spanked her. “It’s okay, sugar. I know you just wanted another spanking.”

A deep, throaty laugh shakes her shoulders. “It was accidental. But now that you mention it, maybe it was subconscious.”

Pressing the head of my cock forward, I rest the tip inside her channel. “Lettie baby, if you want my cock, then throw your ass back and fucking take it.”

And she does.

CHAPTER 40

THANK YOU. COME
AGAIN

LETTIE

James is *always* determined to make me come, but he's relentless tonight. It's beautiful torture.

“Again, sugar,” he demands, his warm breath fanning over the side of my neck.

My protest is weak and garbled by my pillow. “I can't.”

Seriously, I *cannot* come again. He's already given me five since he first slipped inside me.

The first was when he took me from behind, encouraging me to slam against him to chase my pleasure. I think that was a partial punishment because I was bratty earlier, so he wanted me to do the work.

Not that I minded.

Now that I've gotten over *most* of my tentativeness, I love controlling the pace. Well, I do when I'm facing away from him, at least. Oral sex aside, I'm unsure why I struggle to go after what I want when I can see him. Residual shyness, perhaps?

He flipped me over to my back, keeping my hands tied to the headboard for round two. That time, he held the vibrator on my clit and drove me crazy by languidly pumping his hips. It was an interesting juxtaposition with the frantic speed at which the vibrator got me to the edge in concert with his almost lazy thrusts. The way he looked at me as I came was hot as hell, though. His eyes burned up my skin.

For my third orgasm, he filled me with his cock and the vibrator at the same time, the way I asked. He came with me that time. I thought he'd be done after that, but he wasn't.

He gave me climax number four with the vibrator pumping in and out of me while he sucked on my nipples. The fifth one was his mouth on my clit and vibrator fucking me. That might be one of my new favorites.

But then he was hard again, so here we are, with him demanding number six and me resisting because I don't think it's physically possible.

After freeing my arms, he rolled me over to my stomach.

One of my legs hitches out to the side, and he's at a slight angle. Each stroke pumps against my G-spot deliciously.

Not only does it feel exquisite, but I love this position because he drapes himself over me and whispers in my ear.

“You *can* come for me again. And you will.”

I shake my head no and whimper, but I know it's no use. My body's no longer my own to control.

The fire blooming inside me blazes through my veins until I'm a quivering, shaking mess. My entire body is a hairbreadth from contracting — every muscle and inch of me is seconds away from detonating.

A growl tears from his throat, and his hips pump faster and harder. That's my undoing.

He's so frantic for me to come that he sounds more animal than man.

My eyes roll into the back of my head as my pussy clenches and spasms around his cock. “I'm coming, babe. Shit,

shit, shit. *Yes.*”

His answering grunts drive me higher. “Good. Girl.” He can barely get the words out through his raspy breaths and gasps.

As we climax together in blinding pleasure, he buries his face into the curve of my neck, licking and nipping at my flesh. Our bodies writhe and thrash together as we ride it out. Lights dance behind my eyelids, and consciousness threatens to leave me.

Our breathing slows, and all tension leaves our bodies.

He lifts off my back after pressing a kiss to my cheek. “You want to shower?”

I laugh sleepily. “There is no way my legs will work after that. I’ll shower and wash my sheets in the morning.”

“Fair enough. I’m exhausted.”

He swats my ass playfully before getting up to deal with the condom. As usual, he brings the vibrator with him to clean it before returning to bed. So responsible. He convinces me to get up to use the restroom afterward, always concerned about my health. It probably should bother me that he knows so much about UTI prevention, but since I was a virgin before him, I’d have never known until it was too late.

Once we’re both in bed, he rests on his back, and I curl up on his chest, slinging my leg over his.

“You were a bit of an animal tonight, babe,” I tease him while twirling my fingers into his chest hair.

His body tenses, his grip on me tightening. “I didn’t scare you, did I?”

I twist my neck and rest the opposite cheek on his chest to see his handsome face. “No. Not at all, silly. I was just surprised that you were so intense in the middle of the night. I would have expected a quickie.”

He exhales, his features visibly relaxing. “It was a rough night. My head was a bit of a mess.”

“What happened?”

The skin between his brows creases, and his lips pinch tightly. After a lengthy pause, his next words shock me. “The sister of one of my coworkers was abducted tonight.”

My head springs up off his chest. “What? Oh no! What happened? Is she still missing? What can we do?”

I’m a half second from jumping out of bed to do... I don’t know... *something*. But his hold on me intensifies, refusing to let me escape. “Shh. Sorry. Don’t flip out. She’s fine now. They found her. She’s safe. Just a bump on her head.”

A gush of air expels from my lungs as relief floods my system. “You tryin’ to give me a coronary or somethin’? Why didn’t you lead with that?” I collapse onto his chest.

“Sorry, sugar bear. You know I don’t always say the right thing. My bad.” He pulls me close and kisses my head. “I didn’t mean to upset you. Forgive me.”

A smidgen of guilt creeps its way into my chest. “It’s okay. Don’t apologize. You know I like to fly off the handle at the slightest thing.”

He chuckles quietly, his hand stroking along my naked back. “We’re quite a pair, huh?”

“Well, I happen to think so,” I toss back, my lips curving into a widening grin.

Silence settles once more, but my curiosity takes the wheel when he doesn’t offer more details. I twist to face him. “So what happened to her? Was it like a gang or something? Was she involved in bad shit?”

“No. Nothing like that. She’s a waitress at a bar on the beach. We don’t know who took her yet. She was nabbed from the back alley behind the bar while taking out the trash. They threw her in the trunk and drove off. She was smart enough to pull the safety exit latch in the trunk when they stopped at a traffic light and escaped.”

“Wow. That’s terrifying. But good for her. I’m glad she’s all right. She must be scared now, though.”

“She’s tough. Been through a lot, but she’ll be fine. And my friends are looking out for her now. They’ll keep her safe.” His face contorts like he’s in pain. “Lettie, I can’t always look out for you the way I want to —”

I cut him off. “Is that why you were lecturing me earlier about being more careful?”

“Yes. And it’s why I came here so late and woke you up. I had to see you.”

My heart stutters. “You were worried about me?”

He answers in a whisper. “Of course I was. I had to make sure you were safe.”

I can’t keep my mouth off his after that confession. As much as I don’t want him to be worried, the fact that he needed to reassure himself I was okay has me swaddled in warm fuzzies. Try as I might to keep my feelings in check, I’m rapidly falling for this man.

As soon as I join our lips, he takes over, cupping my cheek with one hand and the nape of my neck with the other. His tongue swipes against the seam of my lips, tenderly seeking entrance, which I eagerly grant him. As we use our mouths to soothe each other, I swear a part of my heart strains, reaching out to his.

But I can’t tell if his is reaching for mine.

“Mmm,” he grumbles, pulling out of the kiss. “We need to stop that, or I’ll need to have you again. And I really should sleep. I’ve got a lot of work to do tomorrow.”

The desire to needle him for information strikes me hard. He’s always guarded with what he tells me about his job and life outside of Bask. He’s all ears when I share, but rarely does the same.

“So this coworker whose sister was taken,” I start.

Trepidation is layered into his one-word reply. “Yes?”

“He must be a good friend of yours if you went to support him. I mean, I assume that’s where you were and what the emergency was.”

He inhales sharply, averting his eyes. “I’ve known him for a while.”

Didn’t really answer my questions, but he doesn’t seem to want to talk about it. I wonder if it’s a sore subject because of what happened tonight or if there’s more to it.

“Did you meet him at work?”

“No. In the Army.”

“Oh. That’s cool that you work together now. Was he in Intelligence too?”

“No.”

My nose wrinkles, eyes narrowing. “But he works in IT now?”

“Sugar, we need to get some rest. It’s late.”

There’s the wall. I knew it would be up sooner than later.

But I’m no quitter.

“He must have appreciated you being there for him. That was kind of you. But you could have told me. All night, I thought you were blowing me off for some coding thing or whatever.”

He nods solemnly. “I apologize. I couldn’t... I mean, I didn’t want to worry you.”

I place a quick peck on his lips before snuggling back onto his chest. “Next time something happens, just be upfront with me. I can take it. Don’t worry about me getting upset.”

“Okay. Sorry for missing your dinner. I was looking forward to it. No one has ever cooked a meal for me before. Unless you count restaurants or the Army chow hall.”

“Well, no. Those don’t count. And that’s sad. You deserve to be taken care of. I’m happy to be the first girlfriend to cook for you.”

He frowns, and it’s adorable. “Assuming you ever want to cook for me again, I promise I won’t miss it.”

“I’ll cook for you on my next night off.” Sensing a precious few moments remain before he shuts me down, I ask, “Was your mother a good cook?”

“I don’t know.”

My stomach clenches. “What?”

“I don’t remember much of her. A few brief glimpses are all I have. Like flashes of memories. She died when I was very little.” His answer was so soft I could have missed it if I were an inch farther from his mouth.

My heart jumps in my throat, threatening to shatter. “I’m so sorry, James. I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay, Lettie. It doesn’t bother me.”

Liar.

“What happened to her?”

His sigh stretches into a yawn. “It’s late, Lettie. We can talk about this another time.”

“Okay. I just want to know more about your life. I feel like I’m always the one doing the talking.”

“You are. Like now,” he quips, a teasing lilt to his tone.

“Smart-ass.”

“Good night, sugar bear.”

“Good night, babe.”



PAINED WAILS WAKE ME. Someone is yelling.

“No. *Don’t*. Bring her back. No!”

The fog of sleep recedes further.

“I’m sorry. Don’t take her. Please. Don’t. I’m sorry. I’ll be quiet. I promise. *Please don’t*.”

It’s James.

He’s talking in his sleep. Well, screaming in his sleep is more accurate. And he’s got a death grip on me.

“Don’t take her. No. I need her. Don’t take her away. I love her. She’s mine. No, no, *nooooo*.”

I twist in his arms, struggling to move with the hold he has on my upper body. “James! Wake up!”

“Daddy, no!” he yells louder this time.

“James, you’re dreaming. Wake up.”

Keeping his eyes closed, he shakes his head back and forth.

I manage to get one hand free to gently tap his cheek. “Wake up. Babe, wake up.”

His yelling ceases, and his words become choppy whispers that I can’t quite make out. With the streak of light from the closet shining across the bed, I see a sheen of perspiration lining his brow. His face is a mask of anguish, every muscle pinching tight.

Oh my sweet man.

My ribs suddenly feel too tight for my body. I must pull him out of whatever misery he’s lost in.

“Babe, wake up. James, it’s me. It’s Lettie. You’re having a nightmare.”

His voice turns into an almost child-like cry. “*Please*, don’t take her.”

Tears pool in my eyes. His suffering is filling every corner of the room.

I place my open palm on his upper stomach to help him center. “Hey, calm down, babe. It’s okay. Wake up.”

His eyes finally spring open, but he doesn’t seem to focus. “Where is she?” he grits out in a rush.

“James, wake up. It’s just a dream.”

His neck whips his head from side to side as he bolts upright. In the process, he brushes off me and raises his fists in front of his face.

He's not fully awake yet. His normally tranquil eyes are stormy seas. His chest heaves with frenzied deep breaths.

I shuffle across the bed on my knees and lean close to him. "Babe, wake up. Look at me. Look at Lettie."

He shakes his head as if clearing his mind. "Lettie?" Recognition finally sparks in his expression.

My heart slams in my chest so fiercely it makes me want to convulse from the force alone.

He reaches for me, eyes blinking rapidly. "Lettie baby? You're okay? He didn't —"

I interrupt, desperate to comfort him. "Yes, babe. It's me. You're safe. It was just a dream."

Allowing him to take me into his arms, I fold my nude body around his. My thighs spread as I move onto his lap. He grips my waist tightly, holding me fully against his chest. Securing myself to him, I lock my legs behind his back and arms over his shoulders. His heart beats wildly, echoing in my chest. I feel each pounding beat as if it were my own.

We stay there, plastered together, for a long time. His breathing slowly begins to steady, and eventually, we begin to loosen our grips. When he lets me shift back some, I move my face in front of his and cup his cheeks for a quick kiss.

I need the kiss for myself as much as I need it to soothe him. At first, I thought he was dreaming about his coworker's sister, but now I'm not so sure.

"Are you okay?" I ask as I pull away.

"Yes. I'm so sorry for waking you."

"I don't care about that, babe. I only care about you. I've never seen you upset like that."

He doesn't respond, only holds me loosely for another few moments while dragging his palm up and down my spine. I cup his nape and nudge his face toward my shoulder.

Maybe he should talk about the dream. He's clearly troubled by it. Sometimes, when I have a nightmare, it helps

me to talk through it. Once I hear the nonsense aloud, it loses some of its teeth and becomes less frightening.

“That must have been *some* nightmare, huh?”

“Yeah. It’s been a few months...” His words trail off, but I get the distinct feeling that he didn’t lose track of his thoughts. That was an intentional shutdown.

“A few months since you’ve had a nightmare?” I prod.

“Since *that* nightmare,” he corrects, then lets out a haggard sigh.

My next question is shaky and tentative sounding. “You have that same dream a lot?”

He nods, hiding his face in the curve of my neck.

My mind rewinds, attempting to bring forth the words he was yelling. “Someone in the dream was taking something from you?”

His grip on me, which had been steadily weakening, strengthens once more. “Yes.”

I’m fairly certain I already know the answer to this next question, but I must ask. “Was it your dad?”

James’s blistering inhale is a telling response, but he doesn’t give me verbal confirmation.

I poke some more, trying to get him to confide in me. “Does your dad always take things from you in the dream?”

He nods again, and the gesture is simultaneously gut-wrenching and encouraging. I don’t want him to suffer through recurring nightmares about his father — that sounds horrible — and the idea that they might be rooted in a real-life experience sickens me. But the silver lining is that he’s actually opening up.

“Did he take things from you in real life?”

“Everything. He took everything from me,” he answers in a rush like he was bursting with the confession and unable to hold it back. His chest shakes, and his shoulders cave in with a deep sob.

I don't have a clue what his father did, but I already know I hate that man. Sure hope I have the chance to meet him at some point so I can dish out a little Southern justice.

"Shh, it's okay, babe," I soothe him as he rocks against me. I drag my hand through his hair, scratching his scalp and hoping to infuse affection in my touch.

After a heavy few seconds, he pulls back and stiffens. "I'm fine. Sorry about all this. I'm good now."

"You don't have to act tough. You're safe with me. Always."

He searches my face, eyes scanning from my forehead to my chin and back up again before landing on my eyes. "Lettie, I don't deserve you. But I can't let you go." He rambles on and on, pain injected into every confusing word. "I can't. I know I should, but I can't. I'm not strong enough. Forgive me. *Please* forgive me."

"Stop that right now, ya hear me? There's nothing to forgive. You don't have to let me go. And yes, you do deserve me. That's the craziest shit I've ever heard. We all deserve someone who'll give us... affection."

I almost said *love*. Shit.

That's the last thing he needs me to throw at him right now.

To smooth over my *almost* confession, I add, "And I've got plenty of it to spare. So help me, you're going to take it, or I'll be the one spanking your ass."

He gives me one peck, then another. A third turns into a tender kiss with tongues touching only enough so we feel connected.

After gazing into my eyes for a handful of seconds, the slightest upward curve breaks free at one corner of his mouth.

"Unlock your legs behind me," he instructs.

Once I do, he leans backward, bringing me with him. It draws a surprised giggle from me.

“Let’s sleep like this. You on top of me. Be my blanket. My sugar bear blanket.”

“I’ll crush you in your sleep,” I say through a deeper laugh.

“I’ll die happy.”

“Funny. I have that same thought every time you nearly kill me with orgasms.”

“We can do that later. Right now, I need sleep.”

It’s impossible for me to avoid falling in love with this man. I’m pretty sure it’s already happened.

CHAPTER 41

ALL HAIL THE QUEEN

Eight months later

LETTIE

As soon as my foot touches the front stoop of James's house, he yanks open the door and scoops me into his arms. "Get in here, gorgeous."

While I giggle into his neck, he carries me inside.

Literally.

As in, my feet do *not* touch the ground.

He sets me down only long enough to lock the door and arm his security system. Then he's back on me, cupping his hands over my cheeks and slamming our lips together.

His intensity is so welcome tonight. I've missed him.

He's all but consuming me alive. With our hands groping and tongues twirling, I tumble headfirst into our connection. His clean, masculine scent washes over me.

I'm so damn in love with this man.

Yet I haven't told him.

Every time I try, I chicken out. Because, deep down, I know he won't say it back.

At times, he's an impenetrable fortress.

Is that just how he is? Or is there more to his armor?

Am I the only one thinking of forever?

For months, I was plagued by doubts — most of them regarding our sexy times. A recently deflowered virgin dating a Dom? Not ideal.

My worries about my inexperience were so interwoven with my religious shame I didn't think I'd ever be able to move past them.

But I did.

Steadily, he shattered my barriers.

I used to think I'd never fully satisfy him — especially regarding his rope kink. The light bondage was fine from the beginning. At first, he tied my wrists together. Once I was comfortable, he began tying me to the headboard. The ankles were next. It got a little dicey after that.

There were a few moments when I thought I was at my max. After all, the idea of being completely restrained and at someone else's mercy is outright terrifying.

Then, the weirdest thing happened.

I began craving more time in bondage. On my entire body, and not merely my wrists or ankles. Whether I'm bound and suspended from above or merely restrained while on the bed, I can't get enough. From head to toe, he can wrap me up like a mummy, and I'll simply say thank you, then beg for more.

James has his theories on why I love it so much. According to him, it could be the physical sensation of pressure on my body, much like a weighted blanket. Neurospicy peeps like me tend to enjoy that, and I certainly do.

He says another possibility is that being rope-topped gives my mind no other choice than to stop racing. Once he's got me

wrapped up, there's nothing I can do to ease my worries or tackle my ever-present to-do list. It gives me an unspoken permission to just exist.

No guilt. No pressure.

Simply *be* in the moment.

I suspect the latter theory is more accurate.

It's similar to when a cat or dog sleeps on your lap. You can't possibly be expected to do anything with a case of pet paralysis, right?

How bizarre is it that when I'm the most restrained is when I feel the freest?

Not only is it therapeutic and euphoric for me, but he loves it too. And that's heady as hell since it tickles my need to serve and please him.

It's been a long road, and I love where we're at sexually.

All his kinks are mine. Like fate or kismet.

And yet, he's still guarded. Secretive and evasive.

Why?

It makes me wonder if he's not as serious about me as I am about him.

I know my limited relationship history is toxic at best, given my past. Nonetheless, I'd still like to believe that a year into this one, I'd have a better grasp on his feelings for me.

He's mercurial.

When we're together, his attention on me is so intent that I can barely breathe. I love it. At other times, he's dodgy and reserved.

Well, I have plans to change that tonight.

I hope.

I'm strong-arming my way into his heart. I've come prepared with a battering ram of sorts. A secret weapon.

His lips are warm branding irons, sizzling their mark on me.

When he finally lets me up for air, his gaze prowls all over my face and neck before traveling down my body. His lips part into a wicked grin as he studies my dress.

He loves it when I wear these. But it's what's underneath it that has me as amped up as a coked-out squirrel on speed.

"My eyes are up here." Playfully, I tilt his chin upward, drawing his gaze back to my face. "Hey there, handsome. Ain't you frisky tonight?"

He keeps me close, locking his hands at my lower back. "Sorry for attacking you. I missed you so damn much."

I give him a peck. "It's only been five days."

"That's five days too many."

It really was. But that's on him.

"Don't whine to me, mister. You could have come. Stella wants to meet you anyhow. She was pissed you bailed again. If she hadn't seen you on a few video calls, she'd never believe you're real."

This was the third trip I've taken back home to visit Stella. And yes, I saw my mama too. *Ugh*. Mostly, I went for Stella. James was invited each time. Unsurprisingly, he refused to take leave from work.

It warms my insides to know he loves his job, but *come on*.

I know Climax isn't a glorious vacation destination like Clearwater. However, it's simply *not* normal to choose work over a week of Southern cookin' and *actual* sweet tea instead of the garbage water they serve down here.

He presses little kisses along the curve of my neck. "You know I would've gone if I could take the time off. I'll go with you on the next trip."

I huff. "Sure. Heard that before."

"This time is different."

My hands skim the expanse of his shoulder up to his nape.
“Oh? How so?”

He moves from one side of my neck to the other, kissing as he goes. If I were wearing panties, they’d be soaked.

“Because now we have Mia.”

My spine stiffens reflexively. With a deep breath, I force away the tension.

Of course, he notices my reaction and stops worshiping my neck to meet my eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Babe, can we not talk about Mia tonight?”

For the last two weeks, her name has come up in practically every conversation.

Hell, even when we were talking on the phone while I was in Georgia, he brought her up at least three times. Telling me all about how smart she is. How funny she is. How fast she’s catching on.

He almost *never* talks about any other coworkers. Yet this new chick is always on his mind.

Stella says I should show up at his job one day unexpectedly to meet her. Make sure she knows he’s taken so she keeps her paws off him.

The only problem is... I still don’t know where he fucking works.

He knows everything about me.

Everything.

At first, he was a closed book. And the book was locked shut, tossed in a chest that was also locked and hidden in a basement. There was also a deadbolt on the door.

Over the last year, I’ve gotten him to open up about a lot — memories from high school, his time in the military, what led him into kink, and even bits and pieces from what sounds like a seriously fucked-up childhood.

But he doesn't talk about anything related to the present. Nor will he talk about the future with me. He's holding back. I just don't know why.

And now this Mia character is always on the tip of his tongue.

His face crumples with confusion. "What's wrong with Mia? You haven't met her. I don't understand why you —"

He cuts himself off. Probably because of the red flaming my cheeks.

This isn't how I wanted the night to go. Then again, I've gotten used to the unexpected with him.

With my shoulders slumped, I extricate myself from his hold and meander into the living room, setting my purse on the couch. He lets me go, trailing close behind. Sitting down casually, I contemplate how big of a deal I want to make this.

Do I make peace and let it go? Or do I stand up for myself and demand answers?

This shouldn't be a tough decision. Yet it is.

Sitting beside me, he's smart enough to keep a few inches of space between us. "I don't understand why you're mad. Clearly, I fucked up, and I'm sorry for whatever I said. Sugar, I can't promise not to do it again unless you throw me a bone here."

Part of me wants to scream at the top of my lungs: *You can't possibly be that dense*. But I know he is, and I love him anyway.

His face is clouded over with confusion. It's genuine and pure, hiding no trace of deceit.

This man is incredibly intelligent, but he has the emotional IQ of a cracker. And the cheese has slid off.

While I'm figuring out what to say, he pleads for an explanation. "Lettie baby, please help me understand so I don't do it again. Why does the mention of Mia make you angry?"

“Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing,” I start, preparing to minimize it and apologize for overreacting.

Nope.

Screw the old me. The one taught to bite her tongue in the presence of a man.

“You know what? Strike that. It ain’t nothin’.” I twist my neck to face him. “For a man who evades every question I ask about your work and friends, you sure do talk about her an awful lot.”

He flinches, rearing back like I slapped him. “You think I’d cheat on you with Mia?”

I cross my arms at my chest and keep my voice calm and even. “I don’t know what to think, babe, so I’m gonna ask you flat out. Is somethin’ going on with you two?”

Placing one palm on my thigh, he gazes into my eyes and flays me with those intense turquoise orbs. “No. Lettie, you have nothing to worry about where other women are concerned. Mia is only a coworker. I talk about her because I’ve never worked with anyone who thinks the way I do. For the first time, I’m not alone there. She doesn’t make fun of me or make me feel weird. But she’s more like a sister to me than anything else. I promise you.”

Make fun of him? Is that why he doesn’t talk about work?

I don’t have time to ask a follow-up because he tosses a question that sends me reeling. “Have I ever given you a reason to think I’m capable of cheating on you?”

Before I think better of it, I blurt out my response in a quivering ramble. “Yes. No. Sort of.” My hands fall to my lap. “I don’t know. All I know is this. It’s our one-year anniversary, and yet I have no idea where you work or what you really do there. You’re telling me *now* that you felt alone at work until Mia got hired and they’re mean to you. Well, why haven’t you mentioned that before? People in a relationship talk about this kind of shit.”

“Lettie, please,” he starts, trying to placate me.

Miraculously, I keep my volume low, but my words start wobbling more as I rant. “What about the other friend? The one from the Army with the sister? Why don’t I know more about him? Or why haven’t I met him? And why is work so damn important to you that you can’t take time off to go on a trip with me, yet it’s not something you’ll talk to me about? It doesn’t make sense. Am I your girlfriend or just someone you fuck?”

“Sugar bear, calm down and give me a chance to —”

“I don’t want you to tell me to calm down. I want you to tell me why the only people in your life I’ve met are at the club. I feel like there’s a whole hidden side of you. Why won’t you let me in? Let me love you. Because, dammit, I *do* love you. I love you so much, but I don’t think you love me. If you did, you’d let me in.”

By the time I’m done, I’m short of breath. My heart races, and tremors wrack my entire body.

His lips mash together, and he tugs in a big breath through his nose, making his nostrils flare.

I’d intended to approach this topic with a calm, rational discussion. But in true Lettie fashion, my impulsivity got the best of me. Nonetheless, I essentially got out what I needed to say.

After an impossibly long standoff, he slides off the couch onto his knees. Holding my stare, he closes the space between us until he’s in front of my shins.

This man is kneeling before me.

What is this madness?

He’s a Dom. And he’s kneeling.

I’ve worked at the club long enough to know that Doms aren’t usually the ones on their knees. And this particular Dom doesn’t kneel unless it involves licking me down yonder or removing my strappy heels.

And yet, he’s on his knees.

For me.

My lungs pump furiously, trying to fill my chest with oxygen. But all the air is held captive by the intense way he's looking at me.

He reaches for my legs, running his palms along the tops of my thighs. My skin heats, and not only where his hands are. Warmth shoots from my core in all directions.

Unable to resist touching him in return, my hands move of their own accord and rest on top of his. He bends down to place a soft kiss on my knuckles.

I remain silent, partially because I've been struck mute. Plus, the ball is in his court.

He doesn't make me wait long, and when he speaks, his voice is simultaneously honey-coated and dark as night. "You are so much more than someone I fuck. And girlfriend doesn't do justice to how I feel about you. You mean the world to me. I am nothing without you."

"Babe," I whisper, heart pounding wildly.

After licking his lips, he shakes his head subtly to cut me off. "Didn't think where I worked mattered. It's just a security company. I do the IT shit. If there are things I don't talk about, it's because all my focus is on you. You occupy almost all my thoughts. There is only one woman for me. Only one woman I can't live without. And she's the only woman I'd get down on my knees for. Are you clear on who that is?"

My lips part as I struggle to get air.

His eyes bounce to my mouth for a moment, then quickly pivot back to my eyes. "Just in case I ever made you doubt it, let me be crystal clear. There is no one else I need, want, or could even stomach being with than you. Not anyone at the club. Not a supermodel. Not Mia. Not the fucking Queen. Are you getting that yet, sugar bear? You're my girl. And I'm your man."

My mouth does that dumb thing where it opens to let my runaway tongue loose. "The Queen died. That's a bit insensitive."

The deep lines of tension on his face soften, letting a smile slip into place. *I love his smile.* “She wasn’t the only queen in the world, Lettie baby.” His palms resume stroking my thighs, sliding up and sneaking under my skirt. “In fact, there’s one on my couch right now.”

“Aren’t you above flattery, babe?” I quip, letting my insecurities fade.

“When it comes to you, there’s nothing I won’t do.”

I roll my eyes so hard I could bowl a strike with them.

He slants his head to the side, his hands freezing at the tops of my thighs. “You don’t believe me?”

Unsure how to respond, I shake my head, then nod, confusing us both.

“Thanks, sugar. That cleared it up for me.”

Covering my mouth with my hands, I attempt to quash my chuckle.

Immediate failure.

His laugh mingles with mine, shooting lighter vibes throughout the room. It’s a beautiful tension release after my outburst and his heartfelt confession.

Although he didn’t say he loved me back, what he did say spoke volumes.

For now.

Once our laughter subsides, his posture changes. His expression heats, shooting past warm and going straight for scorching inferno.

Despite still being on his knees, he’s shifting into his Dom mode. I’m already salivating. From my mouth and between my legs.

With hooded eyes, he holds me captive in his stare. “Now, if there’s nothing else to discuss, I want to take you into my room and give you at least two orgasms for every day you’ve been gone.”

“What about supper?” I ask, like a complete and total moron.

Only Lettie Holt would turn down ten orgasms for a pot roast.

“It’s keeping warm in the oven, baby. But I need to have you at least once before we eat.”

Instead of answering with my mouth — which is liable to say something stupid again — I reach toward the hem of my sundress and slowly raise it, baring myself to him.

His eyes cascade down my body, getting to my waist before I lose sight of him for the brief moment the dress passes my face.

By the time my head frees from the fabric, he’s a barely contained ball of lust. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

“Happy anniversary, babe. Do you like your gift?”

I’m decked out in a vibrant purple velvet harness bra and panties set. And calling them that is laughable. It’s basically a few elastic straps creatively placed to resemble the outline of a bra and panties.

My breasts and nipples are fully exposed, merely trussed up by the purple bands. Aside from the waistband and straps encircling my upper thighs, the panties are non-existent. The top and bottom are connected by a series of diamond patterned bands, resting over my abdomen.

The manufacturer has record-levels of audacity to charge fifty bucks for this getup. It’s essentially a half-inch-wide purple ribbon. I look like a drunk person with the shakes tried to decorate me like a present but forgot the wrapping paper.

His eyes devour every inch of my exposed skin. “Dinner is going to have to wait, Lettie.”

He stands, offering me his hand. I let him pull me to my feet, enjoying every blissful second of his eyes consuming my flesh.

My belly swirls and pitches with nervous energy as if it knows this moment is more significant than all the other times I've been with him.

I've been nude with him countless times. I've dressed in fetish wear at the club before — but only on nights when I was singing. I was able to accomplish that by convincing myself it was a costume. And it was never anything *this* revealing. All my girlie goods were covered, thank you very much.

What I'm wearing tonight is a first for me.

Although my stomach threatens to revolt, his covetous expression is all I need to steady my anxiety.

All my life, I was told to dress modestly to protect my virtue, making myself worthy of my future husband and free from sin. Don't be a stumbling block to the men around me by tempting them.

I was shamed for showing my shoulders. Shamed for exposing the barest hint of cleavage.

Yet what I'm wearing is the furthest thing from modest — it's the poster child for anti-modesty. It leaves nothing to the imagination. It's made to tempt, not to shield.

What I've chosen to wear may only be purple velvet straps, but it's more than that. It's a middle finger to the old me — the one clothed in shame.

For the first time, I put something on without the intention to cover up. I'm embracing my sexuality instead of hiding from it or pretending it's not there.

And he's looking at me like I'm beautiful.

For once, I see myself that way too.

My eyes light up as it dawns on me how I can prove it. "Can we do the thing tonight?"

He shakes his head and blinks before letting his eyes drift toward my face. "I don't know what thing you're talking about, but I will literally do anything with you looking like that."

Before I explain, he claims my mouth and lets his hands run down my back before pulsing around the globes of my ass.

I pull back, putting a hand on his chest. “I want to record us. I’m ready.”

His eyes sweep over my face, studying me closely. “You sure?”

My head jerks in a sharp nod. “Absolutely sure.”

Although we’ve talked about it many times in the months since he first suggested making a sex tape, the time never felt right. I was still scared.

I’m not scared anymore.

“Where’s your phone? Let’s do it on yours. That way you’ll know I won’t have a copy.”

I run the back of my knuckles over his freshly shaved cheek. “I trust you. But using my phone is fine.” I tip my chin toward the couch where my bag sits. “It’s in my purse.”

He springs into action, letting go of me to retrieve it. While he does that, I sashay toward his room. By the time I get in there, he’s hot on my heels.

I sit on the edge of the bed, crossing my legs at the knee and waiting patiently for him to decide where to set the phone and how to prop it up. A budding laugh hangs out in my belly, waiting to be set free. He’s normally so composed during our sexy times. But he’s bumbling around. And his erection is so prominent, straining the crotch of his pants. It amuses me to no end to see him off his game.

And I did that to him with what I put on my body.

Once he decides the best place to prop up the phone on his dresser, he taps at the screen. He freezes, and his eyes fall to mine. “It’s locked.”

“Point it at my face, silly.”

He spins the phone around and holds it in front of my face to unlock it. Out of reflex, I smile at the screen as if it’s taking

my picture. His sudden laugh surprises me.

“Don’t you smile at the face ID on your phone?” I ask, giggling with him.

“I don’t use that shit. It’s not safe.”

“Why not?”

“For starters, I just unlocked your phone without touching you. Now, imagine I abducted you. I could keep texting with your friends and family so they’d think you were fine and would never know you were taken.”

“Damn, babe. That’s dark.” I uncross my legs and lean back on the bed, resting on my hands. Intentionally, I leave my legs parted a touch. “Are you going to start recording or lecture me like you’re the safety patrol?”

“I’m the safety police, and not the safety patrol. Now, up against the wall.”

Gush. A shudder runs down my spine, and my clit pulses.

“Hit record and say that again.”

An almost sadistic grin captures his face, and he taps the screen a few times, then sets the phone on the dresser.

Then he growls out the command again, molten lava flowing through his tone. “Up against the wall, sugar.”

NETFLIX AND CHILL

TOMER

“Do we need popcorn for this? Tequila shots? Or better yet... tequila-soaked popcorn?”

“No, we don’t need a thing. That sounds terrible, and you’ll puke. I’ve got everything set up and ready to go. Just get your sweet ass over here.”

Lettie creeps closer to my couch, dragging her feet and looking utterly adorable. “Speak for yourself. I might need a whole bottle of tequila to watch this.”

“Nah. You’re going to be fine, sugar bear. Come sit.” I pat the tops of my thighs. “I’ll be right here with you the entire time.”

Her shoulders lift toward her ears as she fills her lungs. After she expels her breath, her face looks serene yet determined.

She was brave last night when we recorded our adventures, but a day later, she’s apprehensive.

Moments like these remind me how far she’s come. A year ago — hell, two months ago — she wouldn’t have been able to

even talk about watching herself. And wearing what she wore last night was even further from possible.

She's a butterfly, finally out of her cocoon.

Once she's on my lap, I wrap my arms around her waist, holding her close. She covers my forearms with hers and weaves our fingers together.

"I'm ready," she announces in an airy wisp, her head facing the laptop on the coffee table in front of us.

Before I hit play, I take a moment to revel in the quiet pleasure of having her tucked in my embrace. I never thought I'd have someone to spend time with this way. As simple as it may seem to others, the mere idea that I'd be reclining on my couch with a woman like her was out of the realm of possibility. I didn't know I could tolerate this much affection, let alone crave it.

When you're denied love all your life, you eventually stop reaching for it.

Yet somehow, I've found myself holding love in my arms.

She said she loved me last night, and I know she means it.

I wanted to say it back so damn badly.

But I can't. Not yet.

Not until I've come clean with her about everything.

Throat tightening, I kiss the side of her neck and inhale her sweet scent. "Happy anniversary, Lettie."

She cricks her neck to glance at me over her shoulder. A face-splitting grin brightens her expression. "That was last night."

"But I forgot to tell you then since you left me speechless when you waltzed in here looking like all my fantasies come to life. Speaking of forgetting, I have your gift in the other room. Don't let me forget again tonight."

She rolls her eyes. "Good call. Put the girl with ADHD in charge of remembering shit."

I squeeze her waist. “Hop up. I’ll get it now.”

With a shake of her head, she lets her facade slip. “No. It can wait until later. If I get up now, I can’t promise I’ll be brave enough to sit back down to do this.” She gulps, her gaze falling to my chest.

I remove one hand from her waist and tilt her chin so she’s looking at me. “You’re so brave, Lettie. I’m very proud of you.”

“Will you still be proud of me if I can’t watch the whole tape?”

“Don’t be silly. It’s a video recording on your phone, not a tape,” I tease, aiming to steady her with a joke.

“Har, har, har.” She clicks her tongue at me. “I’m serious. I was so sure I was ready last night, but now I don’t know. Maybe I’ll never be ready.”

“Sweetness, listen to me. The woman who I tied up last night in over a hundred feet of hemp rope is not the same woman who cried the first time I made her climax. You’ve already come so far. There’s no timeline for this. I’m not going anywhere.”

Her cheeks redden, and her chin wobbles. “What if I can’t go any further?”

“That wouldn’t change anything. You’re still perfect to me and always will be. If you’re happy, that’s all I need. *Always.*”

My throat is suddenly an arid desert full of rolling tumbleweeds.

I shouldn’t say these things to her. I’m promising her forever when I know I can’t deliver it. No matter how fiercely I wish I could.

As much as she needs my reassurance, it will only make things so much worse.

I’ve almost confessed a dozen times in the last month alone. But then Kri got kidnapped, and Redleg picked a fight with the fucking Russian mafia.

For a fucking year, there's never been a good time to tell Big Al.

There's always something stopping me.

My stomach sours as I admit to myself that even if things were rosy and full of rainbows at Redleg, I'd still avoid telling her about her father.

And the truth about me.

Because the guilt and pain I feel for lying to her is easier to stand than the thought of hurting her or watching her walk out my door.

And out of my life.

For twelve damn months, I've been held hostage by the lies I've told her.

Every passing day, the ropes around my wrists and ankles tighten. I don't have the strength to break free. Instead, I wait for the noose to slip around my neck and cinch, cutting off my airway.

When she leaves, she'll take the oxygen with her.

I won't survive it.

Unaware of the darkness ravaging my psyche, she raises her mouth to mine and kisses me tenderly. I close my eyes, selfishly letting her lips ease the burn of the ropes binding my body.

When she pulls away, she cups my cheek. "Thank you." Her posture changes, strength infusing her frame. "I'm ready now. Hit play." Some of that gritty determination that gave her the courage to leave her church is present, front and center.

She spins around to reface the laptop. I lean over to tap play, then pull her close again, locking my hands at her waist in the position we were in before the conversation went sideways. She's nestled between my legs, resting her back to my chest.

The video starts with me telling her to get up against the wall. The expression she wore was priceless. The sparks of her arousal were doused with gasoline when she realized I was going to act out her fantasy.

A few weeks ago during pillow talk — another experience I never thought I'd have — she told me about how our banter in the coffee shop on the day we met left her all hot and bothered.

I already knew that since I heard her tell Stella all about it when I invaded her privacy. And I hate myself for all those violations. If I had a time machine, I'd do a million things differently.

Before I get sucked back down the self-flagellation rabbit hole, Lettie stiffens in my arms, and her breathing intensifies as she watches me stalking behind her on-screen and guiding her hands where I wanted them, leaving them pressed flat against the wall.

Despite the onslaught of negative thoughts, my dick twitches at the sight.

She was so fucking hot last night. From the way the harness bands wrapped around her breasts to the solo strap running between her ass cheeks like a thong.

A goddess. Naked except for the purple bands.

Purple became my new favorite color.

No. Not purple.

Violet.

Squeezing her midsection, I whisper in her ear. “You okay, sweetness?”

Her head bobs frantically, her breath catching. “Uh-huh.”

Nuzzling into her neck, I kiss her supple flesh. “Look how beautiful you are.”

“I’m trying.”

“You’re doing amazing, sugar bear.”

“I might throw up. You should have let me have the tequila popcorn.”

I chuckle and kiss her neck again, before locking my gaze back on the screen where we acted out her fantasy.

“*Are you hiding any weapons?*” I asked her.

“*Where could I possibly hide a weapon in this attire?*” she taunted while pressing her ass backward into my erection.

“*I’m sure there’s somewhere you could hide something.*” Using both hands, I roughly pried her thighs apart. She didn’t fight me. “*Good girl.*”

I knelt to frisk her from the ankle to the top of her thigh, one side then the other. “*Nothing down there.*” After pressing my chest to her back, I ran my hands around her front to cup her breasts. I wasn’t gentle, and she was so fucking into it.

My dick is no longer merely considering getting stiff as we watch the playback. It’s already rock hard and throbbing. I shift myself to avoid breaking it from where her ass rests on it.

“Getting worked up back there,” she teases in a throaty purr.

“Can’t help it, sugar. Look at how fucking sexy you are.”

“You’re not so bad yourself. Here’s the part when you took your shirt off. All those mouthwatering muscles. Mmm. Mama likes.”

The corners of my lips hike upward. “You’re supposed to be watching yourself.”

“I’d rather watch you. The lust on your face is *really* doing it for me.” She reaches behind her to cup my nape. “That was part of your plan, right? To get me comfortable with this?”

She gives her hips a swirl, dragging her ass over my cock and drawing a groan from me.

“Babe, this part was so hot. I loved how you did that.”

Having stopped watching the video in favor of studying the beauty in my arms, I ask, “How I did what?”

My hand drifts from her waist, working its way under the waistband of her cotton pajama shorts.

“When you touched me. Down there.”

I shoot my gaze to the screen, seeing the moment when I plunged my hands down the front of her lower body and worked them through the silky pink flesh of her pussy.

“Was it like this?” I ask while flicking two fingers over her clit.

Her head leans back, pressing against my upper chest. “It was a bit different. Keep going, and I’ll tell you when you get there.”

“How about you tell me when *you* get there instead?”

Her mouth rounds, a dainty sigh slipping past her lips.

My line of sight vacillates from how I fingered her pussy last night with her spread against the wall to the way I replicate my ministrations on the couch.

So much to feast my eyes on. And my ears.

The sounds — both from the laptop and the woman in my arms — make it hard to concentrate on anything but how badly I need to get inside her.

“Do you hear yourself, Lettie? Hear how sweet you sound when you come for me?”

“Yes,” she grits out, pulsing her hips to drive herself harder into my touch.

On the screen, we’ve progressed from the frisk fantasy, where I brought her to orgasm with my fingers, to when she asked me to get my ropes out. There was no way I was gonna turn down that request, even if I’m the one who’s supposed to be in charge.

Sort of.

She’s the one in control, truthfully. As it should be.

We agreed on a partial suspension where her upper body would be attached to the rig along with her right leg.

I get a little lost as I watch it unfold, tendrils of the rush from last night flaring in my abdomen. All the while, I keep playing with her pussy and loving how she's grinding that perfect ass against my hard cock.

"Look how serious you get when you're binding my chest," she whispers, then stifles a moan as I slip a second finger inside her.

Starting off, I fashioned a basic bikini harness. With the beautiful violet straps she already had on, I didn't need to do anything complex. She already looked like a piece of art.

I directed her to a comfortable position so that I could do her leg next. *"Get on the bed. Face up. Right knee bent and legs spread."*

She complied while I gathered a few more hanks of rope and tossed them on the bed. Before tying her thigh to her calf in a bent position with a spiral futomomo tie, I delved my tongue through her folds and sucked her clit.

Lettie adjusts her position on my lap, recapturing my attention away from the video.

"You doing okay, sugar bear?"

A deep breath rasps from her chest as she gives me a quick nod. "Mm-hmm."

From this vantage, it's hard to gauge where her head is with an answer like that, so I give her a bit more reassurance. "You're so beautiful. I could watch you every minute of the day."

She grabs my free hand and plasters it onto her breast. "Babe, play with my nipples. I need to come. Please make me come."

Guess she wasn't getting quiet because she was upset. That's a relief.

I lick her neck, drawing a patch of skin between my teeth for a quick nibble. "That's my dirty girl. You like watching us, don't you?"

Her eyelids flutter, and her moans pitch louder as I squeeze her nipple while working her clit with my free hand.

“Oh my god, babe. Just like that.” Her hips buck and writhe harder, shoving her ass into my dick. “Don’t stop.”

“You didn’t answer my question, sweetness. Do you like watching?”

She nods repeatedly.

“Use your words, baby.”

“I like watching. I do. So much.”

“Good girl. Do you see how beautiful you are?”

She doesn’t answer, so I slow my movements. “Answer me if you want to come. Tell me you see how beautiful you are. Do you see how much I want you? Do you see how hard you make me? Do you see how absolutely exquisite you are when you’re lost in ecstasy?”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes,” she mewls. “I see it. I believe you.”

I kick up the pressure on her nipple and blur my fingertips across her clit. “That’s right. You’re fucking perfection. Keep watching the sexiest woman in the world on that screen while you come for me now. It’s time to come, Lettie.”

And she does.

Her thighs clamp together, squeezing my hand. She arches her back as a silent scream convulses her chest.

It’s a sweet relief for me almost as much as it is for her.

“I’m so fucking proud of you, Lettie. So proud.”

As she comes down slowly from her climax, my gaze returns to the video where I’ve completed her bent leg tie and moved her to an upright position so I could bind her lower arms together loosely in a long column of black rope.

The contrast against her pale skin, growing pinker with the handling, was breathtaking.

On my lap now, Lettie’s breathing steadies as she resumes watching with me.

I attached her to my suspension quad rig over her head by her bent arms, chest harness, and right leg. Her left foot was flat on the floor, taking most of the pressure off her joints.

Once I had her the way I wanted, I circled her slowly, reveling in the simple beauty of the pose and how glorious she looked. The basic rope work blended with those fucking violet straps crisscrossing her skin.

Modest perfection. Exquisite.

“You’re a vision, Lettie. Absolutely stunning,” I told her. *“Wait until you see this for yourself.”*

In her ear now, I ask, “Was I right?”

She turns around in my arms and straddles my lap. “Don’t gloat.”

Right before she kisses me, she drags her needy pussy over my throbbing cock. Greedily, her tongue delves past my lips, and I get lost in her kiss. I use my grip around her hips to drag her back and forth over my lap, bucking up against her warm center.

When she breaks the kiss, she whips her head toward the laptop. Fortunately, she doesn’t stop pulsing over me while she watches our video.

A chorus of last night’s grunts, moans, and slapping of skin fills my living room. I glance at the screen and watch how I drove my cock into her weeping pussy while she was still on the rig. It was hot as hell.

Almost as hot as what’s happening right now.

Lettie reaches between us and unfastens my pants, swiftly removing my cock and giving it three firm strokes. “Fuck, babe. I need you inside me. Now.”

She doesn’t even bother removing her shorts or panties. Instead, she swoops them to one side and sinks onto my cock. Her warm, silky channel welcomes me home.

“Fuck, Lettie. *Damn*, you feel good.”

The sex sounds from the laptop are our erotic soundtrack as she grinds and writhes on top of me. Her moves have an intensity she's never instigated before.

She clamps her hands on my shoulders, riding me harder. Matching her pace, I settle my hands on her hips and help her keep the tempo.

My Lettie has never been this confident and determined while being on top. It's pure fucking bliss.

"Look at you, sugar bear. You're owning your body." I pause to suck in a ragged breath. "You're taking your pleasure. Embracing your desires. *You* are fucking *me*, baby."

Her eyes roll back as a wicked grin slips into place.

Bending close, she claims my mouth and tugs my lip between her teeth. My balls draw up with a frantic need to come, thanks to her uncharacteristically rough treatment.

Normally, this wouldn't do it for me. But I like that she's taking control. She needs this, and I'm so damn proud of her.

"Spank me, babe," she blurts out of nowhere.

As requested, I swat her ass. The loud crack reverberates around the room.

"You like that? My hand making your ass sting and turn pink?"

"Yes. Do it again," she demands, and I comply. "Again. Make it hurt. Yes, yes, yes."

With each smack, she takes my cock harder and faster. Her hips drag over my lap in a punishing rhythm.

If I don't get her off soon, I'm going to come first, and that's unacceptable.

Time for me to retake the reins.

After steadying her hips to still her movement, I buck her off to adjust our position.

As if she weighs nothing, I flip her over so she's flat on the couch, face down. Moving behind her, I strip her bottoms off

and let my pants fall to the floor.

Once we're both naked from the waist down, I grab her hips and yank them upward so she's on her knees. A second later, I thrust inside her body, setting a punishing rhythm of my own.

I alternate smacks from one side of her reddening ass to the other. She screams louder, begging for more.

"You gonna come for me, Lettie?" I grit out, struggling to hold back my release.

"Why? Can't keep up?" she taunts, earning a harder smack on her ass.

"Mmm. *Shit*. Yes, just like that," she wails, pumping her body back to impale herself.

Fucking hell. She's ravenous. I've never seen her like this before.

Something has turned my Lettie into a hellcat.

My eyes shift to the laptop, where I've lowered her from the rig and put her on the bed. I untied her leg and arms, but her chest harness was still on.

We fucked in so many positions last night. That damn lingerie she wore was perfect for moving her exactly where I needed her.

"Watch the video, baby. See how pretty you look taking my cock."

She glances at the screen obediently. Her mouth curves into a devilish grin.

Sexy vixen.

Together, we indulge in the view of our lovemaking from last night while I fuck her into oblivion on my couch.

My eyes roll back in my head as her core starts quivering.

"Spank me again. I'm so close. Make me come, babe. Spank me."

Yes. Fucking hell. *Finally*.

Three moderate smacks in rapid succession later, and her pussy flutters. Her screams of ecstasy crescendo as I jerk into her with the first wave of my climax.

I look down to watch her body taking my cock, and I freeze in panic.

I'm not wearing a condom.

Immediately, I pull out, but my orgasm has already started. Jets of my release soak her ass, dripping down the back of her pussy.

The euphoria shatters.

How could I do this?

“Fuck.”

She collapses on the couch, one side of her face lifted in a satisfied grin. More than likely, my expression is the opposite, reflecting panic, terror, and regret.

Jumping off the couch, I shake out my limbs and think.

Mitigate the risk.

Formulate a plan.

Take control of the situation.

After a quick exhale, I pull her off the couch. “Get up, baby.”

“My legs are gelatin,” she protests but allows me to help her to her feet.

Come on, gravity. Do your thing.

“Where are you in your cycle, sugar?”

Her nose bunches up. “What?”

“Your period or menstrual cycle. Where or when? Whatever you call it. How far away from ovulating are you?”

The smooth planes of her throat undulate as she catches my meaning. “Condom. Oh no. What did I do?”

Her expression goes vacant, and she stutters a step backward. I hold her up, wrapping my forearm behind her.

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s okay. I got you, sweetie.”

“No, it’s not,” she shrieks. “I fucked up.”

“Shh. It wasn’t all you. I fucked up too. Although I tried to pull out, I don’t know if I did in time. I only realized it at the last second.”

The hue of her cheeks, which was a rosy shade a few moments ago, fades to a ghostly pale. Her eyes dart to the floor, and she withdraws from my hold. Placing her palm on my chest, she pushes me back, gently at first, but ends with a firm shove.

She retreats, backing away with her vision trained on the floor and her jaw hanging open.

I take a leery step in her direction. “Lettie, it’s going to be fine.”

She holds her palm out in front of her. “Stop!”

My feet reluctantly obey.

Wrapping her arms around her waist, she furiously shakes her head no. “Mama was right. I did exactly what she said I’d do. I’m just like my mother.”

To hell with her objections, I launch myself across the room, eating up the distance between us before she sees me coming.

I scoop her up in my arms, throwing her legs over my forearm, and I carry her down the hall to the bathroom. She doesn’t fight me.

As I set her feet on the tile floor, I calmly tell her, “You should use the restroom, and then we’ll shower.”

She bristles at my words, shoulders rolling back and chin lifting. Her eyes look everywhere but at me.

“Focus on me, sugar bear.”

After an agonizingly long few seconds, she finally meets my eyes. “James, what do we do?” Her voice is as timid as I’ve ever heard, barely recognizable.

Desperate to comfort her, I wrap her in my embrace. “Don’t worry, sweetness. I’ll figure it out. Just relax.”

She clings to me, thankfully hugging me back. “Okay.”

While I comfort her, my mind races in a million directions. She’s shocked, and that’s understandable. I am too. I’ve never been reckless like that.

But I’ve also never been in love before.

“Lettie, I’m going to step out while you go to the bathroom. Get in the shower when you’re done, and I’ll join you. We’ll talk after that, okay?”

She nods and extricates herself from my hold. Before I let her go, I kiss her forehead.

With a plan forming in my mind, I close the door and race to the other room to get my phone. Pulling up the delivery app, I quickly find emergency contraceptive pills from the local pharmacy and place the order.

She doesn’t have to take it. But if she wants it, I’ll have it ready. It won’t be on her to buy it. One less thing for her to worry about.

By the time we’re done showering, it’ll be waiting on my porch. She and I will sit down for a talk. I’ll let her know it’s up to her. No pressure either way.

Once she calms down, she’ll be able to calculate where she is in her menstrual cycle. We might not even need the stuff. But if we do, it’s here.

Problem handled.

Unless she doesn’t want to take it.

Fuck.

What do I do then? Marry her with my fake name?

With my phone still in hand, I search how long it takes a woman to know if she’s pregnant.

The answer is slightly reassuring. Guess I’ll have a few weeks to figure out what to do before we know for sure.

Perfect. I'll just put it off.

Same as I've been doing about telling her the truth for a fucking year now. What's another few weeks?

Dammit.

HOW DARE HE?

LETTIE

No woman in modern history has consented to recording a sex tape and then thought: *That was a great decision!*

Hell, I'd wager that back in caveman times, there was probably an era-equivalent divorce or two after the little stick figures on their cave wall drawings got explicit.

I've done some dumb shit in my life, but this one creams the corn.

My phone is dead to me.

And I don't mean the battery went to be with the Lord. What I'm sayin' is that the damn doom device has wronged me for the last time. I should toss the damned thing down the hog and grind it to bits.

The damn sex tape is on there.

To be fair, the phone has never been a friend of mine. For starters, it's the vessel for incoming calls — justifiable grounds for homicide in my eyes. Then last year, it gave me double black eyes and a broken nose. That was only its warmup act.

Am I projecting my anger at myself onto the damn device?

Yes.

In my defense, if the accursed thing hadn't recorded our sexy times, I wouldn't have been able to watch it. Thus I wouldn't have gotten so turned on that I jumped on my boyfriend's condom-free cock and took it for a spin.

So as you can see, it's clearly the phone's fault.

Thanks for agreeing.

Last night, after our shower, James erased the recording from his laptop, ensuring the original on my cell was the only copy in existence. He'd already disabled the automatic cloud back-up.

On the bright side, if my phone were to be accidentally pulverized in the garbage disposal, the kinky sex video — proof of my heretic nature — would die along with it. Rest in peace.

He led me through painstaking details of how he deleted it from his computer, removing it from the *back-up of blah, blah, fucking blah, tech speak, who gives a shit, yada yada yada*.

It was hard to follow his explanation, considering the other item on the kitchen table.

A box of Plan B — the morning after pill.

He had it delivered to his house like it was a large pepperoni pizza while we showered. What a time to be alive, eh?

According to him, he bought it in case I wanted it. No pressure either way.

After our little talk, I had to leave. And I didn't bring his *no pressure pills* with me when I left.

That's not happening.

For fuck's sake, I can't even take birth control yet because it's a daily reminder of my impurity.

How could James think that was a good idea for someone like me?

He's been clueless before, but this tops them all.

Despite his insisting I stay the night, I bolted after reassuring him I was okay. He knows I'm not, but he pretended to believe me. And I pretended to mean it.

I needed space to think.

To cry some more.

To freak out without sucking him down into despair with me.

Sometimes, a girl needs to cry herself to sleep alone in her room with music blaring. So I did. Not sure it helped.

All day I've been itching to message Stella to get her take on this cluster I've fucked myself into. Hell, I might have been so bold as to call her.

With my voice!

After all, she needs to hear about this huge leap I've made toward the *Liberation of Lettie Holt* — making the sex tape *and* watching it.

Plus I can't wait to hear what choice words she has to say about how I immediately eroded my victory by doing the *Lettiest* thing ever — being spontaneous, reckless, and forgetful all at once. The ADHD trifecta.

Can't believe I forgot to use a fucking condom.

I'm going to end up pregnant and unmarried, exactly like the woman who birthed me.

Shit ass. And my birth father was a soldier — like James was.

I'm such a fucking cliché.

Then again, did my mother date her soldier for a year before she got knocked up? Does that make my situation better? Worse? Did my father try to give her Plan B?

Wait. Was Plan B even a thing in the 1900s?

Dammit, Lettie, focus! Stop chasing mental squirrels.

I need my Stella Bella. She'd help me figure this shit out.

But I'm afraid to touch the phone.

What if I accidentally sent her the video or posted it on social media? Accidental sex tape leaks are a thing. They happen all the time to celebrities. All because they had to text their best friend about their dirty deeds.

And if anyone is going to have an accidental slip like that, it's *Calamity Lettie*.

"Hello, sunshine," Freya singsongs as she bounds through the front door.

I bolt from the table to assist her with what appears to be thirteen hundred grocery bags. Her hands are as red as her lipstick, thanks to her death grip on the plastic handles.

"Why didn't you call me to come help you unload?" The weight of one of the bags nearly drags me to the floor. "Or you know... make a second trip?"

"Second trips are for pussies!" she declares, chin raised. "My mother didn't raise me to be a multi-trip-making shopper."

"Nope. Looks like she raised a pack mule instead."

Only in the door for five seconds, and Freya's already preventing my mind from careening down *Depression Drive* before taking the on-ramp to the *Freak-out Freeway*.

Bless her precious heart — non-ironically.

She plops the remaining bags on the kitchen counter and shakes her hands.

While Freya and I unload the groceries, I decide to take the opportunity to talk to her about what I'm unable to discuss with Stella due to my fear of spontaneous sex tape leakage. And they don't make protective undergarments for that.

"*Sooo* James and I did a thing."

She pauses, her hand dangling over the dozen eggs she's transferring to the tray in the fridge. "Honey, I bet you do a lot of things with James. And judging by the sounds that often come from your room, you enjoy those things, which is always a plus."

On autopilot, I stack and restack the boxes of macaroni and cheese in the pantry with trembling hands. "This was a new thing, and it led to something rather reckless."

She throws the empty egg carton in the recycle bin, then leans on the counter, facing me. "What's going on?"

I close the pantry door and nibble on the inside of my cheek. "We... um... made a sex tape. Well, not a tape, because who has those anymore. But we recorded it on my phone."

Grabbing my hand, she pulls me toward the high-top barstools. "Come into my office, honey." Once we're seated, she pins me with a serious glare. "You consented to this, right? James didn't —"

I cut her off immediately. "It was entirely consensual. He would *never* force me to do anything."

"I didn't think so. But the way you're acting had me worried for a second. So what's the situation?"

"The recording isn't really important. It's what happened while we were watching it that has me shittin' bricks."

She looks expectantly at me, her face free of judgment.

I swallow around a lump in my throat and force out the words. "I was so hot and bothered that I instigated a very intense and *sudden* round of sexy times, but I forgot to put a condom on him." Slamming my eyes shut, I bury my face in my hands.

Freya lets me hide for a second before saying, "Lettie, I have to stop you right there."

I glance in her direction without meeting her eyes. "What?"

"You aren't the only person responsible for protection. It takes two to tango, and I'm pretty damn shocked he'd forget

something like that. But we're all human. How you said *you* didn't put a condom on him versus something like *we forgot to use a condom*, makes me a bit stabby. Did he blame you for it?"

Her statement gives me pause. My shoulders hit the stool's backrest as I stare off into the distance.

Finally, I admit, "No. He didn't say anything like that. In fact, he was apologizing profusely for most of the night."

"Thank fuck. Because I'll kick a Dom in his taint so fucking fast if he even dares to pull that bullshit." She blows a raspberry, then playfully nudges my arm. "Sounds like you're just blaming yourself, which is on brand for you."

Through a tight-lipped chuckle, I quip, "Welcome to the Guilt Hotel, where there are no vacancies 'cause Lettie's taken all the rooms."

Freya piles onto the sub-par joke. "Bitch checked in, but she could never check out."

I exhale and bury my face back in my hands. "*Argh*. What am I going to do?"

"Aren't you on birth control?"

My hands fall, but I keep my head down. "No, I'm not."

"Okaaay." The way she draws out the word makes it seem like an implied question.

I meet her eyes and see the inquiry etched onto her pretty face. "I still have issues with it."

"Although I'm not implying birth control is only the woman's responsibility, I've just found it's often easier than trusting a man. You don't have to answer this next question. I'm just curious why you aren't on it. Is it medical?"

After I give her an abbreviated version of my religious upbringing, I eventually meander to the point *du jour*. "Given my feelings on *regular* birth control, you can imagine my surprise when James presented me with a package of morning after pills no more than one hour after the incident."

She makes a hissing sound with her raucous inhale and crinkles up her nose.

“Yeah. So now I’m not only worried about a potential unplanned pregnancy, but I’m also trying to decode what he’s telling me with that lovely gesture.”

“What on earth do you think he could be trying to tell you?”

“That he’d never consider having a baby with me. Or he doesn’t see us lasting much longer. Maybe he thinks I’d be a terrible mother or that I’m not wife material.”

“That’s a stupid expression. Never use it again. Women are not rated for marriage aptitude like a damn thread count.”

“Fair.”

Her lips flutter with a dramatic exhale. “Now tell me why the hell you think he could have any of those ludicrous thoughts about you?”

My shoulders droop, and my lower lip juts into a pout. “He hasn’t said *I love you* yet.”

“Have you told him you love him?”

“Yes. A few nights ago. And he had plenty of time to say it back since then.”

“So he didn’t say it back. *Yet*. Big deal. Not all men are in touch with their feelings. And no offense to James, but he’s the poster child for that affliction.”

My jaw drops, and I shoot an indignant glare at her.

She puts her hands up in front of her, palms out. “I said *no offense*.” After stifling a chuckle, she continues, “Seriously, though, honey. That man is crazy about you.”

“Then why is he always so secretive? And when I confront him with something I think he’s hiding, he distracts my squirrel brain. What is he hiding from me?”

Her eyes double in size, and she pulls back from me. Her shoulders stoop as if she’s attempting to shrink herself.

“What’s that look for, Freya?”

She mashes her lips together and wobbles her head in tiny, quick shakes. I narrow my eyes at her, leaning closer.

“What look? There’s no look,” she tosses back unconvincingly.

Great. Now Freya’s hiding shit from me too.

Before I can press her further, an errant thought skitters to the top of my mind. James did the distraction thing again the other night when I called him out for not telling me where he works. All he said was *security* before diverting my focus. What if all those things he said were nothing but a distraction? The kneeling? The *I’m nothing without you* speech?

Was it all just smoke and mirrors?

Everyone tells me I’m too trusting — including him. Is this more proof of that? Did I give my heart to someone who’s never going to be honest and upfront with me?

“Freya, is he just biding his time until he gets bored of me? Is that why he got me the Plan B? So he would be able to keep his easy exit? Because I-I...”

My words trail off because the thought of him leaving is so abhorrent and painful that I can’t speak.

The truth is, I don’t know what I’d do without James. But I know how I’d feel — like half of my soul was ripped out.

Freya reaches out for me, taking my hand for comfort. “Sweetheart, listen to me. That man is head over heels in love with you.”

“He’s probably already getting bored of me now that the novelty of taking my V-card has worn off. If he loved me, he’d have said it back. He hides things, but he doesn’t lie.”

By the time I’ve gotten my rant out, I’m a blubbery mess of emotions. Freya releases my hand to hand me a napkin from across the counter.

“Lettie, look at you. See yourself how others see you, just for a second. You’re smart, kind, funny, ridiculously talented,

and stunningly beautiful — inside and out. How could you ever bore anyone?”

“Looks are one thing, but he needs more.”

“Stop it right now, Lettie.” She squeezes my hand to halt my sobbing. “First, I didn’t *only* mention looks. James knows how lucky he is to have such an amazing partner. I’m telling you, he’s madly in love with you.”

“You don’t know that,” I contend, my voice raising and tears spilling over.

“Shh, shh. Honey, calm down.”

I force my mouth shut, tears trickling down my cheeks.

“Lettie, listen. I shouldn’t be telling you this, but you need to know. If he gets mad, so be it. I can’t watch you lose your shit like this for no good reason.”

“What is it?” I whimper past my trembling lips.

“He’s been in love with you since you first started at the club. Probably before then.”

I frantically wipe my tears as if dryer skin will help me hear better. “Did he say that?”

“Not with words. But his actions were loud and clear.”

My tears abate while I patiently await her explanation.

“When he found out you were living at that shit bag motel, he asked around to find a place for you to live. I was considering getting a roomie anyhow, so it worked out great. He paid for your first month’s rent and gave me a generous deposit, which I haven’t spent because I plan to give it back to him or to you if you ever decide to move out.”

My head slowly cranes to one side. “He did what now?”

“Plus, the bedroom was bare as a hairless cat’s ass. He bought all the furniture, bedding, curtains, shower mat, towels, and even the little toothbrush holder. Everything. He’s the one who sent the VR headset, which was so you wouldn’t go jogging alone at odd hours. He also —”

I hold out my hand, halting her words. “I don’t want to hear anymore.”

A deluge of emotion floods me, too powerful and convoluted for me to single out which feeling is the strongest. Anger, awe, confusion, self-pity, gratitude, and another one. *Ah, yes... shame.*

Shame.

When we first met, I was certain he saw me as a pathetic charity case. I’ve worked so hard to get past that. But this revelation is throwing me back in time.

Does he still see me that way?

If he does, it explains the Plan B. He must believe I’m incapable of raising a child. Either that or he thinks I’m too helpless to purchase it myself.

All my muscles tense at once.

Why can’t I just be touched by his generosity? Why the hell does it feel so icky?

Sensing my panic, Freya attempts to soothe the riot brewing inside me. “Sweetie, I know it’s a bit heavy-handed. Maybe think about *why* he did it, and not *what* he did.”

When I don’t fill in the blank for her, she explains her theory. “He did it because he cares about you. The man wanted you to be safe and comfortable, so he took care of it. He kept it a secret because he didn’t do it for recognition or to obligate you to him. I think it’s sweet.”

I push away from the counter and begin pacing. “No, no. I disagree. I don’t think he did it because he wanted me to be happy, safe, or whatever the fuck you said. He did it because he saw me as a weak, pathetic fool who is incapable of fending for herself. He was trying to be my savior.”

“No, baby, no. That’s not true. It can’t be. He loves you. I believe it with my whole heart, both tits, and all three nipples.”

My stomping around and angry hair-tugging cease. “Wait. Three nipples?”

She raises her shoulders to her ear and flashes a shit-eating grin. “Gotcha!”

I grab a pillow off the couch and chuck it at her. “Freya! This is serious. I don’t want to hear about your supernumerary nip.”

“Nice word. But at least it made you stop panicking over practically nothing.”

She crosses her arms at her chest — which I know for a fact only has two nipples — because I’ve seen her topless at the club.

Hell, I’ve seen *everyone* topless at the club. And most of them bottomless.

I plant my fists on my hips. “It ain’t nothin’, Freya. He lied to me. Treated me like a dang 501(c)(3) organization. I hope you gave him a receipt for his taxes.” I stomp my foot, tantrum mode activated. “Damn him! I thought we got over this shit.”

“Pump the brakes. This happened before?”

Sumbitch. Let me just air all my dirty laundry at once.

“Pour yourself a glass of wine and join me in my circle of sadness. Otherwise known as the living room.”

She claps her hands and darts into the kitchen. “Yes! We’re off tonight, so let’s get drunk.”

I hold up my index finger. “None for me. What if I’m... you know?”

“Too early to have an impact, but whatever. I’ll get you some water. If you’re still upset after we chat, we’re going dancing tonight. I need to teach you how to do a proper body roll. It’ll go nicely with your karaoke performances.”

After pouring our drinks, she joins me on the couch. “Tell me about the time when James did horribly, non-romantic shit to you. Like buying you things.”

“It only sounds romantic until someone does it to you.”

“Bitch, do you know how many women would drop trou and spread their thighs for a man to pay their rent? Add in a

bougie new bedroom set like that? They'd happily do butt stuff. *Allll* the butt stuff."

Not responding to her theatrics, I give her the Southern side-eye. It's like a regular side-eye, but often done in a fancy hat.

"Jokes aside. Tell me what happened the last time he spoiled you."

I take a deep breath, letting my lips flap with the force of the exhale. "I met him when I was getting gas. I was in tears, and he asked me what was wrong."

"To be fair, gas prices are depressing."

"No lies detected." I grin, but it fades fast. "I was crying because I overspent at the fuel pump — thanks, ADHD — so I had nothing left to buy food. At all. And I was sangry."

She narrows her eyes in confusion.

"It's like hangry, but sad," I explain.

Her head cocks to one side, and she purses her lips. "Wouldn't that be sungry?"

Damn. She's right. My whole life is a lie.

She waves her hand, motioning for me to continue.

"Anyhow, he opened his wallet, gave me eighty dollars in cash. On the spot. Barely flinched."

"Should have held out for a hundred," she jokes, nearly making me choke on my water.

When I stop chuckling, I continue, "We talked a bit, and he asked to take me out for coffee. I told him it was my treat since I didn't want him to spend more money on me. Right then, we went to a coffee place down the road. Needless to say, I left with the eighty dollars still in my purse and a to-go bag filled with a sandwich, salad, fruit, protein bars, and snacks."

My shoulders jerk back when I remember another detail. "Oh and a hundred-dollar gift card for more coffee."

Holding perfectly still with her wine poised in front of her mouth, she blinks rapidly. “Wow. How awful for you. Where does he get off? The nerve of him,” she drones, flat and monotone, sounding like an annoyed robot.

“Listen, I hear ya. I know how it sounds. It *should* be sweet and all. But you have to understand about my mama... err grandmama. She was so dang horrible to me when I left the church. She predicted I’d be broke, homeless, and turning tricks for crack. I’ve been hell-bent on proving her wrong.”

I pause for a deep breath.

Mama also said I’d end up knocked up.

Freya lowers her chin, warmth shining in her face now instead of sarcasm. “By accepting his help, you felt like your mama was right about you. Is that it?”

I let my head sag onto the back of the couch. “Sort of. Either I failed already or was days away from failing. I’d have let myself down, not to mention my mama and everyone else. It was like a neon sign telling me to head home with my tail between my legs. I couldn’t make it on my own, so might as well give up before I end up addicted to crack.”

“Please stop talking about crack. That’s not a thing around here anymore. It’s meth or molly. Get your facts straight, please.”

Thankfully, she brought her silly side back quickly, lest I devolve into a puddle of tears again.

“Lettie, I get why you might see his gifts as charity and how it might trigger you.”

“But?”

“But this feels more like a Dom thing to me. I seriously doubt he could *ever* see you like a failure or a pathetic fool.” She slants her head and grabs my hand for a reassuring squeeze. “Do you honestly believe he sees you that way?”

My nostrils flare with a deep inhale. “No. I don’t.”

“Doms love to take care of their subs. That’s their real kink. Not ropes or anything else. And I think he wanted you

from the moment you met and began treating you accordingly. Caring for you is natural for him. Sounds like it was that way when you first met him and then again with the morning after pills. You needed something, so he handled it. Done. He's not... uh... terribly deep. I doubt he spent a lot of time dissecting how his actions could affect you on an emotional level."

When we trade glances, her face is muddled up in a partial cringe. "At least that's how *I* see him. But you know him better than me."

"In truth, he's quite deep, but most people don't see that side of him. He's not a machine. Although he's more straightforward than most, he's extremely passionate and kind. And he has been very protective and caring over me since the beginning."

"Maybe he just knew you were meant to be his."

Tears fill my eyes again. "Then why isn't he mine?"

She scoots closer and tosses her arm over my shoulder. "Oh honey. He is. I know it."

I let her comfort me for another few moments, my head swirling as I try to put my chaotic thoughts into something resembling order.

Naturally, I fail. But at least I tried.

"I don't know the ins and outs of your relationship and what you feel he's hiding from you, Lettie. But I honestly believe he loves you. And if you're patient, he'll prove it to you."

"Thanks, Freya. You're probably right."

It's not like there's an expiration date on our relationship. I can wait him out. Perhaps this mess isn't the end of the world.

Unless I miss my next period. Then we'll have to reconsider the end of the world thing.

She taps my leg. "Of course I'm right. I've never been wrong. *Never*. It was one of the conditions when I sold my soul to Satan — absolute perfection in all things at all times."

She waves her nearly empty glass toward the kitchen. “Take, for example, my ability to carry in three hundred dollars’ worth of groceries in one trip. I’m unstoppable in every aspect of life.”

With a wink, she tosses back the rest of her drink.

Despite feeling substantially better, I’m not sure I’m ready to see James. After I fire off a text to tell him I’m going out tonight, I head to my room to change.

“Freya, get your ass ready. We’re going dancing, and hopefully, we can find some karaoke.”

“Hell yes! And then we need to circle back to how you never mentioned you were a virgin.”

Shit.

JUST ONE LOOK

TOMER

T blink four times, rub my eyes, and reread the text.

SUGAR BEAR

Going out tonight. You should work late.

NEVER HAVING BEEN one to read into things when proof doesn't exist, I experience an unusual sensation as I scan her words repeatedly and sort through a vast array of potential hidden meanings.

In other words, I'm reading into things.

Nothing overtly wrong with the two sentences. It's a factual update accompanied by a suggestion. Simple. Straightforward.

Yet dread pools deep in my gut. Each reread of her message further saturates it.

Especially after how things ended last night.

Fuck.

She cried into my chest in the shower. All I could do was hold her and tell her it would be fine.

I didn't know what else to say.

After our shower, I shifted back into action mode. Once I wiped the video file from her laptop, I showed her what she needed to do when she was ready to delete it from her phone permanently.

She was silent through most of the conversation.

And I let her be.

If anyone understands the need for silence, it's me.

Perhaps that's what's happening tonight. She just needs more time for introspection.

The last few days were up and down for us.

The confrontation over Mia morphed into her pressing me for details about work. Despite the rocky start to our anniversary, we got past it and had a fantastic night. That euphoria carried over to last night. Unfortunately, it made the crash even harder on her. And for me.

How could I be so reckless about the condom?

Was the Plan B a bad idea? She seemed to understand I was providing an option and not attempting to force her.

But she left it sitting on my table when she went home.

Does that mean she wasn't even considering taking it? Then why was she crying?

Maybe she didn't understand why I got it. Or she didn't believe me.

Shit.

My head hurts. How am I supposed to get any work done while my heart is in my throat, clogging my airway?

This is stupid. Why am I jumping to conclusions? It could be nothing.

I should call her.

Then again, she hates phone calls. Will she even answer?

Nah. A call is out of the question. If she *is* upset with me, she won't answer. It'll piss her off that I dared to call.

I could text her to ask if she's mad.

But would it make it worse? If she wanted to tell me what's wrong, she'd have told me. Right? Or maybe she wants me to ask.

This is maddening.

Relationships. People. Communication. These are a few of my least favorite things.

Fuck my life.

Like an angel, my coworker Mia halts my internal meltdown by handing me a can of soda as she returns from the break room. "Diet Coke break."

Setting my cell phone face down on my desk, I take the offered can. "Thanks."

If anyone needs a distraction right now, it's me.

As I pop the top, I spare a second to enjoy the soothing whoosh from the release of the CO₂.

Mia settles into her chair after shooting Klein a look over her shoulder.

Look? Glare?

Same thing when it comes to these two.

He narrows his eyes at her in return, his upper lip curling in a snarl.

Mark my words, they'll implode any day now. I hope I'm far enough away to avoid the fallout when they do. But given we're all sharing my lair, the odds aren't great that I'll get clear of the blast zone.

Each day since she joined the intel team at Redleg, the tension in the room has doubled.

You know what? I could use another topic to obsess over so I don't revert to panicking over Lettie. Math might do it. I'll extrapolate the tension a bit.

For argument's sake, let's assume the starting pressure was one pound and has doubled each day for ten working days since Mia started. Therefore, by today, it's up to 1,024 pounds. That's a 102,300 percent increase in sexual energy.

No wonder it's hard to breathe.

But I like working with Mia.

She's funny and smart as hell, and she doesn't treat me like a machine. Still not sure how much I trust her. That's why I'm monitoring her activity so closely.

She's also saving my ass around here. And the competition between her and Klein has been good for him. He's stepped up his game — either to impress her or beat her. His reason is irrelevant. A rising tide lifts all ships.

Currently, he's pouring through background research for another new bodyguard Big Al wants to hire. Of course, I'll do my own digging after Klein passes the file to me. I'll be damned if I let anyone sketchy join the Redleg family. Fuck that. Yet with him handling the initial legwork, it frees up my time to focus on training Mia and working on more complex tasks.

Hopefully, Lettie believed me when I told her she has nothing to worry about with Mia. It's the truth. I miscommunicated things to Lettie, as to be expected, given I've never had a female friend. Or a girlfriend.

Dammit. Now I'm thinking about Lettie again.

Mia sips her drink as she glances over her computer monitor. "You're about my age, T. Do you remember those commercials?"

My nose wrinkles as I mentally rewind to find out what I missed while doing exponential mental math and doom spiraling. "What commercials?"

She cups her hand beside her mouth like she's telling me a secret. "Diet Coke break. Diet Coke break." She drops her hand and smiles. "Remember those? With the ladies running around the office whispering that it was break time?"

I nod as the memory sharpens. "And there was a construction guy outside drinking soda with his shirt off?"

"Yeah. Those were funny commercials."

"I was partial to the Cindy Crawford Pepsi ad."

Her eyes widen. "Oh yeah. With the little boys watching her like they'd stumbled onto their dad's Playboy, right?" She laughs, but not her over-the-top one. Just a little one. "What was the song in that one?" She taps her fingertip over her lips.

I'm about to search the web for the answer like a civilized man when Klein chimes in. "It was 'Just One Look' by Doris Troy."

I snap my fingers and point at him. "That's the one."

Mia leans closer and lowers her voice. "Figures he'd know the song, given his *interesting* taste in music." She contorts her face like she's dry heaving. "Old man shit."

"I heard that," Klein retorts in a barely restrained growl. "You only wish you knew what music was."

Aaany day now.

Tick, tick, tick, boom.

Mia rolls her eyes, then faces her computer. Mostly to herself, she mumbles, "It's wild how those commercials just implant themselves in our psyche and then pop into your mind at random, even decades later."

Another old commercial jumps into my head. To further my attempts to avoid thinking about Lettie, I decide to play a game with Mia. Maybe I can stump her in another language. Given that she's former CIA and I was Special Ops, we speak some common languages — besides binary and English.

Over the next half hour, we work on our tasks while trading advertising slogans back and forth in German, Italian, and Russian. She stumps me with an M&Ms commercial in Dari. But I best her with a Doublemint gum slogan in French.

Klein calls it quits around 1800, probably to check on his mother. Mia bails not too long after.

I access the building security log that monitors who's scanned in and out of HQ. Only Boss and a handful of others are still in the building. Considering it's a Friday night and things are fairly quiet, I should leave.

I'd pick up a shift at Bask to pass the time, but it would only make me miss Lettie. What's the point of going if she's not there?

Shaking it off, I fall into a few other tasks that have been piling up on me. Two hours later, the restlessness I've been fighting all day returns, attempting to smother me.

"Fuck this," I announce to my empty office.

I grab my cell to call Lettie, breaking her cardinal rule of phone etiquette. It rings five times before rolling to voicemail. I try again, getting the same outcome.

It's been around eight or nine months since I've invaded her privacy. Aside from the GPS trackers, which are just good safety precautions, I haven't even glanced at her phone history, listened to her calls, or browsed her e-reader history.

Nothing.

She has a safe place to live, a job, and a good friend. Thanks to the VR headset, most of her workouts happen indoors now. I see her almost nightly, so the need to check up on her has all but vanished.

Until now.

Dread surrounds and fills me. From the pits of my stomach to the back of my throat, it's there.

Only I don't know if it's my instincts or paranoia making me this anxious.

If she doesn't answer me soon, I won't make it through the night without checking up on her.

ME

Sweetness, can you let me know if you're okay?

FOR SEVERAL AGONIZING MINUTES, my eyes ping between my phone screen and the clock at the bottom of my monitor while I gnaw on the inside of my cheek.

It's too fucking silent in here tonight.

The only sounds are the soft hum of the fan in my computers and my chair's incessant squeaking since my knee won't quit bouncing.

When she doesn't reply after ten minutes, I check her GPS tags. One by damn one, they all ping at her residence. Her car is there. As is Freya's.

If she's at home, then why isn't she replying?

Knowing she's there should make me feel better, but it's only making it worse.

I'm about to crawl out of my skin.

Dragging my palms over my face roughly, I remind myself not to cross any lines. *I will not* check the cameras hooked up to the security system at their place. That's going too far.

Attempting to distract myself, I lock my system, powering down what I can, and head to the gym on the first floor. Physical exertion should help me silence the madness clouding my mind.

But is it really madness if I'm losing her? Something tells me the end I always knew was coming has arrived.

You're always going to be alone.

Once she goes, I'll be vacant again. The Tin Man.

By the time I jump on the treadmill, she's sent a two-word reply. The last two words I want to hear.

SUGAR BEAR

I'm fine.

FUCK.

We all know what that means — she's anything but fine.

Usually, when this happens, I ask her to tell me what I did wrong. And she does. After I apologize, we move on with my lesson learned. We both know I'll fuck up again in the future, but rarely do I make the same mistake twice.

Yet today, she's stonewalling me.

Unfortunately, until I talk to her in person, I don't have a chance in hell of fixing it. Whatever *it* is. So many options for her to choose from.

I bet it was the Plan B. Why, though? Is it a religious thing? Did she think I was trying to force her? I wasn't.

Like always, I must have done a shit job communicating my intentions.

My father's voice rings clearer and more insistent than it has for months.

You're such a freak.

No one could love you, boy.

Even your mom left you.

I bat that last thought away because I know the truth. My mom did *not* leave me.

That was one of his lies.

He knew exactly what happened to her. Because he's the one who did it.

Unfortunately, the other things he said are harder to brush off. Especially when the proof of his words begins to pile up.

My feet pound out five miles in thirty-eight minutes before I power through strength training like I'm gunning for

personal bests.

When my father's voice starts overpowering the music in my earbuds, I hit the locker room for a cold shower. The shock of the freezing water on my overheated skin is enough to drown out his memory.

I barrel out of Redleg a few minutes later. The entire drive home, I attempt to talk myself out of checking up on Lettie.

But let's face it. I'm too much of a mess to resist.

I'm weak without her.

My gut is twisted in a hundred knots. Is this the feeling that Leo and Big Al get? Is that why it's called a gut instinct?

Back in the service, they always knew seconds before something was about to get FUBAR. That's exactly how I feel tonight.

Maybe it's not Lettie. Maybe something is wrong with Big Al or Leo.

As I turn down the street leading to my house, I have the voice assistant send individual texts to them both, just for a quick check-in.

By the time I pull into my driveway, they've both responded that everything is good.

So it's not them.

It's my Lettie. Something is wrong.

She's taking tonight to figure out how to end it with me. I know it.

I fucked up one too many times. The Plan B was the last straw.

When I walk in the front door, I drop my bag by the door and fire up my laptop with zero hesitation.

What's one more invasion of her privacy?

After verifying her vehicle and the GPS tags I put on various personal items are still at her residence, I'm left with

two options. Check the Redleg home security cameras I installed or access her cell. That latter feels more invasive.

Before crossing that fucking line I've resisted for months, I check my phone one last time, longing to see a message from her that'll yank me away from the ledge.

Nothing.

I lurch to my feet and pace the living room while a war wages inside my mind.

My eyes linger on the couch. The same couch where we were so desperate for each other we forgot to put on a condom. The same couch where she sat the night before while I knelt at her feet, frantic to show her how important she is to me.

And I know I've already lost her.

Taking a seat, I log into the Redleg system and pull up the cameras in the living room and foyer of Freya's place.

No Lettie. No Freya.

Where the fuck are they?

My neck stiffens, muscles straining and sending tension throughout my shoulders. The hairs on my forearms stand on end.

I fucking *knew* something was wrong.

I'm all in now. Finding her is a physical need.

After a half dozen clicks, I've tracked Lettie's phone to a restaurant on the other side of town.

My mouth feels like it's been filled with cotton. I chug a whole bottle of water while accessing the microphone and camera on her phone.

By the time the audio and visual come through my laptop, I've chewed my thumbnail down to the nub.

I can't see anything through the camera lens besides a dark haze. It's probably in her purse.

The sounds of talking and laughing are muffled, making them hard to distinguish. Female voices, I think. I plug in my

headphones and crank the volume. Yeah, those are females.

A dusting of relief coats the inside of my chest, although it's too thin to be of any comfort.

With the phone buried in her bag, I only pick out a few phrases here and there. Not sure who is talking. Hell, I can't even be sure Lettie is one of the voices.

Frustration begins to overtake the turmoil and dread coursing through my veins. But then Lettie's angelic voice and enchanting laugh sails through the speakers, firing into my heart with the precision of a sharpshooter.

An audible sigh escapes me as I flop deeper into the couch.

No clue how or why I convinced myself she was in danger. And if she were about to break up with me, would she be out laughing with her friends?

Yet that feeling in my gut remains.

Unable to resist, I send her a text.

If anything, she'll grab the phone, then I'll get a glimpse of her beautiful face.

ME

I'm done for the day. The workload is finally under control. I can probably get away with working only a half day tomorrow. Want to go to the beach? I can hit up Entenmann's and get you some of that potato salad you love so much. And all the sweet tea you can drink.

AFTER HITTING SEND, I start biting my other thumbnail as impatience prowls under my skin.

The audio registers the chime of the text I sent. Three seconds later, her phone jostles as she retrieves it from the bag.

And then I'm looking directly at her.

My breath hitches, and my shoulders sag.

Flawless makeup and hair as beautiful as ever.

Ironically, a halo of blue and purple neon light surrounds her, courtesy of the restaurant's lighting fixtures shining from behind. She looks like a radiant vision.

So much life in her. No way she'd be with the likes of you, boy.

Shut the fuck up, Dad.

With her first glance at the screen, her mouth quirks with her familiar grin. All too soon, her expression hardens into a blend of sadness and anger.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

No, sugar bear. Don't do this. Not yet.

I'm not ready to lose her. I can't. I need more time.

The phone lowers, twisting over rapidly before the screen goes dark again. A slamming sound that resembles plastic hitting wood resounds from the speaker.

Dammit to hell. She put it face down on the table.

My hands coil into rigid fists, fingernails piercing the insides of my palms.

Although I can't see anything through her camera, I retain audio. Maybe she'll give me an idea of what I did to fuck everything up.

Then I can fix it.

"Who was that?" a vaguely familiar female voice asks.

Not sure who that is, but it's not Lettie or Freya.

"Was that him?" That one sounds like Freya.

Lettie responds, "Yeah. He wants to see me tomorrow. Beach day."

Her voice is flat. Emotionless.

And I know that tone better than most, given it's my default setting.

But it's *never* hers.

“Are you gonna go?” the first woman asks with a taunting quality threaded into her tone.

“I don’t know. Not sure I’m ready to see him. I think I need a few days.”

My worst fears are officially confirmed. I wasn’t paranoid after all.

This is far worse.

She’s upset because of me. And likely considering breaking up with me over whatever I did. The condom? The Plan B? Befriending Mia? Did Lettie find out about my deceit? Just sick of me?

Freya’s the next to speak. “Take a few days. He’ll wait for you. I’m telling you, that man is gone for you. Just be honest with him.”

“I’m not responding now. Fuck it. This is our GNO. No male distractions.”

Told you that no one would ever love you, boy.

“If you decide you’re done with him, let me know.” I swear I know that fucking voice. “I’d love another shot with him. He can tie me up and do anything he wants to me. Mmm.”

“Come again now? I know you weren’t talkin’ about my man,” Lettie hisses. Her anger rings clear, despite the distorted audio.

Must be a sub from Bask. That’s got to be uncomfortable for my sweet girl.

Obviously, she knows I’ve been with other women. Oddly enough, she’s never asked who. I always assumed it didn’t matter.

Lettie’s response does leave my spine a little less stiff and chest lighter, though.

She called me her man. Not her *soon-to-be-ex* man.

Freya’s voice has an artificial cheeriness as she announces, “Help me wave down the waiter. We should hurry.

The club is gonna get busy soon, and I don't want to wait in line."

"Don't worry. I know the bouncer. He'll get us into VIP."

Whoever she is, she's got a cocky attitude.

It's killing me that I don't know where they're going. The only way I can track them is via Lettie's phone. None of the trackers in Lettie's purse or jewelry are with her for some reason, which is odd. And I never tagged or cloned Freya's cell.

The microphone doesn't detect much over the next few minutes, except for the muted voice of a server, who brings the bill and cashes them out.

Before they leave the restaurant, Lettie grabs her phone off the table. Before she slips it into her purse, I get the briefest glimpse of her dinner companions.

Isolating the image, I rewind and advance the clip, frame by frame.

"Shit," I grumble to myself.

Vanessa. The bratty rope bunny from the club.

She's made no attempt to conceal her desire to scene with me again.

That's out of the question.

Why the hell would she be out with Lettie and Freya?

CHAPTER 45

**RAISE YOUR HAND IF
YOU'VE EVER BEEN
PERSONALLY
VICTIMIZED BY REGINA
GEORGE**

LETTIE

This bitch. Must die.

She's determined to piss me off or make me cry. Or both.

And if that happens, the only remaining option is homicide. Right?

Unfortunately, she drove us here, dammit all to hell. It'd be much better if I drove so I could leave her on the side of the road. And as I peeled out, I'd run over her phone so the hooker couldn't call an Uber because I can be Petty Betty when I need to be.

After all, I was raised by the best.

When Freya said Vanessa was going to join us for girls' night out, I was excited. Although she's never been my *favorite* person, she's always seemed nice... enough.

Wrong.

So far, she spent half the night hinting about how well she knows my boyfriend's sexual proclivities. And don't get me started on the not-so-subtle reminder she gave me to let her

know when our *agreement* ran up so she can be prepared for his affections to return like they always do.

Pshaw. As if I'm under a contract with him that's about to run out.

Frustratingly, the bitch wasn't done.

She *really* put a hair in my biscuit when she asked me how I liked the quad pod at his house. Then she took immense pleasure in explaining what that was.

Turns out, the *quad pod* is the suspension rig for when he's rope-topping me. Or, as I so eloquently call it, the hook thing.

Naturally, I told her I loved it. That it's my favorite thing in the world. And I swing from it every night like I'm the love child of Tarzan and Simone Biles. For added flare, I told her how I dismount with a double back tuck, directly onto James's erect dick, sticking the landing, of course.

Bitch.

This whole damn night, she's implying I'm just a phase *and* rubbing my nose in the fact that she's been in his room. Two birds. One skanky bitch.

Err. I mean stone.

And from the way she's watching me, it's clear she thinks she's slicker than greased owl shit on a hoe handle — emphasis on the *ho*.

There's a reason I haven't asked James about his past partners.

Because I don't want to fucking know.

No good can come from that mess. Especially since I work at the place where he likely has had most of his *relations* and have to see these women *all the flipping time*.

Way back when, Stella warned me to avoid asking, pointing out that the kink community doesn't view past partners the same way the vanilla world does. From what I've seen, she's right.

Plus Papa always told me not to ask questions I didn't want the answers to. And I took that shit to heart.

I miss him.

Despite lying to me and allowing the church shit to happen, he was a good man. He loved me. Raised me the best he could.

While I sip on my water, my lip quirks around my straw when something Papa used to say to Mama comes to mind. In their end days, he found some colorful ways to cuss her out without her knowing. Like that ol' chestnut for cunt — *See you next Tuesday*. Or how he'd say fuck by saying, "*If you see Kay, tell her hi.*"

Sound it out if you need to — *If you see kay*.

I'll have to try out a few of those on Vanessa if she keeps this shit up. I already told her *thanks for sharing* three times tonight. Bless her heart, she doesn't know that means to hush up.

I might have to dust off the *I'll pray for you* Southern blessing before the night is done. In other words, only the Lord can help you, honey.

Speaking of the witch, here she comes, sauntering over from the bar with a beer. She tips her chin at my bag and hollers over the music. "Is that a new purse?"

"No. Freya lent it to me. I didn't have one to match this dress."

"What?" she squawks, leaning closer.

"It's Freya's. The purse. Fre-ya's," I yell, overenunciating each syllable.

Talking in a dance club is dumb.

In fact, dance clubs are dumb.

This bitch is dumb.

I hate everything about this night. I should have just talked to James about what was bothering me instead of going out.

He'd have apologized and spent the rest of the night between my thighs.

Maybe I should leave soon. I wonder if he'll come pick me up. I'm sick of this thundercunt anyhow.

But then again... there was a sign on the door saying they were having a singing contest at midnight, and I already registered. The prize is a thousand bucks. If I *am* pregnant, that money could come in handy.

Vanessa shimmies her shoulders to the music, her eyes trailing up and down my body with her nose scrunched. "That's a cute dress."

My cheeks pinch with my fake smile.

"Doesn't she look gorgeous tonight? Her shoes are new too." Freya points at my heels, which aren't new; they're borrowed from her. Clearly, my friend doesn't want to give Vanessa more ammo to use against me.

She purses her lips, her face doing nothing to hide her disdain. "Beautiful. Exactly like a Barbie doll." She adds a fake grin that's more of a nose twitch than a smile. "No wonder James is so smitten with her." Right as the music quiets for a song change, she adds, "For now."

She's either gonna apologize or wear my drink.

And homicide is still an option.

"What's that now? You got somethin' you wanna say about my man? Either spit it out or keep his name out yer mouth." I'm too ticked to try suppressing my twang.

She attempts to pass for confused, her ugly face contorted.

Guess I have to draw her a map. "You keep bringin' him up, so you must have somethin' you want to get off yer chest. Say it to my face and quit beatin' around the bush."

Looking affronted, she steps back and puts her palm to her chest. "What do you mean? I thought we'd just talk about our common ground. You know? Since we've both played with him. What's the big deal?"

“That’s the thing. He’s not a game to me.”

Vanessa looks at Freya with her mouth agape and a barely restrained laugh rattling in her chest. “Is she for real, Freya? I knew she was inexperienced, but come on. This is hilarious.”

Freya stands dumbstruck, shock written on her as plain as day. Like me, she probably can’t believe this is happening.

I step in front of her, leaving Vanessa no choice but to look at me. “Do we need to have a Come to Jesus Meetin’, you and me?”

She juts her chin and arches an over-plucked brow. “When I said *playing*, I didn’t mean like a game. If you had any idea about the lifestyle, you’d know that’s what we call partnering or doing a scene. Or do you not know what that means either? Should I explain that to you and your simpleton vanilla mind?”

My drink suddenly feels damn heavy in my hand. I might need to toss it at her face to lighten my load.

“Vanessa, I don’t give a damn what it’s called, and I sure as hell don’t give a fanciful feathered flyin’ fuck if you know more about the *lifestyle* than I do. I won’t tolerate being shamed by you about something that’s nunya business.”

She steps closer, bowing her chest like she has a right to be offended. “Face it, blondie. You can’t possibly give him what he needs. You’re only interesting to him because you’re new and shiny. So you can sing? Big damn deal. He’ll be back on top of me soon enough. He always is. You’re just a phase. Better enjoy him while it lasts.”

I don’t back down, getting right up in her craw. “If I had a dick, this is when I’d tell you to suck it.”

Her stupid jaw drops, and her beady eyes bulge.

But I’m not done. “Now listen up, ‘cause I’m only sayin’ it once. *Stop tryin’ to get under my skin*. That dog won’t hunt. Face the facts, Regina George. Regardless of your past with him, that man is mine now. And I *will* fight for him. I give him everything he needs and more. I am *not* a phase or a simple fuck. That would be what you were. Any questions?”

Freya tugs at my arm, pulling me back. I shake free of her grasp and flay Vanessa with my bitchiest bitch face.

I'll be damned if I'm ever going to feel shame about my sexuality again.

Not by my mama.

Not by the church.

Not by myself.

And damn sure not by this jealous, bitter skank.

“Are we done now? Ya good?” I ask, my rib cage heaving with rage, and my fist choking my water bottle like it has an asphyxiation kink — and yes, I know what that means despite what this bitch may believe.

Vanessa eyes me down long enough that I can count the hairs on her upper lip. Finally, she plasters on a fake smile, softens her shoulders, and takes a step back. Then another.

“All good. Just a misunderstanding. I'm sorry for talking about him like that. I'm sure you two will be very happy.”

She doesn't mean it. Her hairy upper lip is curled with blatant disdain, and her eyes can't hide the hate in her black soul.

But I don't care if she believes it.

Because *I* believe it.

I dismiss her with a curt nod and my own fake smile, adding, “There we are then.” That was Papa's secret code for calling Mama a twat — *There We Are Then*.

Freya stands between us, looking confused as I do when I'm trying to decide whether it's effect or affect.

Needing a moment to calm down, I announce, “I'm going to use the restroom now. If you'll excuse me.”

For some reason, I tip my head like a Southern gentleman and prepare to exit stage right while my water is still in my hand instead of running down her face.

“Me too. My bladder is about to burst,” Freya tosses, grabbing my hand to stop me from making a dramatic exit à la Scarlett O’Hara. “Vanessa, can you get me another cosmo? Get yourself another beer and a shot. It’s on me. In fact, get us three shots. Here’s my card.”

Freya flings her credit card at Vanessa and begins weaving through the crowd toward the bathroom, dragging me behind her.

When we get there, it’s just as you’d imagine. There’s a crap load of girls waiting for the three precious stalls, as per dance club tradition.

Although we didn’t have clubs like this back home, Stella and I made a few trips to Tallahassee to experience nightlife a time or two after we turned twenty-one. Sowing our wild oats, minus the sowing. At least it wasn’t sexual oats — just learning to drink and dance after being denied *fun* for years.

I cross my arms and park myself in the potty line. Smoke still fumes from my ears.

Freya promptly pulls me out of line, dragging me to the corner of the restroom. Reluctantly, I comply while wearing a pout that would make Keira Knightly proud.

Attempting to get my attention, Freya lowers her face a few inches from mine. Unfortunately for her, I’m distracted by an oddly-dressed lady singing and dancing in front of the sinks.

She’s wearing a tuxedo shirt with a black bow tie, cummerbund, and tiny black hot pants. In a lovely soprano, she sings about everyone needing to pee faster to move the line along.

Freya recaptures my focus. “Lettie girl, I’m so sorry about Vanessa.” Her tone is apologetic and genuine. “Believe me, I had *nooo* idea she was such a cuntface. Hell, I didn’t even know she was into James. I mean, I knew they scened before, but I had no idea she was a psycho.”

“She’s obsessed with him.” I shake out my shoulders and twist the ends of my hair around my index finger. “That

woman is friggin' lucky I didn't cloud up and rain all over her. Why did you invite her?"

Freya nibbles her lower lip, her eyes flitting to the ceiling. "The last few weeks, she's been constantly suggesting the three of us go dancing. But what I don't get is this. If she's that hostile toward you, then why on earth was she so insistent we all hang out?"

"Maybe to fuck with me? Get in my head? Mess with our relationship? I don't know how crazy people think. Too bad she drove, or else I'd slash her tires. I can bring out my inner trailer trash pretty damn fast in a pinch."

Shaking her head and fighting a smile, Freya wraps her arms around herself. "Honey, I feel like shit. This was supposed to be a fun night to cheer you up. I was just trying to prevent the guilt trip she'd have given me if she heard we went dancing without her after. I never would have invited her if I knew she would start shit with you. Can you forgive me?"

"Of course I can. How could you have known? She's never said anything about him to you, right?"

"Not once. I would have shut that shit down immediately. No one messes with my girl."

I attempt to smile at that, but I'm still spitting mad. "Nothing says GNO like half the group ending up in the bathroom bitching about the other half."

"Sad facts." She glances over her shoulder. "Before we get back in line, let me say this. Don't you dare let the things she was saying get to you. She was wrong for poking at you like that. And damn wrong about what she said. *It's not true*. You are plenty enough for him. More than enough. Any man would be lucky to have you, especially him. I've never seen him this happy before." Pausing, she darts her eyes from side to side and pinches her mouth to the corner. "Like ever. Come to think of it, I've never seen him happy at all. Or sad. Wasn't sure he had emotions. Honestly, he was kind of a robotic sex machine until you."

I narrow my eyes at her and put my hands on my hips, but there's only a hint of anger. "Don't talk about him like that."

She flaps her hands in a *what-did-I-do* gesture. "I'm kidding. Mostly. But I love how you defend him."

I know she's playing about James. And to be fair, he was somewhat mechanical when we first met. Most of the time, I had no idea if he liked me, hated me, wanted to fuck me, or was about to kill me.

She holds her arms open for a hug, which I greedily accept.

When I pull out of her embrace, I wipe the few tears that escaped and nod in agreement. "I meant what I said. I will fight for him."

She winks suggestively and purrs, "Good girl."

"Oh nice! Praise kink mode activated. Testing out your Domme side? I approve."

We hug once more, some of the lightness returning. Once I'm back in the line for the restroom, I study the tuxedo woman at the sink. What a fascinating human.

Still singing her tinkle song, she squirts liquid soap onto the hands of the ladies that approach the sink, then hands them paper towels when they're done washing. She's even turning the faucets on and off for them.

This woman is high on life and happy as a pig in shit to be hanging out in a nightclub bathroom like it's her job to help people make pee-pee.

As I get closer to the front of the line, I wonder if it *is* her job. Between the sink basins, she has a tip bowl beside an array of perfumes, hair spray, mints, and mouthwash.

Is she a bathroom attendant? Is that a thing in Clearwater? We didn't have those in Climax. And I never saw it in Tallahassee, either.

As a silver lining to this ADHD gold mine, I'm no longer fuming about the bitch we left at the bar.

After waiting my turn, I use the facilities and approach the tuxedo lady. She's as sweet as can be to me, and I'm beaming back at her by the time I've washed up. I throw a few bucks in her tip jar. She rewards me with a wink and a twerk. That's a nice touch.

While I wait for Freya to finish, I linger in the corner of the restroom. Three girls are lined up in front of the mirror, taking selfie after selfie.

Ugh. Not my vibe. If it were me, I'd get the tuxedo twerking songbird in the picture. That's a missed opportunity.

Once Freya is done, we head out to find Vanessa. I'm determined not to let her ruin our GNO. If she wants to keep being nasty, I'm gonna do my own thing. She can leave without me.

In fact, I like that idea.

I'll get a rideshare to James's place to surprise him. He said he was done working, so he's probably doing whatever he does when he's at home alone. Practicing his rope skills on a sex doll? Playing video games? Reading the Tax Code?

I want to see him.

I need to apologize for my overreaction last night and for giving him the cold shoulder.

He said he mostly pulled out. It's unlikely I'm pregnant. I just did the Lettie thing and freaked out before processing my feelings.

And when I get there, I'll have a thousand bucks in my back pocket. I could use it to pay him back for the bedroom set and shit he bought me. Clean the slate.

Yeah, this contest is gonna give me what I need to get over that shit.

And I know exactly what song I'll sing.

I'll be thinking of him the entire time.

Because I'm his sugar bear.

GENERAL DRUNK MESS

LETTIE

“**T** here she is,” Freya yells over the din, pointing toward the long bar near the VIP section entrance.

“I don’t see her,” I holler.

Freya faces me, smiling bright as daylight. “She’s behind the wall of dicks.”

I canvas the room, locking my sights on a row of inflatable penises near the bar. The phalli are dancing and bobbing to the music.

Now that I’m closer, allow me to amend that statement. It’s a group of women *wearing* inflatable penis headpieces. Must be a bachelorette party.

After wading through the throngs, we find Vanessa.

Sadly.

She’s hanging on the arm of an attractive man with dark hair and even darker eyes. A shorter, less attractive man stands on her other side.

“Freya!” Vanessa flings herself off the barstool at Freya for a hug. Thankfully, my roomie has catlike reflexes and catches her under the arms.

“Whoa, horsey!” Freya groans but hugs her back.

Vanessa squeals in drunk girl fashion. “Where were you? I missed you. You’re so cute.” She pats Freya’s cheeks with her splayed palms.

Vanessa was clearly hitting the sauce while we were in the bathroom. She’s much happier. Almost no trace of the bitchy cunt face she revealed earlier. Perhaps she should do humanity a favor and drink more often.

The handsome man she was hanging on takes us in, his eyes widening. “Aw, lovely ladies. So beautiful. Join us in VIP. We wait for you.” His accent is strange. European perhaps?

“This one is Freya.” Vanessa beams, waving an open palm toward my roommate before flouncing it at me. “And this one here... *she’s* my other friend. Isn’t she gorgeous? Her name is Lettie.”

Oddly enough, that didn’t sound all that catty. Perhaps the secret to a better Vanessa is in the *sauce*.

Get it? The secret’s in the sauce. Like booze.

The men let their assessing eyes sweep down my body. A chill shivers up my spine, instantly dissolving my internal levity. The way the shorter one appraises me is eerily reminiscent of when Mama would study me before I left the house. Always looking for a flaw to chastise me over.

Make sure you keep the top button on your blouse closed. Wouldn’t want to give anyone a free show, now would we?

Where did you get that V-neck? Do you really want to have an arrow pointing down the front of your body?

That top accentuates your breasts too much, darling. You don’t want to be a stumbling block to the young men, now do you?

That last one might have been one of the worst. As if to say that men can't be held responsible for their urges. It's all on us females to protect them *and* ourselves by what we wear.

Give me a fucking break.

After being introduced, I nod and smile. Just a tiny grin that won't give them the wrong idea, but also won't make them angry. That's my default smile when I'm around male strangers. I've learned over time that it's the safest approach to avoid trouble.

We let them usher us behind the velvet rope into the VIP section and take seats at the end of the bar. It's far less crowded than the other bar.

The taller guy smiles at me, leaning closer. "Please. We buy drinks. Our treat." He gestures to his friend, who tips his chin at me and winks.

Okaaay. The shorter one is a *little* creepy.

"Nothing for me," Freya answers. "One of us needs to stay sober enough to drive." She clicks her tongue at Vanessa, who's ordering shots. To me, Freya adds, "Go ahead and have a drink if you want, Lettie. I'll be the DD." She leans closer and whispers into my ear, "Don't worry. A little won't hurt anything this soon."

Not something I'm gonna risk. Freya gets a bottle of water, and I ask for an iced tea.

Once we all have drinks, Vanessa raises hers for a toast. "To a night out with the girls. Sorry, I was a cunt earlier. *Salute!*"

Despite her earlier behavior, I appreciate anyone who can call themselves the *C* word, so I laugh along with her and Freya.

I take a swig of my tea, then promptly spit it back into the glass. "Mother of pearl! What is this mess?" Facing Freya, I stick my tongue out and gag, drawing a boisterous giggle from her.

She looks at the guy who bought the drinks. “Did you order sweet tea?”

“No. She ask for tea, yes?”

Freya glances back at me and narrows her eyes. “You have to specify *sweet* tea, Lettie. We’ve been over this. Florida isn’t really in the south. They probably don’t have sweet tea here, anyhow. I’m surprised they had regular tea.”

“What you like instead?” the man asks, looking concerned. He seems like a nice enough guy.

“I’ll take a diet soda.”

He grabs the dishwater they’re trying to pass off as tea and hands it back to the bartender, quickly replacing it with something drinkable.

My first sip of the soda is tentative. Thankfully, it tastes normal.

Freya and I sing along with the music while sipping our non-alcoholic beverages. The guys hover, but Vanessa keeps talking to them. She’s giving them enough attention to make them stick around. I wish she wouldn’t. This is supposed to be girl time. Not that I want to talk to her anyhow.

I exchange looks with Freya, both of us silently communicating our discomfort. She eventually has enough and interrupts Vanessa and the men, reaching between them and pulling her away from them. “Coming on a little strong here, guys. We need our friend back. You’ve had her long enough. Why don’t you take a walk, huh?”

Both men seem taken aback with her tone. The taller one holds his palms out and lowers his chin, clearly embarrassed by getting called out. “Ladies, I wish you will have lovely night. Night as lovely as you. Good luck singing, Lettie. We root for you.”

He smiles warmly before moseying off. Maybe it’s a Russian accent.

We didn’t have any Russians back home in Climax. But he sounds like the guy in a movie I watched recently. I think he

was Russian. Or Ukrainian?

The other man follows. At least they took the hint without calling us unsavory names. Maybe they aren't so creepy. Wherever they're from, they must have learned to have manners toward ladies.

The DJ makes an announcement when the music dies out. "Last call to sign up for the singing contest. Someone is going home tonight a thousand bucks richer."

A trill of excitement zaps over at me when I check my watch. Less than an hour now.

A good song starts, and we take to the dance floor. We laugh and sing along, shaking our asses and finally having the night I wanted. But it's still lacking, and I'm antsy to see James.

When we get back to the bar, Vanessa sits between Freya and me. She finishes the drink that one of the guys from earlier bought her while we were dancing. He said it was his apology. They tried to give one to Freya and me too, but it was booze, so we passed.

Must have been a strong apology, judging by how drunk Vanessa is getting.

Drunk? Scratch that. Not just drunk, but three-quarters to shitfaced. Here's to hoping she's less annoying when she's hammered. Drunk people are always way less annoying — said no one ever.

Five minutes later, I'm here with breaking news: Drunk Vanessa is not less annoying. She's worse. Far worse.

She reeks of booze and bitch, the latter being 150 proof. Leaning close, she cups her hand around her lips and puts it to my ear. "Did James do-do a one leg sssuspension on... on you yet? It's the perfect height for him to lick your —"

Cutting her off, I bang my fist on the bar. "Finish that sentence, and imma snatch ya bald."

She flinches, jerking backward and nearly tumbling onto Freya to get away from me.

Miraculously, Vanessa lands on shaky legs instead of her face and then bolts straight up, throwing her arms over her head. “And she’s okay!” she yells before busting out in laughter.

I’d sure love to send her home to be with the Lord right about now. But murder is wrong and all. And I’m aiming for good karma.

“Okay, I think this has been enough fun for one night.” Freya tips her chin at Vanessa, who is stumbling, humming, and being a general drunk mess behind us.

General Drunk Mess, reporting for duty, my conscience jokes.

“Keep an eye on her for a sec,” Freya suggests. “I need to get the keys out of her purse.”

Rolling my eyes, I spin the barstool around to look after our drunkard. Freya grabs Vanessa’s purse off the floor and goes spelunking.

Once she has the car keys, she meets my eyes. “We need to get her out of here soon, or we’ll be dragging her to the parking lot.”

“*Oooh* I think I’m gonna be sick,” Vanessa announces as she crawls back onto her stool and flops her forehead onto the bar top.

Freya sits, mashing her lips into a white slash as she evaluates the situation.

“Glad we didn’t bring my car. She’s gonna puke for sure,” I joke, looking at my non-existent watch. “I’d wager she’ll be ralphing in three, two, one.” I look pointedly at Vanessa, waiting for her to start heaving up her million drinks.

After rolling her eyes, Freya’s entire face rumples with disgust.

One of my favorite songs starts playing, and I can’t hold back my loudest laugh at the title. A dance mix of “Karma” by Taylor Swift blares from the speakers.

Heavens to Betsy. The irony!

Smacking the bar, I bray an overzealous guffaw. The bartender glances at me and tips his chin in my direction. I squelch my glee on reflex.

I dare say that Vanessa is getting her karma right now, and it'll continue tomorrow with a hangover from hell. That's friggin' beautiful.

The bartender, who thought my bar top banging of hilarity was a request for service, appears a few seconds later. "For you, my dear." He winks and slides another diet coke at me. "On the house."

The perks of the VIP section. *Oo la la, we fancy.*

"Let's go," Freya says, jingling the keys at me and helping Vanessa off the stool.

"But the contest," I object, my lip already rolling outward.

Freya's adorable nose wrinkles. She glances from Vanessa to the stage where they're already setting up for the contest. When she meets my eyes again, the conflict on her face is as plain as the hair on Vanessa's lip.

In true Lettie Holt fashion, I make a rash impulsive decision. "You take her home. I'm going to stay for the contest. I'll call James to pick me up. If he's busy, I'll order an Uber."

Freya casts a sharp glare at me, brows raised and pout severe. "I can't leave you."

"I'll text James right now to come up here with me. I can't leave without singing. I need that money. Especially if... you know." I tighten my lips and intensify my glare, letting my eyes dip toward my belly and back again.

She nibbles on the inside of her cheek, debating. "Honey, I don't feel right about this. Maybe I should just throw her in the car."

Flopping around like a rag doll, Vanessa moans into the side of Freya's neck, then belches. "Uhhh. Fuck. I want to go home. It's so spinning her. I mean here." Another heaving breath of near-vomit erupts from her mouth.

I arch my head away from her to avoid getting caught in the splash zone. “I don’t want to be puked on tonight. Smelling of vomit is not a good look when you’re trying to win a thousand bucks.”

Vanessa wraps herself fully around Freya, struggling to remain upright.

I grin diabolically. “Bye, Freya. You better get her out of here before she pulls you down to the floor with her. She looks heavy.”

Freya snarks, “Let the record show that I hate this.”

Raising my shoulders, I give her a toothy grin. “Well, you brought her. Not me.”

“Low blow,” she quips, faking offense.

“I’ll be fine, Freya. Get her out of here. I’m not going home tonight, anyhow. In fact, I won’t be there tomorrow either. James and I have some *talking* to do.” I make my brows dance, hoping she gets the innuendo. “Consider me busy for the entire weekend. See you Sunday night or Monday. Take her home before she falls out. I’ll message James right away.”

She tips her chin at me, jostling Vanessa in her arms. “How much battery do you have on your phone?”

I pull it out of the clutch bag I borrowed from her. “Sixty percent. I’m good. Buh-bye now.” I flit my hands at her in a shooing gesture.

A fissure of guilt threatens to rip my contentment. I *should* help Freya with the drunk bitch.

But said bitch was mean to me. More than once. And I’m done letting guilt rule my life. Freya can manage just fine if she leaves soon.

Besides, Vanessa’s safer without me since I still haven’t decided yet whether I’ll choke her with my borrowed purse strap.

Kidding.

But the truth is... Vanessa is *not* my friend. She is *not* my problem.

I'm at peace with this decision.

After the last few days, I feel I'm entitled to choose myself.

Freya huffs at me. "Fine."

"What's happ..." Vanessa's words trail off, her brows furrow. "We're going? I want to dance. Letsie's gonna to sing —" She cuts herself off with a hiccup.

Freya narrows her eyes at me, hefting Vanessa a step away. "Lettie, be careful. Text me when you leave with James so I know you're safe. Call him right now."

Call him? Ha. Hilarious.

I wave my phone at her. "I'll be safe. I'm texting him now."

"Love you."

We air-kiss, and off they go.

I watch them get to the door, ensuring she's able to make it without assistance.

Vanessa staggers, but she doesn't go down. Her gait is eerily reminiscent of Stella's when she had too much of Miss Paula's watermelon moonshine. To be fair, *too much* is anything more than one glass.

Phone still in hand, I stare at the screen, looking over my recent text exchanges with James and debating how to respond.

ME

You up?

DOMINANT JAMES

Yes, sugar bear. Are you okay?

ME

Yep. Just doing some thinking.

DOMINANT JAMES

About what? Should I be worried?

SOMEONE TAKES the vacated stool beside me as I ponder how to start.

One thing I've learned about him is that I have to explain my feelings logically and orderly; otherwise, he doesn't fully get why I'm upset. Because his emotions don't work the same way mine do.

I'm inclined to walk him through my swirling emotions. If I tell him how it all unfolded in my heart and mind, he'll be ready to talk about it when I see him. And he'll understand where I'm coming from better.

Yeah. That's a good plan. It won't be a knee-jerk reaction for once.

I'll text out a little recap and tell him I want him to come see me sing, then we can discuss it face-to-face. All things in order, the way he likes it.

"Your friend is she come back?" the man next to me asks.

I glance to my left, seeing it's the taller, more attractive Russian dude. "I don't think so." I refocus on my phone.

ME

I need to be honest with you. We should talk. It wasn't a great day.

AFTER I HIT SEND, the dude leans closer to shout over the music. "Want to dance?"

"No, thank you." I shift my body away ever so slightly. But the creepier guy is on the opposite side, so I face the front. After throwing back a gulp of my soda, I set my drink down and return my attention to my phone.

Deep breath. Here I go.

DOMINANT JAMES

I'm here whenever you want to talk, sugar.

ME

Gonna start in text because it's easier for me. I need to get this all out.

DOMINANT JAMES

Okay, baby. Whatever you want.

ME

So you know I was upset about the condom thing. I feel horrible about it. I shouldn't have been so reckless and put us in this position.

DOMINANT JAMES

That was on me. I thought we talked about that already.

FEELING nervous over what I'm about to type out, I chug the rest of my soda in three long pulls of my straw as my thoughts shuffle into order. Exhaling forcibly, I type it out as fast as I can.

ME

Yeah, but you know how I think. Of course I'm gonna end up blaming myself. Then the damn Plan B made it worse. I was still dealing with ending up like my birth mother and disappointing Mama. Then bam! You showed up with that, and I freaked out.

DOMINANT JAMES

I shouldn't have bought it without asking you first. I wasn't thinking about your religious baggage and how that might trigger you. I was just trying to solve a problem.

ME

That's the thing. Why do you think of it as a problem? Do you not think I'd be a good mother? Is the idea of having a baby with me that horrible to you?

DOMINANT JAMES



ME

Hang on. Not done!!! All day, I was a wreck. Mad at myself for feeling shame. Mad at my mama for everything. Mad at my self-doubt for making me feel lacking. Mad at you for not loving me the way I love you. Mad at everything.

ME

But mostly I was scared. I was sooo scared.

DOMINANT JAMES

I have so much I need to say to you. Can I call you?
See you?

ME

Soon. Lemme get this all out. Give me a freaking minute. K? I need to tell you why I'm pissed at you 1st. So far I only told you my problems. But I'm mad at u. You need to know why before I C U again. Or I was mad. I'm not sure now. Just give me a minute to think.

ME

Dont rush me

DOMINANT JAMES

Okay, sugar bear. Take your time. I'm not going anywhere.

THE CREEPY GUY tries to talk to me, but I turn away from him. Much more pointedly this time.

Why won't he just leave me the fuck alone so I can tell my boyfriend why I was mad at him and then tell him why I'm not anymore? Is it an unwritten rule of the universe that a woman alone at a bar must be in want of a creepy guy to hound her?

Fuck that rule. And fuck this guy.

Irritated, I attempt to take another drink, disappointed to find it empty. I remove the straw, toss back the ice, and chomp away. Something tastes off with it, so I spit it back into the cup, feeling drops dribble along my chin. I think they need to clean their ice machine.

I shove the cup away, but it spills across the bar. "Oh my galosh. Klutzamity Lettie ssstrikes again. Whoops."

Damn. I'm slurring.

Was there booze in that soda?

"I got it. No problem." The nicer of the two grabs some napkins to dab up my spill.

"Thhanksss," I slur, then get back to this message with a quick shake of my head to clear the fog. The room spins.

The nicer guy says something. I don't know what it is, but I laugh.

He laughs. I laugh. He must be funny.

The creepy guy seems funny too. He's laughing with us.

The music is loud, and my head swishes around. The creepy, short one has a weird smell to him. A cheap cologne, maybe. I don't like it. But he makes me laugh.

Somehow.

Back to the message. Squinting to see better, I close one eye and hold up my phone closer to my face. Oh. Too close.

I push it out a few inches. Ahh. Perfect.

There's a message from Freya.

FREYA

Don't forget to text me when you get to James's place safely. Good luck with the contest! Love you. xo

Aw. She's sweet. Back to James.

ME

I was talking to Freya about it. She told me u love me. And to prove it she told me what u did. Thats why im mad.

ME

The bedrom set

ME

Sheets

ME

VR headst

ME

the deposit. everything.

ME

U know I dont want to be chaitrity. So Im pissed for that.

ME

Thats why i need time 2 think.

MY EYELIDS ARE HEAVY. And my throat feels funny. A heavy weight presses on my chest. But I need to get this out. So I can tell him to come get me.

I type the last message.

ME

I had time 2 think. i 4give u come get me. at bar i love u. ill fight vanesa for u. love u.

BUT I NEVER HIT SEND.

My eyes close instead. So tired.

The phone slips from my hand. No, it's taken. Or maybe I put it into someone else's hand. Scratchy hand. Calluses. I don't like his smell.

Everything goes dark.

CREEPING AT THE STUMBLING SEA TURTLE

TOMER

The last few messages came through so fast I didn't have time to get my laptop or tablet to re-access her phone before she turned it off.

But that's for the best. I already feel like shit for violating her privacy earlier while she was at dinner with the girls.

Still... I wish I could have looked at her as she typed out those messages.

I deserve to witness the pain on her face and the tears in her eyes.

It's my fault she's hurting. My fault she's crying in a bar.

Even if I didn't see her, I know she was. The tears made it hard to type.

She must have turned off her phone after sending that last text so I couldn't call her. And she probably didn't want to see my text replies either.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

After pacing my living room, I collapse back on the couch and spear my hands through my hair, pulling at the roots while my father's grating voice slices nonstop across my mind.

You really did it this time, boy.

No one can stand you.

You fuck up everything you touch.

My foot taps, and my knee jumps around so much that I have to hold it steady with my hand.

Breathing in and out, I read and reread the messages again. Her points were perfectly clear despite the broken grammar and text-speak toward the end when she obviously became more upset.

She thinks I see her as a charity project.

She thinks I wouldn't want to have a baby with her.

She thinks I don't love her.

Wrong on all three counts.

And if her believing all those lies isn't bad enough, she doesn't want to see me. She needs time to think.

More than likely, she'll be thinking about how to break up with me.

For a year, I've been on borrowed time with her. My only hope was that she'd love me enough to forgive me when I told her the truth about her father and how I found her.

I knew she'd be mad, but I thought there was a chance she'd find it in her heart to forgive me eventually. After all, she knows the real me, even if my name isn't James fucking Harris.

But if she can't forgive me for the stupid morning after pills and the damn bedroom set, then how the fuck will she forgive me for the rest?

"Fuck!" I yell to my empty living room, my fist drilling into the couch cushion beside me.

How do I fix this?

Can I?

It's hard to think with all these unfamiliar emotions rioting inside me — remorse, desperation, longing, and gut-wrenching sadness.

After another set of cleansing breaths, I grab my keys. I'm going to that damn bar to see her. No fucking clue what I'll say to her. But one thing is for damn sure, there's nothing I can do to fix it while sitting on my couch berating myself.

The last time she pushed me away — back when she lived at the damn hotel — I stayed away for a fucking month. And it nearly killed me.

She wanted me to fight for her. So a fight is what she's going to get.

Earlier, I tracked her phone to the Stumbling Sea Turtle dance club after they left dinner before I forced myself to stop stalking her. I'm glad I did, though. That's my destination.

I throw on my shoes and head out. I don't even bother to turn off my GPS beacon once I'm in my car. No one at Redleg cares where I go. Not sure why I ever adjust it.

No one cares about you.

Why would anyone care? All I've ever been good at is my job, whether in the military intelligence unit or at Redleg. The only things that have ever made sense to me are machines. Who could ever care about — let alone love — a man who can't process anything other than binary?

I was fooling myself with Lettie for far too long.

But I won't be able to live with myself if I don't fight for her.

By the time I arrive at the club, it's well after midnight. Three guys walk past my car, dressed impeccably. I glance down at my jeans and basic T-shirt.

I don't belong in a place like this.

Oh fucking well.

Lettie's in there. Where she goes, I'll follow.

Once I pass the bouncer, pay the cover, and enter, I'm assaulted with violently loud music. Heavy colognes and perfumes add to my brewing nausea. The thumping of the loud bass settles in the back of my throat with each beat, making it feel like it's squeezing my windpipe.

Fucking hate clubs. How can anyone have a single coherent thought in a place like this?

My gaze sweeps from side to side, searching the room for her, but it's packed. This might take a while.

The first thing to catch my attention is a large group of women wearing inflatable penises on their heads. Let's label that as reason fifteen why clubs are hell on earth.

On my first lap around the main room, I come up empty. No Lettie, Freya, or Vanessa.

During my second lap, I discover they're having a singing contest tonight, which gives me hope that I'll find her when it's her turn. There's no chance she'll miss out on that.

But by the time I hit lap three with no results, I'm a bristling ball of agitation.

After working down a small hallway in the rear, I encounter a long line of women waiting to enter the restroom. Perhaps she's in there with Freya and Vanessa. Might have taken a while to get through the line.

Teeming with restlessness and my toes tapping inside my shoes, I wait by the door for a while. My hands curl into fists, then stretch out repeatedly.

A woman around Lettie's age smiles at me before looking at her phone. Maybe she's seen her.

I approach her tentatively, shouting to overpower the music. "Excuse me. I'm looking for someone." I give her a description of Lettie and how her hair looked from what I recall of the peek of her I got earlier.

She shakes her head. "Sorry. I haven't seen her. We just got here."

"Thanks anyway."

Deciding to go with this approach, I flip through my phone to pull up a photo of her and show it to the women in the line.

No one recognizes her except one woman. “I saw her at the VIP bar with her friends about an hour ago. One of them was so drunk.”

“Was she the drunk one?” I ask.

“No. I don’t think so. It was the brunette. Long hair.”

Vanessa.

I toss my thumb over my shoulder toward the bathroom door. “Can you check inside to see if she’s in there?”

“Sure.”

A few moments later, she enters the bathroom. I lean against the wall, impatience brewing like a storm.

Standing around isn’t my style. I need to *do* something.

An idea strikes, so I fire off a text to Dante and Jesse from Bask, asking if they know what kind of car Vanessa drives. Then I realize how weird and random that kind of question is, so I add a note that she’s out with Lettie tonight, and I can’t find them.

That probably doesn’t help with the weirdness factor. But oh well. I’m beyond having the ability to be tactful or tone down my creepiness right now.

I’m slipping my phone into my back pocket when a woman exits the bathroom dressed in a tuxedo top and short black shorts. Odd.

“You the one looking for the pretty blond?” she asks me.

“Yes. Have you seen her?” I take out my phone and pull up Lettie’s picture again. “This is her. I can’t find her.”

“Yeah, she was in a while ago. Maybe an hour. She was upset. Are you the reason why?”

My lips press into a tight line, and I nod reluctantly. “That’s why I’m trying to find her. I need to apologize.”

She pats me on one shoulder, leans close, and shouts, “She had her friend with her, so she was in good hands. If she’s mad at you, my advice is to give her some time. Text her that you’re thinking of her and want to talk. Give her a day or two to come around. No good ever came out of trying to reason with an upset drunk woman.”

“She was drunk?”

She shrugs and raises her palms to the sides. “She didn’t seem so, but she’s crying at a club. There’s a good chance she’s drunk by now.”

“Thank you. If you see her again, tell her I was here.” At the last minute, I add something I’ve never spoken. “And that I love her.”

Her face softens, her lip jutting in a pout. “Go home, young man. I wish you luck.” She turns to go, re-entering the bathroom with a melodic song bellowing from her lungs. “Ladies, you need to hur-ry up and pee-pee.”

I shake it off and process what I said.

I’ve thought the words plenty of times. But until I said them aloud, it didn’t seem as real.

Can it be true? Am I capable of loving someone? Me? In love?

Yeah. I am.

I’m fucking in love with Violet Holt.

The rightness of that sentence blends painfully with the agony of knowing it’s probably too late. By the time I get the courage to tell Lettie to her face, she’ll have decided she’s done with me.

I always knew this day would come. A woman like her would never settle for a man like me.

She’s probably moving on already. If not now, soon. Tonight’s *taking time to think* is one step closer to goodbye.

On the way to my car, I scan the lot for the car Dante described as Vanessa’s. No sign of it.

They're gone.

For a second, I wonder if Vanessa is driving before quickly shaking it off. Freya would never let Vanessa drive them while intoxicated, given her sister was killed by a drunk driver.

Lettie's not here. Maybe it's for the best. Forcing her to see me and talk before she was ready would have been a mistake.

At least she's with Freya. She'll take care of her for me. I can wait.

Before I drive home, I send that text the lady from the bathroom told me to send.

ME

Sugar bear, I'm sorry for upsetting you. I'll explain everything whenever you're ready to see me again. I'll wait for you, giving you the space you asked for. But I'll be thinking of you. I miss you so much. Come see me whenever you want. I'll always be here for you.

AND THEN I send one more.

ME

Freya was right. I'm in love with you.

PLEASE BE A BAD DREAM

LETTIE

As I rouse from the deepest sleep of my life, the first thing I notice is a headache.

As I struggle to come to, I decide *headache* might be putting it mildly. This is more like a jackhammer cracking through my skull.

I'm nauseous too. Sandpaper has replaced my throat. And it's entirely possible I fell asleep with a mouth full of cotton.

Did I get drunk last night? Was Miss Paula there with her moonshine?

It takes deliberate focus and strength, but I manage to force my eyes open. Instantly, I slam them shut.

Oof! Too freaking bright. Opening my eyes will have to wait.

This is a hangover for the ages.

Either that or a migraine. I've heard those can cause nausea and sensitivity to light. Although I've never experienced one, I imagine this is what it's like.

Not to be dramatic, but everything hurts, and I'm dying.

I'm staying in bed all day, cuddled up to James. Maybe since I'm sick, he'll take care of me today instead of going to work.

Wait.

Did I ever make it to his house last night? I don't remember. Shit. Do migraines cause memory loss?

And why is his bed so hard?

As I attempt to roll over and reach for him, hoping he's in bed with me, something stops me. My arm or hand is caught on something.

I yank again, trying to dislodge it. Something cuts into my wrist when my struggles grow more insistent.

Ugh. What did I do now?

Did I klutz myself into the closet and get caught on a fucking belt or something? Classic Lettie.

I grit my teeth, knowing it's going to hurt when I open my eyes, but I force myself to do it. Three painful blinks later, I can finally focus on my surroundings.

Not at James's house.

Not at my apartment.

Not anywhere I've ever been.

An involuntary gasp surges oxygen into my lungs. The rancid scent makes me slam my mouth shut mid-inhale.

I try to make sense of what's happening and where I am, but the throbbing in my head makes it nearly impossible. Sleep threatens to tug me back under, but my growing unease stops me from slipping under the alluring pull.

Only barely.

This isn't a hangover or a migraine. It's not a natural sleep.

I lift my head a few inches off the pillow to look around the room, quickly realizing it's not a pillow. There is no bed either. Only carpet beneath me from what I can tell. I twist at

the neck to see what my wrist is caught on. An audible whimper leaves me.

My wrist is tied with scratchy rope that's attached to a hook on the wall. And I'm not alone.

There are two other women beside me. One is cuffed with a chain attaching her to the wall. The other is tied like me. They're sleeping or unconscious.

Or... dead.

As my body fills with adrenaline and my pulse spikes, my head whips around the room in a frenzy. My arms thrash wildly at my bindings in desperation. But it only causes the rope to bite deeper into my flesh.

My eyes sweep the small, dirty space, and an acrid flavor settles on my taste buds from the putridness here. Five, maybe six other girls with me. Some of them naked. All restrained in some fashion. I'm the only one awake.

We're captives. On the floor, not even given a bed.

I wrestle up the courage to glance down my body, then force my mouth shut when a wail bubbles from my gut.

I'm naked. Completely naked.

Instinctively, my hands attempt to cover my nudity, but since they're tied, the movement only makes me hiss in pain.

Panic, unlike anything I've ever felt, overcomes me, threatening to choke the life out of me. "Hello?" I whisper. "Is anyone awake in here?"

No movement or response.

Who chained us up? What do they want? Where are we?

Question after question assaults my still foggy mind.

Whoever they are, the fact we're chained like cattle and naked paints a gruesome picture of what they intend to do with us.

Tears flood my eyes, and my chest shakes. My face contorts under the strain of holding back my sobs. I don't want

anyone to hear me. Before I can rein in the tide of sorrow, I let a few drops fall.

Crying isn't going to help or get me out of here.

I need clear, rational thoughts if I'm going to protect myself.

With my eyes closed, I tug in a few breaths to bring some steadiness.

The floorboards creak as heavy footsteps pound outside the door. They get louder with each step. Someone is coming.

My hands clench into tight fists, and I give one more tug on the ropes, hoping I can get free to defend myself. *No luck.*

I swallow my fear back, slamming my eyes shut when the doorknob jostles as someone enters the room.

Stay still, Lettie. Pretend to be asleep. They won't mess with you if you're asleep.

As if my own conscience doesn't believe the bullshit I'm feeding it, I snark back internally. *Oh yeah? Then how did you lose your clothes?*

Whoever entered doesn't speak. But their footsteps creep slowly around the room. My body tenses when they get close, but I don't flinch. I'm playing possum like it'll save my life.

Naked possum.

Another set of footsteps enters the room. Heavy breaths accompany the newcomer.

Crippling fear blankets my torso, its weight nearly crushing me.

"Is anyone awake?" a chilling voice asks, making my skin crawl.

The footsteps move away from me, heading toward the other side of the room.

Another man responds in a language I don't understand. The accent unearths a sudden memory from last night. Or tonight. Or whenever that was.

The guys in the bar. They had that accent.

They must have drugged me.

Why didn't I leave with Freya and Vanessa?

Vanessa. *Oh no.* I bet she was also drugged. That's why she got sloppy that fast.

But Freya got her out safely. Unlike me. Because I was stupid and naive.

This is all my fault. *All of it.*

Stella's warnings ring across my memory. She always said I was too trusting. Vulnerable. She was right. I *did* need someone to look after me.

James agreed.

The tightness in my chest spreads in all directions, settling in my jaw and stomach.

How could I be so stupid? What was I thinking?

From the far side of the room, the harsh voices of the men capture my attention, halting my self-flagellation.

"This is the one who's supposed to be a virgin, right? Let's check. Hope the bitch didn't lie."

"Scissors?" the one with the accent asks, in English this time.

What the fuck? They're checking to see if we're virgins? How are they going to do that?

Oh no.

Bile rises in my throat.

The sound of cutting fabric echoes around the room, along with his raspy breaths. There's rustling and more cutting. My heart breaks for her, whoever she is.

I'm going to throw up. And they'll know I'm awake.

Did they do the same thing to me?

More rustling, a little more cutting, and then some sounds I can't decipher. There's a natural urge to open my eyes, but I

fight it.

I never want to open them again.

Perhaps I never will.

THE SINS OF THE FATHER

LETTIE

My time is running out. They'll come for me next.
There are only three of us left in this room.

Over the last few hours, girls woke up one by one. Some of them were frightened enough to scream and cry, even when I tried to shush or comfort them.

They were the first to be taken out of here, kicking and screaming as they went. Demanding answers from men who didn't care to respond.

Who are you?

What do you want?

Why am I here?

I think some of them are Russian. Although the thought terrifies me, I can't help but fear that they may have flown us there. I have no idea how long I was asleep or how long I've been tied up.

I faked being unconscious for as long as I could. After two of the others woke up, the men came around and started

smacking the rest of us to rouse us. It was either admit I was awake or keep getting hit. Each whack made my throbbing headache worse.

My cheek still stings from where he smacked me. As soon as my eyes opened, he spit on my face.

I don't know why he did that.

And I couldn't wipe it off with my hands since they're bound. But after he left, I managed to rub my cheek against my shoulder to get most of it off.

My bladder is so full. I'm not sure how much longer I can hold it. And then I'll be lying in my own filth. From the smell of this room, I think others have likely done that.

One of the girls in the corner starts crying, and her chains rattle as she tries to break herself free.

"Shh." I crane my neck to look at her, hoping to calm her with a reassuring expression. "Please don't cry, or they'll come back in here and take you. Just pretend to be asleep. It's safer for you that way. Shh."

"I can't," she whimpers, but at least her thrashing ceases. "I'm so scared."

"I am too. But try to stay calm. Don't make loud noises. Just try."

She nods at me, her chin quivering. "What do you think they're going to do to us?"

"I don't know."

I have my suspicions, but I won't tell her. She's terrified enough as it is. Poor thing looks like she's barely fifteen, if that.

"Are they going to kill us? Why are we naked?" Her volume increases, her voice morphing from sadness to renewed panic. "Why haven't they killed us already? I don't want to die."

My eyes fill with tears as I shush her again. "Sweetie, *please* be quiet. I know you're scared. We all are. But as soon

as I get a chance, I'll get us out of here somehow. I promise. We'll find a way out. Just be calm for now, okay? I'm right here with you."

"Do you promise you won't leave me here?"

"I promise."

After a long pause, she whispers, "My name is Tina. What's your name?"

"I'm... I'm Ana."

She gives me a sad, watery grin before her head flops onto the dirty carpet.

Not sure why I lied to her.

Although Anastasia is my middle name, I've never used it before. Never even considered it.

As I contemplate why, I suppose it's because I don't want this place to have my name too. I already know it's going to take everything else from me.

I'm keeping my name.

The other girl speaks for the first time, her voice scratchy. "I'm Sabrina."

"Are you scared?" Tina asks.

Sabrina's answer surprises me.

"Not really. I've been raped before." There's an eerie calmness woven in her tone once the scratchiness subsides. "The trick is to pretend you're somewhere else. Anywhere else. Don't fight them. It only makes it worse."

If she knows *a trick* to enduring a rape, it makes me wonder what the fuck happened to Sabrina.

But I'm not asking.

"I've never had sex." Tina shifts her gaze to me. "Have you had sex, Ana?"

"Yes. With my boyfriend."

Tears rush in so rapidly it's almost painful.

“Did he rape you too?” Sabrina’s cynicism shows in her icy tone. “I fucking hate men.”

Ardently denying her assertion, I shake my head. “No. *No*. He’s amazing. I love him. He... he...”

My words trail off as it hits me that I might never see him again.

And even if I do, I’ll be so disgusting he won’t want me anymore.

Damaged goods.

Broken.

No. No, Lettie, no. You are not going to be broken. You won’t be damaged or unlovable.

Fuck that.

I’ll fight. I’ll get free. And somehow, I’ll find my way back to him.

Even if I am in Russia or Siberia or anywhere else, nothing will stop me from making it back to him.

He’s probably looking for me. Freya must know that I never made it home by now.

“Sorry, Ana,” Sabrina whispers, snapping my focus away from James. “I didn’t mean to upset you. Sometimes, I forget that some men know what consent is. I’m a little jaded.”

“It’s okay. I just miss him. Don’t apologize. None of this is your fault.”

She chuckles, deep and dark. “I wouldn’t be so sure of that. Pretty sure it’s my fault I’m here... naked, tied up, and about to piss myself.”

“No, it’s not,” I insist. “Why would you think that?”

“Because I tried to stab my uncle. I think he sold me off after that.”

My eyes bulge. “What?”

Tina echoes, “Yeah, seriously. What?”

“Some scary-looking dudes came over. I heard them talking to my uncle in the driveway and watched from my bedroom window. They gave him something. I assume it was money or something to knock me out. Probably both.”

“Like a needle or something?” Tina asks.

“No, I think he put something in my food or drink. During dinner, I started getting tired, seeing trails, and I was loopy as hell. I remember laughing at everything. Then I fell asleep. Right there at the table. Woke up here.” Sabrina looks at me. “What about you, Ana?”

“I was at a dance club with my two friends. Later in the evening, there was a singing contest, and I entered. One of the girls was *really* drunk, or so I thought. Now I think she was drugged.” I shake my head, trying to dispel the guilt clogging my mind. “I told my other friend to drive her home. I started messaging my boyfriend and was about to ask him to come get me. But I never got that far. I remember sitting at the bar, finishing my soda, when these two guys started talking to me. I don’t remember much after that.”

“They roofied you. Sick fucks.” She looks at the other girl. “What about you, Tina? How did they get you?”

“A boy from school. I’ve had a crush on him for a few weeks. He finally asked me on a date. I was so excited. He gave me a drink on the way to the movie theater.” She sniffles. “And then I woke up here.”

Anger fills my veins, pushing out all the blood and replacing it with vitriol and rage. “Tina, when we get out of here, we’re going to find that boy and kick him in the balls. Again and again until he chokes on them. After that, we’re going for the head. Bring a baseball bat.”

Sabrina laughs again, dark and low like before. “That’s cute that you think we’re getting out.”

Footsteps come stomping down the hall.

Tina instantly returns to uncontrollable panic. “Oh no. They’re coming.”

My entire body tenses, making my full bladder ache even more. I mash my thighs together, hoping to hold it.

A red-haired man swings the door open, causing us all to gasp and flinch away from the door.

Another man comes in behind him. “Who’s ready for fun?”

Russian accent. Broken English. I recognize him instantly. He’s the creepy guy from the club. The short one.

The red-haired man moves close to Sabrina and starts working on her restraints.

The creep points at me with his switchblade knife, taking a step toward me. “I want that blond bitch. Last night, she think she too good for me. Now we see how she feel.”

I gulp, my stomach twisting into a tight knot.

Thanks to his disgusting words, I know I’ve only been here one night. Doubtful they could have taken me to Russia that fast.

Maybe they’ll cut me free. If I can fight my way out, perhaps I can get Tina out of here before they hurt her.

James taught me some self-defense moves after his friend’s sister was kidnapped. Too bad my head hurts so badly I can hardly remember them.

But I have fingernails and will eagerly claw some eyes out.

“No. Boss gets the blond first,” the red-haired man announces, nodding in my direction. His tone leaves no room for objecting.

A flood of questions threatens to drown me, all of them hitting me at once.

What does he mean by that?

Who’s the Boss?

Boss of what?

Why me?

The creep stops approaching me, planting his feet and spearing the other man with a hardened glare. “Pakhan come here for her, or we bring?”

“Nah. Not him. Viktor wants her.”

He scoffs, rolling his eyes. “Viktor is just baby.”

“Well, he’s still the boss, so you can’t have her yet. And he’s coming here.”

Who is Viktor? Why does he want me?

The creep’s repulsive eyes glide from me to Tina. “When will Baby Boss get here?”

“He’s on the way.”

“Fine.”

The red-haired man slices through the rope tying Sabrina to the wall. He hoists her up by her still-bound wrists.

She doesn’t fight him.

As he leads her out of the room, she looks over her shoulder at Tina and me. Her eyes widen in warning. “Remember what I told you.”

Don’t fight.

Think of anything else but what’s happening to you.

Ignoring Tina, the creeper from last night marches over to me, arrogance wafting off him. He squats at my side, bringing his disgusting body far too close. His eyes rake over me hungrily from head to toe and back again. “After the boss has you, I make it hurt on my turn.”

“Please don’t,” I beg, although I know it’s no use.

His expression somehow gets darker and more disturbed, and he runs his tongue over his teeth. He *likes* that I’m begging.

I won’t make that mistake again.

I won’t beg.

And I won’t be broken.



IF I HADN'T ALREADY HEARD them refer to Viktor as *the boss*, I would've known he was in charge from the deferential way the men acted when he and his entourage walked through the front door.

That was maybe a half hour ago. All our captors went on high alert, jerking to attention.

The tone he used with them would have been intimidating, even if it wasn't in gruff-sounding Russian. Somehow, that makes him more menacing.

I suspect the men who came with Viktor are his bodyguards. I'd call them minions, but that's disrespectful to the little yellow guys who love bananas.

Viktor's presence commands respect. His arrogance tells me he knows it.

The only other thing I know about him so far is that he wants to kill me. Or, at minimum, he wants me to suffer.

And I have no clue why.

A few minutes ago, a monstrous man with biceps as big as my thighs threw me into an empty room in the center of this disgusting house.

Without a word of explanation.

Now, I'm standing in the middle of the room and being circled by a shark in a fancy suit.

Viktor entered a minute ago. He hasn't spoken to me yet. But his body language communicates his disdain for me in vivid detail.

If his wardrobe and fancy watch are anything to go by, Viktor comes from money. Lots of it.

His eyes are fathomless pits, spewing venom at me as they slither up and down my nude frame. He gives me the heebie-jeebies.

He also gives off mafia vibes.

Averting my sight from him, I scan the room again. Not sure why since there's nothing to look at. There's a mattress on the floor but no windows. And no way out. Even if I got away from him, I wouldn't get far. One of his men waits on the other side of the door. The gun he shoved under my chin was a nice touch.

Bastards.

"Look at me," he seethes, finally speaking. "Eyes on me unless I tell you otherwise." His English is flawless, with no hint of an accent.

As I force myself to obey his command, I lift my chin to feign confidence. The thought of him knowing how terrified I am doesn't feel right.

He clicks his tongue at me. "You know why you're here?"

My hands are fisted so tightly I feel the prick of my nails on my palms. "Seems pretty obvious."

With his head cricked to one side, he smirks. "Yes, I suppose it is." He locks his straight arms behind his back and paces around the room, circling me again. "Stay facing that wall."

His fancy shoes click against the hardwood floor with each step as if they're threatening me.

After one revolution, he speaks again, but his shoes continue their ominous warning as he goes. "Don't you wonder why we picked you?"

My brows pinch as I try to decode his question. There's something hidden in it, but I can't imagine what the deeper meaning might be.

"Because I was alone at a bar?"

Like a damn idiot.

His returning laugh is wicked and dark, with tendrils of cruelty woven throughout the timbre. "For most pretty girls, that would be enough. Like the ones in the other room." He stops circling me, planting himself inches from my face. "But you are special, *Violet Anastasia Holt.*"

I've never heard my name spoken with such disgust.

My stomach bottoms out. My knees tremble, threatening to buckle.

He knows my full name. *How?*

Oh. My purse. They must have taken it from me. That makes sense.

His upper lip curls into a snarl. "I know what you're thinking."

I stare into his inky eyes, unblinking and resolute. "You couldn't possibly begin to fathom what I'm thinking."

He snarls out a bitter chuckle. "You are thinking, *how does he know my name? And what makes me so special?*" He taps the bottom of my chin twice, raising it upward in an unspoken reminder to look at him. "Right?"

"Your men probably have my purse with my identification in it. Not hard to figure out."

"They do, but that's not how we know who you are. And it doesn't answer what makes you special."

"Doesn't matter why I'm here. The outcome is going to be the same regardless." For a moment, I impress myself with the air of defiance and disrespect I lace into my voice.

"Ultimately, yes. But how we get there will be different. There'll be much more pain for you than for the others. And we'll take lots of pictures. We'll use them as gifts for the men who earned you a spot here."

Confidence sinking, I break. Curiosity wins over my desire to be obstinate. "Fine. Why me?"

"Your father has harmed my family. Your boyfriend too. They've caused us to lose quite a bit of money, and that can't go unanswered."

My face pinches as confusion wallops me. "What?"

A wicked gleam shines in his dark eyes. "Don't play me for a fool, Violet Holt."

“My father is dead. How could he have taken money from you?”

And what about James? He didn't even know Papa.

This is madness. A mind game.

“Oh, your father isn't dead. Not yet. I'll make him suffer first. I promised my father I'd do that for him.” He drags his thumb over my lower lip, tugging it down. “We're both here because of our fathers, yes?”

“You're mistaken. My father *is* dead. I was there when he took his last breath and watched them lower his coffin into the earth.”

An undecipherable look passes across his features, but it quickly turns to steel. “You are a simple fool.”

“And you're a monster.”

Showing zero hesitation, he sails the back of his hand across my cheek. A fierce jolt of pain causes my posture to falter, sending me backward. He doesn't let me retreat, roughly gripping my upper arms and yanking me near.

With his face inches from mine, he levels me with a poisoned-tipped gaze. “You have his eyes. Did you know that?” Somehow, his expression grows more sinister. “I was going to take you from behind so I wouldn't have to look at you. But I think I'll make you watch me the whole time. That way, I can stare into the eyes of my enemy as I fuck his only daughter. And later, I will tell him all about it. Right before I slit his throat. The video can go to your boyfriend since he likes to watch.”

My skin crawls as if steel wool abrades it. *What the fuck is happening?*

In Russian, he hollers toward the door. One of his men comes in.

Holding a camera.

Tears surge forth and roll down my cheeks. All shreds of my feigned bravery crumple into a pile on the dirty floor.

My mind continues to process his words and the confusion they bring when he does exactly as he promised — forcing me to look at him with every degrading and tormenting thing he does to my body.

For something that my *father* did to him.

And James.

WITHOUT A TRACE

Two days later

TOMER

Despite living on the edge of my worst nightmare this weekend — Lettie leaving me — I'm getting by. For the most part.

I don't think anyone at work has noticed anything *off* about me, so I must be doing a decent job at concealing my restlessness and melancholy. And working with Mia has helped my mood. She's like the sister I never had. If only she and Klein would fuck it out of their systems already.

Lettie texted me in the middle of the night on Friday, several hours after I got back from looking for her at the dance club. She said she needed time and asked me not to contact her while she had a break for a few days. Her phone has been off ever since.

All her trackers show her at home, and it's killing me to stay put and wait for her. I want nothing more than to race over there and beg her to talk to me.

But she asked for space. I'm giving it to her.

I'm also respecting her privacy. No matter how much I want to see her — even if just on a screen — I haven't accessed the security cameras at her apartment.

Hell, I haven't even called Freya. She'd only tell Lettie I was checking up on her, adding more fuel to her belief that I think she's incapable of caring for herself.

I want to be the man she deserves and not a psycho stalker.

She's scheduled to work at Bask tonight. If I don't hear from her by then, I'll swing by the club after work to see how she's doing.

Maybe I should bring her flowers. Is that something a boyfriend would do after a fight?

Probably.

Yeah. I'll do that.

All I need to do is wait a few more hours until I see her again. I can keep it together for a few hours. No sweat.

I've tapped into the part of my psyche that I learned to access as a kid. It allows me to shuffle my worries around, pushing them aside so other thoughts can take the lead. Emotions can be sorted in much the same way.

It's how I can be of use to my team in high-stress situations. Like flipping a switch, I turn off upsetting thoughts and fears, then zero in on what needs to be done.

Today is no different.

Until the workday ends, all my concerns about Lettie are neatly stacked to the side. Doing so has allowed me to finish up Mia's training.

I shot a note to Boss earlier today to let him know I had an update for him on the status of my team. I've just been summoned to see him.

"You can head right in," Peggy tells me when I approach Boss's open door.

When I enter his office, he waves me in, motioning to the table. I take my seat, and he joins me a few seconds later. He

sets his tablet down and props his phone up in an odd position.

“I didn’t bring my laptop. I assumed we were just talking about the team.”

He flicks his wrist at me. “Oh we are. You’re fine.” He glances at his phone. “I’m expecting an important call.”

I sit quietly, waiting for him to begin.

He clears his throat. “Everything okay?”

“Yes,” I reply flatly.

He narrows his eyes at me, brows drawn tight and hands steepled in front of his face.

I hate when he does this shit. Looks at me like I’m going to crack under his intense scrutiny, if only he can wait me out.

How does he always know when something is wrong?

Did he have us all implanted with neuron chips or something?

It’s not going to work this time. I’ve waited him out before.

“Mm-hmm,” he mumbles, nodding at me and hardening his gaze even further. If he squints much more, both eyes will be sealed shut.

Three seconds more. Then five.

I snap at ten seconds.

“What?” I bark out.

“You’re not yourself lately. You’ve been up and down for the last several months. I know something is going on with you. I’m concerned. I keep waiting for you to come and talk to me, but you haven’t. I’m done waiting.”

Holding silent, I stretch out my lower lip, clamping it with my top and jutting my jaw forward. His words have no effect on me. His intuition won’t prove accurate today.

But on the inside, I’m screaming at him. *I’m in love with your daughter, who you don’t know exists. And she’s probably going to break up with me because I crossed lines I don’t*

understand, all in the name of caring for her. Or what I thought was caring for her. Oh and she might be pregnant, but I already fucked that up too. No big deal.

Five more seconds of his scrutinizing silence, and he makes me snap again. *Damn him.*

“Boss, I’ve got some personal shit going on. That’s all. But it hasn’t affected my work in the least.”

“I know your work is fine. I’ve never doubted that for a second, and I never will.”

My eyes shoot from side to side, my teeth grinding. “Then why are we talking about it?”

His nostrils flare with a deep inhale. “Tomer, I know family is a touchy topic. This is a reminder that your Redleg family is here for you.” He leans forward, arms resting on the table. “*I’m* here for you. Same as I always have been.”

His words make my breath catch, bringing up memories of my blood-soaked hands holding my father’s near-lifeless frame.

I clear my throat to play it off. “I know that, Boss.”

He’s Big Al now, not Boss. There’s a difference, and by calling him that, I’m aiming to keep that distinction front and center.

“Are you sure there’s nothing you want to talk about? Get it off your chest, whatever it is. I’d never judge you.”

No one has ever held less judgment of me than him. And he’s seen me at my lowest. But he didn’t turn away from me that night. Saving my ass and probably my life.

I look down at my thighs and notice I’m picking at my jeans. “Nothing is bringing me down.”

He quirks his head to the side. “Didn’t say anything about bringing you down. You said that. In fact, you’ve seemed happier lately, but there’s something underneath all that. Call it a gut feeling, but it’s like you’re conflicted.”

His famous fucking gut. If he could bottle and sell that instinct, he'd be retired and living out his days with Madeline in Hawaii by now.

With a shake of my head and a roll of my eyes, I shift forward in my seat. "Did we have any work to discuss? I need to get back to the kids before they break something."

His dimple pops a second before one of his belly laughs starts low and slow, then bellows louder. "Kids? I like that." He drags his weathered hand over his beard, tinged with more gray streaks than it was when we first formed Redleg. "All right. Shop talk. Tell me about the *kids*. How is it going? And don't sugarcoat it."

"They're good. Workwise, I've got no complaints. Mia's technical skills are unsurpassed. In many ways, she's far better than me. Cocky, but it's deserved. She's handled four CPD cases so far, which resulted in new leads for them. And the client dossier work I've given her is outstanding."

"You trust her?"

"As much as I trust most people I've known for a short period of time."

He arches one brow. "How much digging did you do on her?"

I open my mouth to answer, and he stops me with a raised finger. "And I mean more than what you put in the background file you gave me before we hired her."

A slick-as-shit grin eats up my face. I couldn't stop the rare show of emotion if I tried. I've always liked how he knows me that way and is fine with it.

I can only hope he feels the same when I tell him that my digging into his background turned up an old and outdated copy of a birth certificate with his name on it.

"I did my due diligence on Mia if that's what you mean. She helped me by giving me her personal laptop on her first day here. I held onto it for a few days, copied everything I needed to be able to monitor her. So far, nothing concerning

has come up. Of course, she could have engineered it that way, but I'm watching."

He smacks his lips in a tsking sound. "You're always watching, aren't you?"

My sly grin grows. "Old habits die hard, Boss."

"Yeah. I guess that's fair after the shit we saw over there. And back home."

I don't answer. He didn't ask a question.

His knuckles tap on the desk. "So Mia is good. What about Klein?"

Without hesitation, I answer in earnest. "She makes him better."

He purses his lips, eyes widening in either surprise or disbelief. "Really?"

"Yeah. He watches her. *A lot*. And not only because he's attracted to her."

He laughs quietly this time, and it holds a hint of alarm. Makes sense because it's likely not the best idea to have staff involved when working together so closely on our new three-person intel team.

I rub the back of my neck. "But while he's watching, he's learning. His thought process is different than it used to be. I can see him working through challenges differently. Asking for help less and taking more initiative. She's good for him."

"Excellent. That's great. I want to make it permanent for him if I can. I know he wants that. Guess he got sick of risking his life for the wealthy who hire us."

"That's not why he wants it. Not entirely."

The wrinkles in his forehead deepen. "What is it?"

"I think his mom is sick. He hasn't said as much, but something is going on with her."

He's taken too many calls. Snuck away too many times. And his emotions are all over the place. And all that started

before Mia flipped him upside-down. Since he wears his heart on his sleeve, it's plain to see if you're looking.

Plus, I hacked into his texts with his sister.

“*Shit*. I'll talk to him about that. I have a one-on-one with him later this week unless something urgent distracts the team. And isn't that always the way?” He exhales a haggard rasp. “But I wanted your evaluation on his readiness first since he's likely to ask about a permanent transfer.”

I nod, waiting for a question. That wasn't one.

“About the two of them.” He lowers his chin. “Is it going to be a problem to have them working together?”

Drawing back in my chair, I roll my shoulders to loosen the brewing tension. Although he's moved the topic away from me, it'll never stop rolling around my mind.

Tension that's mostly there because I want to tell him about Lettie. But I think I need to tell her first.

Or do I?

Fuck.

I shake off that worry for now and redirect my thoughts to his question. “I snapped at them about an hour ago when the tension spiked. Then I walked out to give them a few minutes to handle their shit, and when I got back the vibe was much better. I think they'll work it out. They're both committed to the job, so I expect that'll prevail regardless of their personal issues.”

He checks his phone, nibbling his lip. “I'll avoid thinking about *how* they relieved the tension and just be grateful they did.”

If they have sex in the lair, I'll put them both on the MFKL.

“I'll do that too. Safer for everyone involved.”

He glances at his phone again. We sit in silence for a handful of seconds.

“Anything come up lately with anyone else in the family?”

“Meaning?”

“Anyone else at Redleg got anything going I need to be concerned with?”

“Oh.” I shake my head, running my hands along my thighs in soothing strokes. “No. Nothing new.”

Although, I haven’t been watching much over the last few months. Been a bit distracted.

“Excellent.” He slaps his palm on the table. “Any new business?”

Wordlessly, I shake my head, channeling my emotionless mask to shield me.

But on the inside, my stomach pitches and rolls in a riotous tumult.

I need to confess the secrets I’ve been hiding.

I *should* tell him.

There aren’t any excuses worthy of deceiving the only man who ever protected me.

Redleg is good. Things are calm — finally. I’ve waited for things to settle, and they have.

He’s a logical man, and I have no doubt he’ll understand why I hid her for so long. He’ll know I was protecting him. Like he protected me.

But if I tell him, I’ll definitely lose Lettie.

The pain I’ve felt this weekend from *suspecting* I’m losing her will become real and permanent, darkening the cavern in my chest to a blackness I haven’t experienced in more than a decade.

He prods me harder. “Any chance you’ve reconsidered talking to me about whatever is happening in your personal life?”

I *cannot* lose her. It’ll kill me.

All I need is a little more time to find a way to keep her. To protect her from the pain.

Just a little more time.

“Nope.”

He’s a second away from doing that brain probe thing again when his phone signals and the screen lights up.

Saved by a text.

I’m physically unable to stop myself from glancing at the screen. Heart emojis by the contact name capture my attention, the bright red screaming off the black screen in the little text preview.

A megawatt smile spreads up his face as he sets the phone down. “Okay. If there is nothing else, it’s time for my call.”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

On my way back to the office, the curiosity of what made Boss smile like that starts getting to me. Fucking heart emojis and Big Al do *not* go together. At all. It’s a more unlikely combo than me and heart emojis.

As a general rule, I don’t give two shits about people’s social lives so long as it doesn’t affect work. But I have to wonder if what I just witnessed is an even brighter neon flashing sign that now is the time to tell him. And that’s something else I don’t typically lend weight to. Signs? Those are illogical.

But with Mia assimilating and Klein joining my team full-time, I’ve finally got the capacity to ease the burden on Boss, allowing him to focus on getting to know his daughter. And if his life outside of Redleg is going well too — like it seems — this is the perfect time.

I can’t stand in the way of them anymore. No matter how it affects me.

This isn’t about me — it’s Big Al’s and Lettie’s lives. And they deserve to know. Holding out for selfish reasons is a mistake I can’t keep making for the two most important people in my life.

There was never a good way for us to end. At least I’ll be confessing on my own instead of it getting out some other

way. If there's a chance for her to forgive me, it needs to happen this way.

And now.

Once I'm at my desk, I resist the compulsion to get a phone number for the person labeled with heart emojis. I could get it off his phone. Easily.

It's got to be Madeline — Leo's mother. So it doesn't matter. All I need to know is that he's happy. Decision made.

Mia makes an excuse to work in her office instead of the lair. Klein follows a few minutes later, leaving me alone.

Just like old times.

I should be grateful for the alone time, but dammit, I miss the two of them. The Tin Man has a heart, after all.

My phone vibrates in my back pocket. My pulse spikes, dread curdling in my gut.

FREYA

Consider this your friendly reminder to get off Lettie so she can fulfill her work obligations. Untie her or whatever. Since she's not answering her phone, I figure her hands are bound.

ME

What do you mean?

FREYA

I realize you two needed to have a sexy weekend fuck fest and all, but wrap it up and send her home. I got shit to do and can't be covering the front desk all night. It's trivia night. We're gonna be slammed.

ME

I haven't seen her all weekend. What are you talking about?

FREYA

Wait. What? She didn't come home all weekend. She wasn't with you?

ME

No. When did you last see her?

FREYA

At the Stumbling Sea Turtle on Friday night.

ME

And after? When you went home?

FREYA

She didn't come home with me that night. If she isn't with you, where is she? Holy shit, James. This isn't good.

WITH MY HEART in my throat and lead in my stomach, I dial Freya.

As soon as the line connects, I blurt, "What do you mean she didn't come home with you?"

"She was staying for the singing contest. Plus, she and Vanessa were sort of having a tiff. I needed to get Vanessa out of there because she was so drunk she could hardly stand, but

Lettie insisted on staying behind to sing. She was already texting you to pick her up when Vanessa and I left. A while later, she messaged me that she made it to your place.”

“Well, she didn’t. She texted me that she needed time to think and asked me to leave her alone for the weekend.”

“That’s crazy. That wasn’t her state of mind when we left. She wanted to see you. I know she did. What time was that text?”

My trembling hands drag across my forehead, my fingertips digging in punishingly. “We were messaging back and forth around 2330,” I catch myself using military time and amend, “around eleven thirty, but she never told me to come get her or even implied it. Her last message, sent around two a.m., asked me to leave her alone.”

“Oh no, no, no,” Freya whines, then launches into a long-winded rant. “That’s around the last time I heard from her. When I left her at the club, I made her promise to let me know when you got there. I even sent her a reminder message. After an hour, I called, but it went straight to voicemail. She *finally* texted me back, but I was up to my tits making sure that Vanessa didn’t aspirate in her sleep. She was wrecked.”

“I don’t give a fuck about Vanessa,” I yell, a murderous rage simmering in my veins. “Are you telling me you left Lettie alone in a fucking nightclub? *Alone*? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“*I knooow*. Fucking hell. I’m sorry!” she trills, her volume quickly matching mine. “Vanessa was nearly passed out at the bar. I had to get her out of there, and Lettie refused to go with us.” A muffled sob comes through the receiver. “Dammit, James. I’m sorry. So fucking sorry. But you know how stubborn Lettie can be, and she wanted that prize money. I wish I would’ve waited for you to get there, but Vanessa literally couldn’t stand. Dammit. *Fuck*. What have I done?” Another sob. “What do we do? What do we fucking do?”

I pull forth the only remaining thread of calmness from deep inside me, focusing on action steps.

We're already behind by almost three days.

I need details. As many as possible.

We already have the timeline of when she was taken. It had to be between when we were messaging and when I got there to look for her. It's not that long of a window. Maybe I can find a license plate. Security footage from the club.

"Freya, call the cops to report her missing, giving them every detail you remember. I'll try to track her phone and start looking for her."

"Okay. I'm so sorry, James. If something happens to her —"

I cut her off. "Nothing is going to happen to her. I won't let it. I'll fucking find her. Call the cops."

Without saying goodbye, I disconnect.

What the actual *fuck* was she thinking leaving Lettie alone in a fucking nightclub?

Turns out my worst fear has nothing to do with Boss finding out about Lettie or vice versa.

Inhaling sharply, I force out my breath in a loud whoosh and suck in another wave, trying to steady myself. Can't do anything to help her if I can't fucking see straight.

Think, Tomer, fucking think.

Trackers? None of them are on her. No fucking clue why she didn't bring her purse.

Jewelry? Must not be wearing any of the pieces I tagged.

She never made it home, meaning camera footage at her apartment won't provide anything of use.

Phone?

Although it's powered off, there's a chance I can still get in through the hidden app I installed on her phone. As long as the battery hasn't been tampered with.

That's going to take some time, though.

First, I'll run my facial recognition program so it can process while I try to get into her phone.

I spring into action, pulling up a recent photo of Lettie to run through my software. Hopefully, she's been somewhere with cloud-based surveillance feeds.

While that runs, I try and fail to get her phone's location through the app. Fuck. That means they tampered with the battery.

She's definitely compromised. There's no way she'd do that if she only wanted time away to think.

My chest suddenly grows tight, but I force the panic away with three sharp inhales.

Gotta keep going.

Back on my other machine, I attempt to access the security cam footage from the Stumbling Sea Turtle. It takes a few attempts, but I finally hack their server right as Klein comes into the office.

“Where's Mia? What's she working on?”

I don't even bother looking up. “Hasn't come back yet.”

“What's the big news? Which case is going ass over tits now?”

My fingers freeze. “What are you talking about?”

He can't possibly know Lettie is missing. Nor would he know who she is or that I'm working on this.

He plops down in his chair casually. “Mia said something urgent came up on a case.”

His words don't fucking compute. “I thought you didn't know where she was or what she was doing.”

“I didn't. I don't.”

Judging by the look on his doe-eyed face, he knows nothing about Lettie. Therefore, whatever he's talking about is irrelevant. I attempt to blow him off so he leaves me alone, faking a normal vibe.

On the inside, I'm quickly spiraling out of control.

He makes some excuse to leave the lair shortly thereafter. Not that I care.

Once I skim through the files where the nightclub's security feeds are stored, I pound my fist against the desk.

Nothing there for Friday night. A quick scan through all the dated files reveals that footage from several nights is missing. Either they have faulty equipment, or something fucked up routinely goes on there.

The system running a facial search on Lettie's image pings, throwing an error message. This is not the time for this bullshit.

Mia's been working on enhancements to the program. Looks like she's not finished. Dammit all to hell.

I could call her in to make her fix them now, pulling her off whatever she's working on. But if I put her to work on this, it'll lock up the machine, and I need this one for its power. Plus, I'd have to tell her why I need it fixed immediately. She asks far too many questions for her own good.

Making a snap decision, I adjust my approach. Keeping this system available for me is more important at this point.

I launch the older version of the program from my back-up files. It'll take longer, but at least it'll work. Well, it should.

I work for hours.

Call logs and cell towers.

Camera footage at nearby intersections.

Police reports.

Hospital admissions records.

It's dead end after dead end.

Lettie disappeared.

Like a ghost.

At some point Klein and Mia announce that they're leaving for the night. I barely react. Too much to do.

While forking my fingers through my hair, I close my eyes and try to cast a wider net. What am I missing? There's got to be something else I can do. I can't go interview witnesses without raising suspicion with the cops.

Fuck it. Worth a shot.

Let me take a look at the police report Freya filed to see which detective is assigned and if any witnesses are listed in the file yet.

While accessing their server, I notice I'm not the only one creeping around behind the firewall.

I recognize the signature of the hack instantly. Because I've seen her use it three times in the last ten days. The hairs on my arm and back of my neck stand on end.

What the fuck is Mia doing looking into Lettie's file?

Diverting my focus, I grab the laptop I've been using to track Mia's activity. Let's hope she's using her computer right now.

Jackpot. She's online.

Her search history from this afternoon indicates she's investigating the nightclub. I pour over the files, my eyes growing wider by the second.

As soon as I have Mia's address up, I check her GPS location and confirm she's home.

She's going to tell me why she's tracking Lettie. And then she's going to help me find her.

CHAPTER 51

KARMA IS MY BOYFRIEND

LETTIE

I used to long for sleep.

It was my respite from the unimaginable horror I've been trapped in for... I don't know how many days now. Three? Five? I think it's Tuesday. Or maybe Monday.

I'm too tired to figure it out. But it's dark outside. At least I still know the difference between day and night.

Yet I'm not sleeping. My dreams are painful now. In those few moments of sleep, I'm tormented as much as if I'm awake. Sometimes worse.

Fortunately — or unfortunately — they don't let us sleep much. I assume sleep deprivation is part of their plan to break us down.

But I'm not broken.

I will not break.

Sabrina was right. If you think about something else and don't fight, it's more tolerable. But that feels far too close to being broken. Like Sabrina.

Not me.

I'll never break.

That's why I continue fighting them, even if my efforts only result in more punishment. It's my way of communicating that I'm still me. And I'm never going to accept the way they're treating us.

Like animals.

If that's what they want us to be, I choose to be a wild horse. One that refuses to be tamed.

I'd be lying if I said the drive to fight back wasn't waning, though. Especially when my disobedience earns me extra pain.

In addition to the cut on my upper cheek, I've got a black eye and cigarette burn marks under my upper arms. They picked that spot so the scars won't be visible to my future customers. Heaven forbid they damage the merchandise. My ribs are bruised, if not broken. Each inhale might as well be razors under my skin.

My bones might break, but I won't.

Before I was living this nightmare, I occasionally wondered how I might handle being in a life-or-death situation. Especially when I was watching an action movie or reading a thriller. Would I be the damsel in distress? Would I be brave, or would I cower? Fight back? Cry? Panic? Stay calm?

I bet lots of people wonder how they'd act in situations like this. But no one ever thinks they'll learn the answer.

Turns out, I'm all those things.

The strength it takes to be brave is tiring. It comes and goes. Sometimes, it's easier to cry. At other times, the idea of being weak makes you angry. Then you can fight again. There are ebbs and flows.

Even the weaker girls here have moments when they've had enough.

It's silent in the house. For now.

These brief moments of peace are when I find my strength again.

I'm in a bedroom, along with a few other girls. Lying on my side, I curl my crossed legs toward my chest. Not enough to compress my aching rib cage. But just enough to give my midsection a modicum of protection.

My volume is soft as I sing to myself. As always, it's the song James would hum when trying to get me to serenade him. The one with my nickname in the chorus.

Sugar bear.

Sometimes, when I'm scared to fall asleep, I pretend I'm singing it to him. Holding him close. Looking into his turquoise eyes. With each note, I feel him loving me through this nightmare.

Just like he did with everything else that haunted me.

Dammit. How could I ever have thought he didn't love me?

The pain of being without him is a gnawing ache that never relents. It starts in the back of my throat and sinks to my toes. From the time my eyes open, until they close again, it's there. Battering me more than these monsters ever could.

I *will* see James again.

This is not where our story ends.

I wonder if he's looking for me. Does he know I'm missing? He must, by now.

It's probably killing him. He's been so protective since the day I met him. He must be a wreck.

They're not only hurting me in here. They're also gutting him.

When I escape, I'll return one day to kill all these men. Then I'll find Viktor and kill him. And there will be pain. So much fucking pain.

Theirs. Not mine this time.

I'll start with the man who seems to be running the show here. I think he reports straight to Viktor. For simplicity's sake, let's call him *a skid mark on the underwear of humanity*.

Skidmark is the one who decides whether we eat or when we've earned our precious half hour of rest. He makes other decisions, but I don't want to think about those right now.

So I just keep singing to myself instead.

Interrupting my song like the rude fuck he is, Skidmark throws open the bedroom door. The girls on the floor around me startle awake, immediately shirking away from the door.

He laughs darkly, dragging in a woman by her hair. "Go say hi to your friend," he sneers, throwing her into the room. "Tell her how you helped us. Thanks again, by the way. Great job." The door slams behind him.

My eyes fall to the floor where a brunette in a ripped bra and panties lies collapsed. She snuffles and sobs into the dirty floor. My heart clenches, and my throat thickens.

Whoever she is, I can't let her suffer alone. Crawling to her, I gently place my palm on her shoulder and whisper, "Are you okay, hun?"

While I wait patiently for her to stop crying enough to answer, my knees throb and ache against the hardwood. Everything fucking hurts.

When she twists her neck to look up at me, I'm met with a familiar face. The air catches in my lungs.

Oh no.

My voice cracks as I choke out her name. "Vanessa?"

In the dim light of the room, I see the tight pinch of her eyes and mouth as she fights back a pained sob. Her gaze travels up and down my partially nude body. The lack of sleep and food have my brain scattered, and confusing thoughts pelt me without mercy.

When did she get here?

Has she been here all along?

What did Skidmark mean about helping them?

I saw her leave the club with Freya. Is she here too?

That last one is the one I need answered first. “Did they get Freya as well?”

With her eyes downcast, she shakes her head. “Just me.”

I squeeze her shoulder a bit firmer, offering more comfort. “When did you get here?”

Although she glances up at me, she’s not really meeting my eyes. “An hour or two ago.” Her tone is cold, and she shirks away from me.

Maybe her shoulder is injured.

Or perhaps she still can’t stand me. Bitch.

Withdrawing my hand since it’s clearly unwelcome contact, I stay silent for a minute and study her. She doesn’t look drugged like the rest of us did when we got here. I was groggy as hell for a solid day after that shit they gave me.

“Didn’t they roofie you?”

She shakes her head no, her eyes falling once again to the floor. An eerie feeling creeps down my spine.

Something is very wrong about this.

To be clear, nothing that happens in this hell hole is *right*, but... her demeanor. The eye contact. The way she shies away from my comfort. Even the tone of her voice is... just off.

It doesn’t make sense.

“How did they get you if not drugs?” I ask, determined to get to the bottom of this.

“Shh! You’re going to get us in trouble,” one of the other girls chides us from the corner.

“Sorry,” I whisper back.

Aside from when we woke up together the first day, they don’t let us talk much. I assume they’re concerned we’d figure

out a way to break out if we could band together. The windows are locked from the outside — bet your ass I already tried. And they're always guarding the front and back doors.

If there were anything heavy enough, I'd throw it out the window and run for it. From what I can tell of the surrounding homes from the few glances I've got out the window, there are families nearby. I saw some kids' toys in the yard across the street. It's a lower-class residential neighborhood.

Once I find a way to escape this house, I should be able to get help from the neighbors. I'm clinging to that hope. It sustains me. That, along with my tiny acts of rebellion.

Vanessa recaptures my attention as she moves from her hands and knees into a seated position against a wall. Her posture is defensive. She's wasting her attitude on the wrong people. The girls in here aren't going to hurt her. We're all in the same boat. The ones she needs protection from are on the other side of the door.

Judging by the battered look of her, she should know that by now.

"Vanessa," I start, keeping my volume low. "I'm not happy to see you either. But there's no reason to be hostile toward me. We're both fucked now. And not in a good way. Let's put our shit behind us, okay?"

A dark laugh void of humor echoes in the dank room. "Of course, *Little Miss Sunshine* is going to be the bigger person. That's perfect." Another chuckle as she shakes her head. "Do you have a fan club here too? Or will we need to wait until karaoke night until you're everyone's favorite?"

Some twats never change.

"Whatever. Keep being a bitch. I don't give a fuck what you do. I never did." I shake my head at her and return to the thin mat where I was trying to rest before she got thrown in here.

When I roll onto my side, the twinge of pain in my ribs kicks up a few notches as I attempt to get comfortable. Ha. As if there is such a thing here.

After a few minutes, a meek voice calls out to me. “Can you sing more, Ana?”

That’s Tina.

The sweet girl who got here the same night as me.

“Sure, honey.”

“Her name —” Vanessa starts. Immediately, I cut her off with the first line of the song.

She grumbles to herself, but loud enough for all of us to hear every grating word. “Great. The fan club has already formed. This is bullshit. I can’t believe my fucking luck.”

Tina sits up and skewers Vanessa with a sharp glare. “What’s your problem? We don’t need any of your shit,” she hisses. “This is our only break from this nightmare. And you’re ruining it. We support each other in here. If you can’t shut up, then get out. Don’t take the rare minutes of peace we get by being a bitch.”

See what I mean about even the weak girls having moments of strength?

Damn, I’m proud of Tina.

Vanessa turns her ire on the teenager. “You want to know what my problem is? I’ll tell you.” She points her fake fingernail in my direction. “She’s my problem. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for her.”

What?

Tina and I trade confused glances.

When I face Vanessa again, some pieces start aligning in my exhausted mind. “You were behind this, weren’t you? Is that what he meant when he said you helped them? Did you orchestrate this?”

Vanessa trails her tongue over her bloody lip, shaking her head despondently. “Not exactly, princess.”

My spine stiffens, tiny spikes of adrenaline removing the pain from sitting up straighter. “What did you do, Vanessa?”

“I didn’t orchestrate it.”

“What. Did. You. Do?” I ask again, over-enunciating each syllable.

“It wasn’t my idea, okay? They approached me. They already knew who you were.”

I’m on my feet and moving across the room before I know it. “You set me up? For them? Why? When? What kind of monster does something like that to another woman?”

“Only a mega bitch twat would,” Tina chimes in, suddenly behind me with her arms crossed at her chest.

Another girl — one I don’t know yet — stands on my other side now. All of us banding together to eye down the trader bitch who had some hand in getting me fucking drugged and kidnapped.

Not to mention everything that’s happened since then.

“Explain yourself, Vanessa. I deserve the truth.”

More footsteps shuffle behind me.

My throat gets tight, and my heart swells with affection for these girls. I don’t know them. Most of us have barely spoken more than a few words. Yet we’ve suffered together. We’re bonded.

None of us asked to be here.

None of us deserve this.

But when someone wrongs one of us, apparently, we all stand as one.

We wait Vanessa out as her gaze bounces around the room from girl to girl. When her eyes finally land on mine, she looks more nervous than a worm in a hook hallway.

“Fine. I’ll tell you what happened.” A shaky breath leaves her. “A few weeks ago, this guy came into the club. He was asking around about you. As you’d expect, I had nothing nice to say.”

I make a tsking sound. “You have no reason to hate me. I’ve never done anything to you. Never spoke about you behind your back. Never been unkind. Never —”

She cuts me off with her palms out and a calm voice. “I know. I *know*. It was me. Okay? I admit it. I was the one with the problem.”

Biting my tongue, I give her a curt nod.

After a tight swallow, she continues, “Once he knew you and I weren’t friends, he started working me over, I guess you could say. Next thing I knew, he was promising me things. All I had to do was get you away from James one night. He gave me a list of clubs to choose from.”

“That’s why you kept asking Freya to get me to go out? So they could take me?”

She nods, her eyes falling to her lap. “Yes,” she admits softly.

“You knew the guys from the club? The Russians?”

Again, she nods. “I’d met one of them a few times. We’d talk about ways to get you alone.”

If I had the energy, I’d scratch her blind.

When no one speaks — aside from the few gasps of disgust from the other girls — Vanessa finally finishes her confession. “That night, we planned the singing contest so you’d want to stay. Then I acted drunk so Freya would take me home.”

The contest too? That’s insane.

“The dance club was throwing that contest, though. I don’t...” My words trail off because it dawns on me that the entire fucking bar was involved.

Well, not the *entire* bar. But enough people there were dirty. That’s why they gave her a list of acceptable places.

She doesn’t explain because she sees the moment it clicks for me. “So yeah. I delivered you to them. Earlier today, I met up with them to collect my payment.”

“And instead of getting money, they grabbed you and brought you here,” I finish for her.

“Yeah. It seems they didn’t trust me to keep my mouth shut.”

“They were never going to pay you, Vanessa.” I uncross my arms and step back toward my mat. My chin and voice wobble in equal measure. “They just told you that. And you fell for it. Wonderful job. Now we’re both in here with no way out.”

The girls flanking me give me a wide berth. Tina squeezes my arm as I pass her, infusing strength into her touch.

She’s got so little to spare, and yet, she lends me some.

“I’m okay,” I tell the sweet kid. “Thank you.”

As I slide down the wall, I watch Vanessa break down in tears.

For herself. Not me.

Despite how much I’d love to rub salt in her wounds, I won’t. No one deserves this place. Not even her.

I don’t need to punish her. She’s going to get worse than I can give her from the monsters in the other room.

There’s nothing else I need to say to her ever again.

Karma will take it from here.

CHAPTER 52

THE MFKLIS GETTING LONGER

TOMER

Turns out, Mia found out about Lettie in much the same way I did. I should have expected it. I'm kicking myself for not picking up on it when I was deep-diving into her laptop. Not sure how I missed that.

It doesn't matter now.

Mia knows about Lettie. And since Klein was at her house when I arrived to demand answers, he knows too. But neither of them knows why or how I know Lettie. I'm not volunteering that information. It's irrelevant to the mission.

The only thing that matters is finding Lettie and bringing her back to me.

From the moment we arrived at HQ to prepare for the rescue op, we've all been so focused on our tasks that it hasn't come up. Even if they do ask, I don't care.

We all agreed not to tell Boss about this mission. It's off the books. We'd rather beg for forgiveness than ask for permission.

Not only would this be the absolute worst time to reveal who she is — but we don't have fucking time for any delays. He'd want to involve law enforcement, and I'm not risking her for another damn second longer than necessary.

While I was busy hitting roadblocks in my search for Lettie this afternoon, Mia single-handedly uncovered *almost* everything we needed to locate her. She found videos and pictures of Lettie being drugged and taken out of the bar from various social media accounts, including those from the bachelorette party.

Although I saw those women wearing the inflatable dicks, I never thought to be a social media detective like Mia.

Having to watch the video of the woman I love being nearly carried out of the dance club while nobody intervened filled me with unimaginable rage. I've seen a lot of fucked up shit in my life. My kill count in the Rangers was the highest in our unit. When I moved off the front line into intelligence, I had a hand in ensuring enemy targets were decimated on a far larger scale. I watched it all. Never had to turn away.

But when Lettie's footing slipped at the edge of the screen, and the fucker who was holding her up had to drag her the rest of the way out of the frame, I closed my eyes and had to choke back the bile.

I couldn't fucking watch it.

Fortunately, I'd seen what I needed to see. Mia took it from there while I attempted to quell my rage.

She had to do some additional maneuvering, but she ultimately found usable photos of the three men who have been drugging and abducting women in the area for more than a year, including my sweet Lettie.

Once we got back to HQ, Mia's improvements to my facial recognition software enabled her to pinpoint current locations on all three of the perps. We rallied a group of operatives, splitting them into two teams.

Their task is to nab the fuckers and extract the intel we need to find Lettie.

Mia and I are running the op from HQ, watching through their body cams.

Alpha team — Jonesy, Klein, Kri, and Junior — collected two tangos from a bar and are headed to a remote location for some aggressive *persuasion*.

I only hope it ends with Lettie's location, along with excessive bloodshed and two fewer heartbeats.

Bravo team — Shep and Aaron — already completed their portion of the mission, finding the third tango at a strip club. Shep had the pleasure of roughing him up. Although I wished it were me, it was enjoyable to watch. They got Lettie's potential location out of him and left him bloody and tied up in a closet.

Unfortunately, he's alive.

Not for long, though.

After I get Lettie, he's the first I'll hit.

The MFKL has a few more names on it after tonight. And I'll keep adding to it until everyone behind this is bloody at my feet.

Shep and Aaron are en route to the location the fucker provided. We've directed them to start recon while they wait for Alpha team to catch up.

The waiting is killing me.

It's taking every bit of my intestinal fortitude to avoid sprinting out of here to get her. But we need to confirm the location first, and the team is supposed to do the extraction. Not me.

However, as the minutes tick by, it's getting harder to resist the urge. Knowing that she *might* be at that address makes every second I sit here torture. My chair might as well be made of nails.

My knee bobs with adrenaline as I finish wiping the history from the surveillance cameras surrounding the bar where Alpha team picked up their tangos. We need to cover our tracks.

More waiting. More torture. For me and my sugar bear.

That's it.

Fuck waiting.

I can't fucking take it anymore.

Jumping out of my chair, I send it toppling behind me. "I'm going to get her. Fuck it." I toss my headset down on the desk and barrel toward the door.

"Wait, Tomer. Stop!" Mia stands, grabbing my arm to hold me back. "We don't have confirmation yet. And the team will get her out. I need you here."

I shrug from her grasp. "I'll be on comms. You can redirect me if Alpha team gets a different twenty from the other tangos. I'm not waiting here when she's out there suffering. *She needs me.* Every second we delay is one more that she's in pain and danger."

I charge out of the room, my heart pounding violently. The same heart Lettie brought to life.

Mia comes thundering out of the lair, trailing a few feet behind me. "Tomer! You can't change the plan in the middle of an op."

"Lettie needs me, Mia. I'm fucking going. You can handle the con."

Fortunately, she doesn't follow.

As much as I'd love to watch Alpha team rough up the other two tangos, I need to get to Lettie more.

I swipe my badge to enter the weapons room. A satellite image of the location we were given shows this as a single-family dwelling. So I expeditiously grab supplies that'll help me remove windows or cut through bars, along with a half dozen other gadgets and gizmos.

Plus weapons and a shit ton of ammo.

At the last minute, I remember to grab a headset so I can communicate with the team and throw a tactical vest over my shoulder.

“En route, Mia,” I advise through my comms as I tear out of Redleg HQ, with my tires squealing.

Nothing will stop me from getting her out.

Alive. Right fucking now.

CHAPTER 53

BUTTERFLY

LETTIE

With my head held high, I stride away from him.
Another man. Another violation.
But I still won't break.

At least they wear condoms.

Crazy how that's something that crosses my mind, isn't it?

But it makes it better. Somehow.

One of Skidmark's duties is to ensure they wear them so we don't get pregnant. In general, pregnancy is bad for business unless a customer makes a special request.

Disgusting fuckers.

Apparently, someone is coming in a day or two to give me a shot or an implant. They talk about me as if I'm not in the room.

Forced birth control.

More of my autonomy taken.

Not that the idea of carrying one of these monster's babies appeals to me. But still.

Dread threatens to surge, but I quash it down.

It's haunting me that I haven't been able to scrub myself clean. What I wouldn't give for a shower, a Brillo pad, and a bottle of Ajax cleaner.

I opt to take my precious few moments of rest in the room without windows. It makes me a bit claustrophobic to be in there. But I think I saw Vanessa go into the other room.

When I enter the bedroom, three of the girls are already passed out from exhaustion. *Lucky are they who sleep.* As long as they don't dream.

The fourth girl hands me a ratty T-shirt. "Here. Cover up."

Apparently, I've never heard her speak until now. Her accent is thick and familiar. *Russian.*

My gut twists, and a chill runs up my spine.

I despise how this entire fucking horrific experience has made me instantly distrust her because of nothing other than her accent.

I don't want to be naked anymore, so I take the offered clothing. "Thanks," I answer, barely making a sound.

The shirt should be long enough to cover my privates.

Not that they're *private* anymore.

A silly memory distracts my sadness, almost bringing a grin to my battered face. Stella and I overheard her mother on the phone once. She recalled how humiliating the birthing experience was because she felt like the entire hospital saw all the way to her soul via her *lady bits*.

It's like that in this house. Except at the end of the day, there's no beautiful angel baby to cancel your mortification.

Only sadness, disgust, and, of course, shame.

The Russian girl sits on the floor in the corner with her back to the wall and her long, bruised legs crossed in front of

her chest. She's in a bra and ripped shorts.

I take a similar position beside her and tug the shirt on over myself, grateful for the slightest protection and comfort it provides. "Was this your shirt?"

She nods, somehow infusing sadness and compassion into the common gesture. "I have bottoms and a bra. Seems fair you have something too."

My earlier fear of her because of her accent begins to wane. We sit in silence for a while. My head rests against the wall as my haggard breaths begin to lull me to sleep.

Suddenly, I jerk awake when the sensation of falling makes my whole-body tense. The movement causes more of that unbearable rib pain to lance through me, making me hiss through my teeth.

"You okay?" she asks.

"I think I have a broken rib," I answer, one hand cupping my side. "But we're supposed to be quiet."

"They don't hear. Only say that to scare us."

"How do you know?"

"I'm here for nine weeks." Her tone isn't loud, but it's not quiet either. So she must have some measure of confidence that they're not listening to us. "And Savin tell me it is okay to talk to other girls when no one looking."

"Who is that?"

She stares at the wall, her chin wobbling as she fights back tears. "My boyfriend. He forced to bring me here. But he visit me."

"You knew him before you came here?"

She nods.

"He's the one who brought you here?"

Fighting back a sob, she hangs her head low. "Yes. He had to, or they kill me."

"And he still comes to see you?"

“Yes. He bring me food and vitamins. He say he will rescue me soon.”

My head is about to explode. I’m too sleep-deprived and hungry to understand what she’s saying. My brain is in a perpetual fog. None of it makes sense. How could she trust anyone who brought her here?

Are they emotionally abusing her with promises of a rescue on top of all the other fucked up shit they’re doing to us? Do I have that to look forward to when I’ve been here for as long as her?

And fuck, that’s a long time.

Will there be any of me left by then?

“Does Savin work with them?” I ask, trying to uncover what she’s talking about.

With a sad nod, she wipes away a tear as soon as it falls. “At first, he had to. They have his sister. If he stop bringing girls, they will kill her.”

Sounds like something they’d do. Sick bastards.

After she collects her composure, she continues, “And then Savin’s sister, Katia, got pregnant. The Pakhan is father of baby. Lenkov. So she safe now. She is his favorite.”

“What does Pakhan mean? Or Lenkov?”

“Lenkov is the Pakhan. Man in charge. Very powerful.” She swallows, and her voice is shaky when she speaks again. “When he find out about his sister being pregnant, Savin told them he not bring any more girls. He wanted to leave Bratva. He finished. Now that Katia is safe. But then...”

More tears spill over her bruised and swollen cheeks.

“Bratva?” I wonder aloud.

“Yes. Americans call it mafia.”

Mafia. I knew it.

Viktor had that air about him.

I hold her hand as she explains. “Savin came one night to my apartment. He said we must leave right away. Run. But it was too late.” She sniffles back her tears. “When we got in car, they wait for us. With guns.”

“And so they were going to kill you unless he brought you here?”

With his sister no longer able to be used as leverage, they forced him to continue abducting girls by taking his girlfriend. How can they live with themselves?

Nodding, she puts her face in her palms and sobs softly. I bring her close, wrapping my arm over her shoulders. When she grabs onto my waist, I wince from the pain, but I push through it. She needs comfort.

Once she stops crying, she sweeps her gaze around the room where the other girls are passed out. “I have secret.”

Intrigued at the abrupt change, I tip my head to one side and widen my eyes. “What?”

“You can’t tell other girls,” she whispers.

“I promise. I won’t.”

A sneaky half-grin slowly eases onto her face. “I have special place. I want to share with you because I love when you sing. So if you need a break, you come here. Hide.”

“A special place?”

“I hide there. And inside is medicine Savin give me. For overdose. If a girl needs it, you can get it to save them.” Her conspiratorial expression fades, sorrow taking its place. “Maybe it’s me one day. You can save me.”

“What are you talking about? What medicine?”

Am I hallucinating? Special hiding places and magic medicine?

Did I just enter the Shire from *The Lord of the Rings*? Is Vanessa auditioning for the role of Gollum?

Fuck. I’m losing it.

“Before one of us is ready to leave, they maybe give her drugs. Like her.” She points at a girl in the corner, who’s sprawled out like a starfish.

“She’s on drugs?”

“Yes. They start her on drugs three days ago. When she leave, she will need more drugs. They keep her that way. Control her.”

I glance over at the passed-out girl, realizing I haven’t seen her much today. Because she’s been in here high or passed out. That’s so fucked up.

But at least it’s a break from the pain.

Maybe it’s a mercy in disguise.

“Don’t worry. You too pretty for that. Probably no drugs for you. Not yet.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Why does that matter?”

“You’ll be sold at auction. She’ll work on streets.”

Realization hits me like a kick to the tit.

Since she’ll be out on the streets, she could escape. So they’re making her an addict, keeping her dependent on them.

Everything has been planned. It’s structured and calculated. We’re not the first, and we won’t be the last.

And we’re nothing to them. A product. A commodity. *Things* they can control, right down to the circuitry in our mind.

Even our brain cells are under their influence.

This whole time, I’ve been telling myself that they can’t change who I am on the inside. They might have my body, but I’ll never let them claim the rest of me.

That was a lie. A fantasy.

There’s no hope left for me to cling to. They’ve managed to take away everything. We have no autonomy. None.

They decide if we eat, drink, or starve. They decide when we use the bathroom or sleep. They decide if we live or die.

And now, our emotions and cravings are at their mercy too.

This is madness.

My throat grows thick, and my sinuses sting. Tears pool in my eyes, poised to run down my cheeks.

No matter how much I fight, they *will* break me eventually.

Somehow, they'll win.

I went from existing in one prison to another, with only a brief interlude between the two.

At least for a time, I lived. Truly lived.

With James by my side, I was loved, independent, and happy. He showed me I was strong enough to banish the shame I thought would be my eternal shadow.

Instead of being swaddled in despair, I emerged a new person.

A woman — strong, worthy, and beautiful.

But that old me is gone now.

If she was ever real to begin with. Perhaps it was all an illusion. Did I ever truly have control over my life?

A morose thought hits me, striking me in the chest with the weight of a freight train.

Oh yeah. I did take control of my life once.

It was the night I thought sitting at a bar alone was a good idea. Look where my independence led me.

I should've left with Freya. Hell, I should have never gone out on a stupid girls' night. For that matter, I never should've left Climax, Georgia.

My mama's taunting voice cuts through my psyche, and I hear it as clearly as if she were in the room with me.

I told you that leaving the church and the family would be a mistake.

See what having sex out of wedlock got you, Lettie?

You want to whore yourself out? Well, now that's exactly what you are. A whore.

I deserve this. I'm being punished.

Tears rain down my cheeks, spilling onto my legs. Sobs shake my chest violently, and the pain in my ribs doesn't even register over the anguish in my soul.

The Russian girl holds me, comfortingly stroking my shoulder. "What's your name?" she asks when my tears subside. "I call you *Butterfly* in my mind. Because of song."

Butterflies are free to fly.

Yet I'm not.

Does my name matter anymore? Do the consumables I used to pile in my buggy at the supermarket have names beyond their brand? Milk is just milk. It's not Susie Milk. Or Jane Milk. There's no butter named Lettie. It's just milk and butter. We're no different.

Blonde. Brunette. Sluts. Whores.

That's all we are.

Bodies to be used.

We're less than nothing. Names don't matter.

When I don't answer, she says, "I'm Tasha."

The door swings open, bouncing on the wall. We all flinch from the hulking figure in the door. Except for the girl they drugged.

I hate to cower from him, but my strength reserves are depleted. So I burrow my face into Tasha's shoulder, hoping they don't drag me out. Shame at my cowardice inflames my raw insides.

He points at one of the girls on the floor. "Dark hair slut. Come. Now."

I hate how the relief floods my system. I shouldn't be happy that she's about to be violated. But I can't help it.

This is what I've become. Someone who feels relief when another woman is hauled out of the room instead of me.

I'm weak. Almost unrecognizable to myself.

This is how they do it — how they break us.

No. No. No. Fight, Lettie.

I may bend, but I will *not* break.

When the door closes, I face Tasha with renewed determination. I won't hide my name anymore — that's the surest way to forget who I am.

“My name is Violet Holt. I *will* get out of here and take my life back one day.”

A sad yet determined smile graces her face. “I will get out too, Violet Holt.”

We sit together, sharing a brief moment of unity that fortifies our inner strength.

We will not break.

She tips her head toward the bedroom closet. “Come. I show you my secret place now.”

I follow her, both of us crawling into the empty, narrow closet. She turns to ensure I'm watching, then glances over her shoulder toward the other two girls. I do the same. They're both out like a light.

Tasha runs her fingertips over the wood paneling that lines the closet walls. “See here?” She works her fingertips into a groove and pops out a part of the panel.

I gasp in shock, quickly covering my mouth so I don't squeal and wake up the others.

She shushes me through a grin, then moves aside and waves me closer to the small opening. I peek into the hole.

Silky strands of hope branch out from the bottom of my chest.

Although the opening is small, inside the wall is a larger place of refuge, roughly six feet long and three feet deep. It's

as tall as the ceiling. The wood framing of the interior walls is still present. I suspect it was originally a deep closet that they made shallower to create this hidden alcove.

“Savin say this was used to hide guns and drugs.”

How sweet. Ugh.

Despite having a construction-in-progress feel, the hidden space is cozy and inviting at first glance. There’s a battery-operated reading light taped onto the wall. Tasha reaches over my shoulder to click it on.

A soft blanket covers the floor, the fluffy kind. I can’t help but run my hand through it, luxuriating in the feel of something comforting. There’s a pillow too. My hand is drawn to it next. *Heaven.* Can’t believe how much I miss a simple pillow after only a few days. Wait. Has it been a few days? More? Less? I don’t know. Feels like I’ve been here forever.

“Give me that,” she whispers, pointing at a shoe box along one side.

I remove it and pass it to her. She opens the lid, revealing a book written in Russian and a small stash of granola bars, cookies, and candy.

Not just any candy. It’s chocolate.

Yummy.

My mouth waters.

In this hell, it’s easy to forget how hungry you are. Now that I see food, my stomach churns and growls.

An image of the Homer Simpson meme where he’s drooling flashes through my mind. That’s me now. Drooly Homer.

She distracts me from my food fantasies by removing an oddly-shaped container from the box. “Nose spray. For overdose.” She puts the white plastic tip near her nose, positioning her fingers along the plunger to mime how to administer it. “If you see girl in trouble and her breathing almost stop, then you can use on her. Save her.”

Narcan. The stuff they give to people who overdose. I saw it on that paramedics show once.

“Thank you for showing this to me.”

Before she closes the space, she teaches me how to close the panel from the inside and then pop it open when I need to come back out.

We shuffle back to our original spots against the bedroom wall and wait. Wait to sleep. Wait to be yelled at again. Hit or worse.

My mind is too full of everything she showed me to allow me to rest, though. Even if I could sleep, I’d eventually have to wake up again. That’s one of the worst parts.

When you wake up, there’s a moment of bliss when you don’t know where you are. You forget you’re in hell. Then you remember again, and it steals that solitary moment of respite from you. A literal thief in the night.

No. I’d rather stay awake.

At least when I’m awake, I can control *some* of my thoughts. Well... for now.

“Will you sing again?” she whispers.

“Okay.”

The melody and lyrics come with almost no mental prompting. Some words break through to the front of my mind, surrounding me tightly in a cozy cocoon.

Saved my life. Roped and tied. Sugar bear. You’re a butterfly.

Closing my eyes, I envision James’s blue-green eyes and how they looked into mine with tenderness and affection. Especially when he was making love to me. He’d often scoop my hair out of the way to see my whole face, and he’d let his gaze cascade over me like a waterfall.

Our connection was beautiful.

All the intelligence and steadiness hidden behind the mask he wore so well provided shelter from the chaos inside my

head. And when he'd bind me in his ropes, all the world disappeared.

Each tight band was a warm hug, holding me together and setting me free all at once.

And he was with me through it. Checking in with me. Caressing me. Kissing my nose or my head. *Or other parts.*

Complete euphoria.

I'll treasure those quiet moments with him. They were the only times my mind was silent.

My tender memories are suddenly disintegrated when screams start coming from the other room.

I cup my hands over my ears and remember how he held me like I was precious, allowing the mental image to tuck me back into that cocoon and drown out the sounds of suffering.

James would never hurt me like these savages do. Even when he was in Dom mode, he was gentle and loving.

I loved him.

No. Not loved.

I love him.

They're not taking that from me, either.

Losing track of time, my eyes grow heavy once more. I don't know when I stopped singing.

Right before I'm tugged under, I'm startled alert by the power snapping off. Light no longer peeks in from under the bedroom door. The house is instantly silent as every appliance and ceiling fan cuts off at once.

Then there are screams.

I reach out for Tasha, finding only empty air where she was sitting. Did they haul her out while I was in dreamland?

Panic assaults my every fiber until I remember the hidden space she showed me. As the men begin yelling at each other and the girls, I crawl into the closet and pop open the panel on the wall.

Creeping in silently, I hide.

Like a coward.

But at least I'll be alive.

BRICK BY BRICK

TOMER

My team is pissed at me for leaving HQ in the middle of an op, but I can't find a single fuck to give them. If they aren't ready to rescue Lettie, that's too damn bad. I'm done waiting.

She's inside this house.

I know it with every cell in my body.

And judging by the horrific images I'm picking up as I scan the outside of the structure with a body heat-detecting radar, every second she stays inside is another second she's being hurt. Violated. Beaten. Tormented.

Bile rises as my stomach clenches, leaving an acrid taste in my mouth.

My sweet Lettie is in there.

Mia's voice, steady and calm, sails through my earpiece, telling me that Alpha team is four minutes out.

"I'm not waiting four more minutes."

Mia objects, “Hold for infil. Charlie Mike recon efforts only. We have no reason to rush this. No alarms or cause for panic. Hold steady. Backup is coming.”

I outrank her. Plus, I’ve got no fucks to give for other opinions.

I’ve identified a viable ingress point via the northwest bedroom window. “Shades are drawn. The window has a strange lock on the outside that needs a key, but I think I can pick it open and get inside.”

Ignoring my update, Mia cuts back in. “Hold for the other team, Tomer. We have time.”

If we delay, we risk forfeiting a stealth entry. That’s our best bet. I’m happy to go in guns blazing, but in the interest of protecting the captives inside, a smoother infil is preferable. Right now, we have the upper hand, but that can change in an instant.

Gritting my teeth, I pick the lock while defending my position over the radio. “Yeah, but we don’t know how long until the tangos come into this room for a girl or two, and my patience is officially spent. I’m not losing our fucking entry point. We have the tactical advantage but might not if we wait.”

Over the comms, a few of the team members take Mia’s side, attempting to dissuade me from entering, but fuck them too. If they were in my position — with the woman they love on the other side being beaten and worse — they’d do the same.

They’ll fall in line. Or they won’t, and I’ll do it myself. Don’t care. All that matters is getting my sugar bear out.

When I hear that sweet clicking sound of metal gears rotating, my heart rate picks up. That’s one step closer to my girl.

The window looks like it hasn’t been opened in a long time, so I remove a small canister of lubricant from one of the pockets on my tactical vest to grease the track. Last thing we

need is for a squeaky fucking window to announce our presence before we're ready to pounce.

"Listen for alarms, guys. I disabled the lock. Once I open the window, I'll peek inside to get a visual of the room. Popping open the window in three, two, one."

A resolute focus settles over me, silencing everything that doesn't serve my mission. In the space of a few seconds, I visualize how the situation could play out and sort through various contingency plans.

I'm ready.

My hands are steady and controlled as I stealthily raise the window in one smooth motion. Thankfully, it opens without any audible alarms.

In a scant whisper, I alert the team of my next move. "Scanning interior before I enter."

"Fuck. Tomer, be silent as a mouse," Mia warns unnecessarily. It's not like I planned to go in with my cymbals and a snare drum in tow.

Damn. Even my thoughts are hostile. I need to get a fucking grip.

At least her next order is useful. "Shep, watch the kitchen tangos for movement toward the bedroom when Tomer enters through the window."

"Wilco," he responds.

Shep's at the back of the property, scanning for heat signatures on the other side of the structure.

After I confirm no tangos inside the bedroom and the interior door is closed, I'm set for infil. Mia diverts Aaron from checking the perimeter to watch my six as I enter. Good call.

With a firm grip on the window ledge, I pull myself up and slip inside in near silence. Years of practice and muscle memory take control. Despite being stuck in the office for years, my body remembers how to sneak up on the enemy without a sound.

My boots crest the windowsill, and I slide down to the floor.

From behind me, Aaron whispers, “T, should I follow?”

“Hold,” I respond, my voice barely audible. If I’m about to hit trouble, I don’t necessarily need to endanger him.

None of the girls in the room move. They’re either playing possum or worse.

“Okay. I’m in. Any movement from the kitchen, Shep?”

“Negative,” he responds.

Bravo team arrived while I was infilling, and they’re moving into position on the other side of the house. Kri remains in the vehicle as our lookout.

With the tangos unaware of my presence, I rise from my crouched position by the window and survey the room, my eyes darting from woman to woman.

Or more aptly, girl to girl.

Fucking hell. They’re so young.

None of them are Lettie.

My insides churn. Rage, desperation, and panic threaten to shake my composure. What if she’s not here?

No. That’s not happening. The residence has more rooms, and our scans showed more girls.

We’ll find her.

She’s here. She has to be.

Returning my focus to the unconscious females, I attempt to wake them with gentle shoulder nudges and hushed words. Bruises and cuts mar their skin. Most of them are barely dressed.

I breathe through my nose to bypass the bitter taste in my mouth.

I’ve seen similar horrific conditions before. The enemies we eliminated in combat were often surrounded by abducted

women they used for whatever twisted reasons. It never sickened my stomach to *this* degree, though.

“No sign of Lettie,” I inform my team. “I’ve got pulses on the three girls. They’re alive. One is groggy but waking. The other two are out cold.”

Mia responds, “Can you lift them? Pass them to Aaron out the window?”

The fuck?

Primary target comes first. Always.

“Not yet. We get Lettie first,” I grit out through a clenched jaw.

Mia’s suggestion processes a second later. While Lettie is our primary mission, all the females deserve rescue.

Lettie would want us to save them.

I can’t do that on my own. Not without killing every fucker I see — which I’m not entirely opposed to. But since we don’t have Redleg’s backing on this op, it’s unwise. Lettie will need me when we leave here tonight. I can’t be there for her if I’m in jail.

So I wait for the team.

It takes *all* my fucking strength not to rush the house to find my girl.

But still, I wait.

Somehow, a calmer head prevails. Last thing I want to do is cause someone to be taken hostage because I rushed in recklessly. And I’ll be damned if I risk Lettie getting hit in the crossfire.

Mia positions the team strategically, constructing a solid infil plan on the fly. With one ear pressed to the door, I listen to what’s going on in the rest of the house.

The team calls out updates over the comms. Shep and Jonesy enter the window on the other side of the residence just like I did. Junior finds a small bathroom window for ingress

from the rear of the house. Klein and Aaron join me in the northwest bedroom.

We're surrounding our prey, working like a pack on the hunt.

I mute my microphone, attempting to calm the girl who woke up. With three males suddenly looking at her, all of us clad in military tactical gear and balaclavas hiding our faces, she's terrified.

"Hey. Easy there. We're not going to hurt you," I tell her.

Hope coats her shaky voice. "Are you SWAT?"

"Not quite. But we will disable the enemy and extricate you." I shake my head and correct, "We're going to round up the bad guys, then get you and the other girls out safely. There are more of us on the other side of the house."

A gush of air passes her lips, and her chin quivers as tears she can't fight back escape. "Really? You promise?"

"We promise, little mama," Aaron adds from over my shoulder in a more soothing tone than I can muster. "You're going home tonight. We need you to be quiet now, okay? The lights are gonna go off in a minute. Don't be scared. Just stay in here."

She nods, silently sobbing.

I turn on my microphone, focusing more on the comms now that we're all in position. Shep and Jonesy appear to be having a similar conversation with another captive on the other side of the house.

Another one who's *not* my sugar bear.

I glance back at the young girl in the corner. "Is there a blond woman here named Lettie or Violet?"

She shakes her head. "There are a few blond girls, but I don't recognize that name."

My heart fractures, a jagged chasm opening down the middle.

Aaron's hand cups my shoulder, and he squeezes. "We'll find her, T."

A few seconds later, we slide our night vision goggles down, draw our weapons, and prepare to ambush the enemy.

Mia cuts off the power to the house remotely. I'm on point. Aaron and Klein follow. We advance into the living room immediately.

The tangos must see our shadows. One of the men yells, "Weapons!"

But it's too late for them.

I attack my target with a forceful throat punch. Precise and powerful. He cups his neck, leaving his midsection vulnerable. I execute four body blows in quick succession, then follow it up with a knee to the groin. He deserves more, but that'll have to wait until I find Lettie.

The fucker goes down like a sack of bricks. A swift kick to the gut, and he rolls onto his stomach for me. I jump on top of him, remove zip ties from my vest, and secure his wrists behind his back. He's still gurgling from the throat and groin punch as I mash my knees forcefully in the back of his hamstrings, administering some well-deserved pain while I secure his ankles and knees together.

With him restrained, I search him for weapons and grab his cell phone, shutting it off immediately, then tuck it in my back pocket.

I'll need that later.

My team calls out their statuses. One by one, all six of the traffickers are subdued. We didn't even break a sweat.

"That's all six," Junior calls out, roving between the kitchen and living room.

Aaron and Shep hover on the other side of the room, their tangos restrained on the floor.

A few of the men begin cursing, some of it in Russian. I tune it out.

It's possible some of the tangos were missed on our external scan. Subduing all of them is essential.

"You two, do a sweep," I order Shep and Aaron, pointing them in separate directions. They tear off.

My head on a frantic swivel, I search the faces of the women in the living room. It's hard to determine in the green haze of the night vision lenses, but I don't recognize them.

No Lettie.

My windpipe swells, and it gets harder to breathe. A tremor rocks my hands. The typical steely calm that's always been my companion on countless ops is absent.

I *need* to find her. Where is she?

Bolting to my feet, I strain my eyes to inspect the room more closely. I sweep my vision from side to side and back again. There has to be more girls here. In the corner maybe? Behind the couch?

Nothing. No one.

"Lettie!" I bellow, my voice cracking and composure decimated.

Shep reports that the east side of the structure is clear of tangos.

"West side clear," Aaron chimes in next. "Only more girls."

More girls. Maybe my Lettie is back there.

I race toward the kitchen, desperate for the first glimpse of her. "Lettie, are you in here?"

None of the girls jump up and race into my arms.

"Turn the lights on," Klein instructs Mia over the comms.

That'll help. She'll be able to see me and know it's safe to come out.

Any second, I'll hear her angelic voice.

The power flickers on as I race through the disgusting space, putrid odor assaulting me.

No Lettie in the kitchen.

No Lettie in the living room.

I sprint toward the hallway.

“Lettie! Lettie Holt! *Violet!*”

Please be here, sugar. Please be here. Tell me I'm not too late.

I bang open doors, one after another, giving no fucks if I break through walls.

A closet. A bathroom. Another bedroom.

I'll tear this place down if I have to.

Brick by fucking brick.

“Lettie! It's me, sugar. Answer me!”

No reply.

Girls huddle in corners, some of them naked. All of them bruised and battered. All of them traumatized.

But not one of them is the woman I love. The woman I vowed to protect.

That fissure that began ripping my heart in two deepens until two separate pieces hang together by mere threads.

I won't survive if this is how I lose her. I can't. *I can't.*

I'm not strong enough.

But I can't give up on her. I won't stop until I find her.

Until she's safe.

With my hands coiled into tight fists, I stand in the middle of the living room and wail at the top of my lungs. “Violet!”

CHAPTER 55

**SOMEONE SAVED MY
LIFE TONIGHT**

LETTIE

A lone in the darkness of Tasha's hidey-hole, I wrap my arms around my bent knees and rock while humming our song. My eyes refill with tears as fast as they fall.

The sounds from the house are so foreign to what I've grown used to these last few days. The men yelling in fear, instead of the women.

I'm tempted to take that as a good sign. Maybe we're being saved.

But I fear it's a trap. A twisted game of my mind's own making. Some type of nightmare, tempting me with promises of rescue, only to dash the prize away at the last moment, leaving me a heaving pile of misery on the floor.

From the other side of the wall, I detect hushed female voices and a deep male voice. I strain to decipher the words over the blood racing behind my ears.

He's gathering them up.

Another male voice shouts louder than the rest. "Lettie!"

Oh no. *Fuck*. They're trying to find me. They know I'm hiding.

"Lettie, are you in here?" he yells again.

This time, the voice sounds familiar.

James?

No. It can't be him.

I shake my head and cover my ears. Fear of being lured into the nightmare's trap pulses through me. He's not shouting my name. It's a cruel trick.

And it's not him.

The voice grows fainter, still yelling out for me. Banging sounds follow. Doors slamming, maybe?

When the voice bellows my first and last name, my arm hairs stand on end. Is it Viktor again? Has he come back for me like he said he would?

My hand hovers over the panel, and I listen carefully, pressing my ear right up to the wall.

And then I hear him.

"Lettie! It's me, sugar. Answer me!"

It is him.

I know it without a doubt.

My mind would never be this cruel to me. James came for me.

I shake and push at the wooden panel door, desperate to get to him before he vanishes. Or before I wake up.

If this is a dream, at least I'll have one minute with him before it ends.

The door sticks at first. I try again and am rewarded when it flops open, falling to the closet floor.

Heart pounding, I crawl from the dark space on my hands and knees. I stumble as I attempt to stand but catch myself.

I listen from the doorway. Renewed fear that I'm about to be jumped freezes me in place.

My knees tremble, and my heart pounds.

“Violet!” he bellows in anguish.

My legs propel me toward him, one foot in front of the other, faster and faster. I *need* to comfort him. To wipe the misery from his voice.

Instinctively, my arms wrap around my waist. I pause at the end of the hallway, peeking timidly into the living room.

Men with dark ski masks and military-type gear are scattered around. The vile creatures who've violated, beat, and tormented us are restrained on the floor. Girls are huddled in the corners of the room, clinging together. Some of them are even smiling.

Actually smiling.

But I don't see James.

He was the one who led me out of that hole with his voice and pained cries.

Perhaps he wasn't real. I fabricated his voice so I could find the courage to come out. To be rescued.

Even if he's not here, he saved me.

“James?” I quaver, my hopeful eyes searching the room for a sign of him.

“Lettie,” he answers, relief woven into the two syllables.

It's him. He's real.

I can't see his face or his hair. But I'd know him anywhere.

Standing on the other side of the living room, he pulls off his mask and eats up the space between us. I only have time to take one step before he slams into me. The pain in my chest from my ribs barely registers as he holds me tightly to him.

Relief unlike I've ever known washes over me, cascading in crashing waves over my skin. Cuts, welts, and bruises be damned.

“I got you, sugar bear. I got you.” He strokes my hair with one hand, keeping his other hand nestled around my back to hold me near. “I got you. I got you,” he mutters on repeat.

Despite my failing strength, I cling tighter to him. “James, oh my god,” I sob into his chest. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again. How did you find me?”

“I’m so sorry I didn’t find you sooner, sugar bear. So damn sorry. I tried to find you faster.” His words falter, breath hitching.

I can’t stand the pain and self-censure in his tone.

No more guilt for things that aren’t within our control.

I look up at him, still struggling to believe he’s not a figment of my imagination.

He rambles on, “Before they... I swear to you, I tried...” His words trail off.

Unable to resist touching his ashen face, I cup his cheek with my palm. His scruff is longer than it was the last time I saw him.

He covers my hand with his, turns his face into my touch, and kisses my knuckles.

With our bodies moving in unison, we press our foreheads together.

I inhale. For the first time since I took that kick to my ribs, the pain of breathing is gone.

And so I simply breathe him in.

“Sweetness, I’m so sorry. I’ve got you now. You’re safe.”

Uncaring how I smell or what I taste like, I need to feel his lips against mine. I rise to my toes and tilt my head back. He gently captures my mouth in the most tender kiss of my life.

From now on, I won’t need the cocoon of our song or the blanket or the secret hole in the wall. He’s my solace. My protection. My comfort.

He’s my home.

All too soon, he stiffens and cups my cheeks. “We need to go, sugar bear. Someone is coming. You’re not safe here.”

I don’t have time to panic before another man makes an announcement. Unlike James, he keeps his face hidden behind the ski mask. “Ladies, listen up. We’ve got three vehicles outside. Pile into the nearest one, and we’ll get you to safety.”

All the mask-wearing men spring into action. Girls are corralled toward the front door. Some of the rescuers seem to be answering questions I don’t hear.

It strikes me for the first time that he’s dressed the same as the other men. They look like cops or the military. I don’t see badges or insignias to designate them as law enforcement.

Is it possible he’s not in IT like he claimed? Maybe these men have something to do with his past in the Army. Or is he still enlisted?

I’ve always had questions about his career. Things that didn’t add up. But it never mattered.

All that mattered was how he loved me.

In the midst of euphoria from our reconciliation and a rushed exit, confusion settles in. I chalk it up to my brain fog and simply hold his hand.

Girls file out, and I attempt to follow. James’s hand in mine starts to slip, so I stop, look over my shoulder at him, and grab it tighter. I’m not ready to let go.

His face is a wreck of emotions, teeth clenching and upper lip curled. As he scans the room, his eyes burn with rage.

Engulfing his hand with both of mine, I tug him toward the door. “James?”

“Which one, Lettie baby?” he forces out.

I shake my head, not understanding his question.

“Which one, Lettie?” he demands again, this time his eyes lock on the faces of the men on the floor. One by one, he pointedly takes them in as if committing their images to memory. “Which one hurt you?”

“All of them,” I answer honestly.

A growl erupts from the pit of his chest. He shakes free of my hands and stomps back into the living room, anger swirling around him like a vortex.

“Kri, come in here and get Violet to the van,” James yells.

Wait. What?

My attention on James is split with the other rescuers as they shout orders and demand we hurry to the vehicles. Two men haul out the girl from the bedroom, the one who was passed out from whatever drugs they’ve given her. She’s still not awake. Maybe we should have used that overdose stuff on her.

Once the men move her limp body past me, my focus returns to James. Realization of what’s about to happen smacks me out of the brain fog. He’s going to hurt them. For me.

Who says romance is dead?

But we need to leave.

What if the cars leave us behind? He said we’re not safe here. And I don’t want to stick around to find out why.

What if Viktor and his armed men are coming? If they catch us trying to escape, they’ll kill us.

We’re all witnesses. They’d never let us walk away.

Before I take my next breath, a blond woman with her head shaved on one side comes up behind me and grabs my forearm. “Violet, come with me. I need to get you to the van.”

I shrug from her grasp. “I’m *not* going without him.”

Bounding into action, I race across the room to James, who’s squatting over the asshole who burned me with his cigarette.

James grabs him roughly by the back of the head with a handful of hair, murmuring something low enough that I can’t decipher the words. He slams the fucker’s face into the carpet,

yanks his head back up, and does it again before pulling a knife out of one of his many pockets.

He's menacing, filled with so much wrath.

I love it.

Considering how many times I visualized hurting these monsters, I'm on board with his plan to deliver vengeance on my behalf. If that makes me a psychopath, so be it. If they didn't want me to become a monster, they shouldn't have made me that way. Actions have consequences.

But I can't let James get in trouble for me. I may be simple-minded, but I know that even cops can't rough up restrained men.

"Everybody out," one of the men yells from the front yard.

I grab his arm. "James, come on. Please. We need to go now."

"Get to the van, Lettie. You don't need to see this," he seethes, still brandishing the knife. "Kri, get her out."

She's on me again, this time a bit more insistently. I eye her down, finding her a bit intimidating.

But I've had far worse. And there's kindness in her eyes.

"I need to snap him out of this," I tell her.

The engines in our getaway cars rev. I don't see any more girls in the house.

The woman nods at me, then tips her chin toward James.

He has his arm around the neck of the man, choking the shit out of him. He's a second away from slitting his throat when I fling myself onto the floor, wrapping my body around his side to pull him off the man.

"Please come with me now, babe. *Please*. I can't stay here another second. Please, James. *Please*. Take me home. I need you."

He glances from me to the monster on the floor and then back to me. His face softens when he sees my desperation.

With a resigned nod, he stands, pulling me to my feet. He scoops me up in his arms and carries me out, carefully concealing my exposed buttocks in the process. Someone closes the front door behind us.

Our tormentors remain inside the house.

My muddled thoughts can't decide if that's good or bad.

While he carries me away, I look over James's shoulder as the house's exterior comes into view. Despite the dark of night, I get a decent view for the first time. Oddly, it leaves me feeling... nothing.

Empty.

I don't understand what's happening, but I no longer care about the men inside or the house. All I care about is this man holding me in his loving arms, making me feel safe. When I look at him, I'm less empty.

I never thought I'd see him again.

When we drive away with the tires of the van squealing, all I can think is... *please don't let this be a dream.*

If he's not *really* here, holding me now, I'll finally break.

The men inside couldn't do it. But losing James again would surely break me.

NEVER

TOMER

She's alive.
Not unharmed. But alive.

One thing we can heal, but not the other.

She's alive.

I recite these thoughts like a mantra, trying to find my center and channel the calmness I'll need to get through the night.

My team will have questions. Lettie will too. All my secrets are about to be exposed, undoubtedly changing my life in every way imaginable.

It will hurt me beyond measure.

But none of that matters because Lettie is alive.

The worries piling up in my mind weigh heavy, but I can't sort through them now. I'm unable to formulate my exit strategy. There's no contingency plan. I have no means to solve this without it blowing up in my face.

I've failed her, and so I deserve to suffer. I'll accept it while doing everything to minimize the pain that I've already caused her — even if she doesn't know it yet.

For now, all I can do is hold her close, constantly reassuring myself that she's here and providing her with solace.

We found her. She's alive.

As we pull into the parking lot at Redleg HQ, one thought cuts through the clatter in my mind above the rest.

I will kill those men.

Not send them to jail. Not plant viruses on their computer. Not have them arrested for child porn or tax fraud.

I will fucking end them.

They will never hurt another woman the way they've hurt mine.

No matter how long it takes. No matter how far I have to travel. No matter what it costs me. I will follow them to the ends of the earth to make them pay for what they've done to her.

I'll be standing over their battered, bloodied, bruised frames as they take their last breaths. I'll wear a smile on my face when their black hearts stop beating.

After I find the men who've hurt her directly, I'll take down the entire fucking mafia. Even if I have to kill them off one at a time and it takes the rest of my life, I'll end them.

They will never hurt her again.

Never.



To be continued in *Unexpected Hero Redeemed*.

Exact release date for the conclusion of Tomer and Lettie's story is TBD, but it will be soon. ***Want to be among the first to get it?*** [You can pre-purchase from my website directly.](#) Pre-

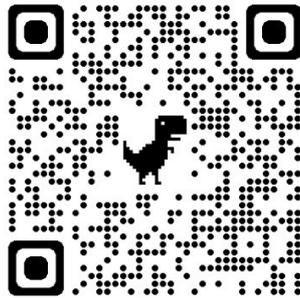
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dear Reader,

I always found it odd when authors would say that their characters spoke to them. Until I became an author myself, I had no idea that was possible. It was “just something they say” (or so I thought).

WRONG!

If you caught the dedication, then you may have picked up on the fact that Tomer and Lettie were pestering me. A lot.

After I finished *Rival Hero*, I immediately went to work on Big Al and Madeline’s story (*Bossy Hero*). As much as I wanted to write *Unexpected Hero*, I had a greater plan and that one was supposed to sit so that I could unfold the events in *Bossy Hero* first. It was going to be perfect.

Too perfect.

A few weeks later, I was pulling my hair out because all I could think about was Tomer and Lettie. They weren’t only talking to me, they were yelling. Nay, screaming. I’m convinced Tomer hacked into my mental operating system and implanted a virus. Madeline was sitting quietly in the corner with her wine and popcorn. And Boss was nowhere to be found.

So... I changed course. Changed the timeline. Changed the pre-orders around. And I freaking wrote the story the muses demanded.

You might have expected this book to start right where *Rival Hero* left off, with the big reveal of “YOU ARE MY FATHER!” Sorry if you’re disappointed. But I promise all that juicy drama is coming soon. It’ll be worth the wait.

Before I could go there, I had to go back to the beginning for this couple. Why?

Because how else would you believe that the “unfeeling robot man” was as in love as he was when he barged into Mia’s house and demanded she help him find his sugar bear? It wouldn’t have been genuine if he was “already in love” and Lettie was as enamored with him. I couldn’t do that to them (and frankly, they wouldn’t let me).

And so... this story took a long time because they are two of the most complicated characters I’ve written. Their traumas worked against them in the beginning and again at the end of this story. Unfortunately, it’s only going to get harder for them before it gets better. On the bright side, that just gives us all more of them to fall in love with. To laugh with. And to cry with.

So much to look forward to.

I’m not sure if you’re ready for when I bring Stella and Freya into the same room.

Speaking of which, I need to get back to writing the next book before you all get angry with me for leaving you with a cliffhanger (a book blue bean).

Before I bid you adieu, I need to thank the most important people in my little corner of the world for helping make my author dream a reality.

Mindy, cheers to another one in the books. Thanks for fitting me into the time between your actual job and family time. I don’t know anyone who could tell me that I’m an idiot as colorfully as you do. And I owe you big for coming up with the sugar bear song connection. I’ve listened to that damn thing on a loop for months now. (And I can’t stop. Stage an intervention!) I also kept the screen shot of you giving me FOUR HEART EMOJIS! I’ll cherish it almost as much as when you cried because I sent Cort Amos to the cemetery. It’s proof that you do, in fact, have a heart.

Deb, you’re an angel here on earth. Thanks for supporting me and lending me a helping hand when I need it (and sorry

for always needing it). I'm so fortunate to have you in my life and on my team (and as my friend). I'd be drowning without you.

Rose, my princess and sister in ADHD. What did I ever do without you? Your talents are mind boggling. I'm so glad I took a chance and sent that message. Not sure why you put up with me, but I'm so glad you do. Your friendship has come to mean so much to me in such a short time.

My beta reading team was big and girthy this time — just like this book — and I love all of you for giving it to me straight (and hard). Without Paula, Tomer would have been too creepy. Without Allie, he would have been a *very* dark shade of morally gray. Without Rose, the third act of the book would have been way too dark for my brand and my readers. And without my bookaholic moms, Adrienne and Amanda, that scene when he said “I came for you” wouldn't have been as powerful. You're all amazing! Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Erin, once again, you did an impeccable job consulting on the tech aspect. I love picking your brain. It's only *mostly* terrifying that you can do most of the things Tomer can. Namaste, my friend.

I'd also like to thank my fellow author Elle Sparrow for the very in-depth consult on all things kink and BDSM. Thanks for making me leave my comfort zone and do a video call. (Gasp!) This book is so much better because of your guidance.

And of course, thanks to my son for rage screaming at video games while I'm trying to write. Why did I think it would be fun to share an office? Thanks to my loving sister Jennifer for respecting my time to hibernate and for always keeping her fridge stocked with wine in case I pop by after my hibernation has concluded.

Thanks to my cats for the cuddles when I was stressed over this book (happened often). And thanks to the new family of peacocks that apparently live in my yard for some unknown reason. It might have to do with the fact that I run out to feed

them whenever they honk at me through my office window (I have no idea how they always know when I'm in there). I've given half of them names so far, and I really think that Puffy can do better than Ted. He's not even got his colorful feathers yet. Set the bar higher, Puffy. You deserve all the colorful feathers.

To my long time readers... yes, I named one of the boys with the big, fancy feathers "Hudson" since he wrote the book on peacocking.

Love, Jackie

ALSO BY JACKIE WALKER

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*All my books are available in e-book, regular paperback, and discreet paperback.
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[Heartbreak Hero](#) is available in audio (narrated by Troy Duran and Savannah Peachwood).

Forbidden Hero is coming to audio in February 2024 (narrated by Robert Hatchet and CJ Bloom). You can [pre-purchase directly from my website](#) to ensure you're among the first to get it before the full release.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A voracious romance reader herself, Jackie writes stories featuring the four Ss: Spice, Swoons, Suspense, and Sarcasm. Her heroines are badass, and her heroes are easy on the eyes and heavy on the charm.

When she is not writing heart-pounding stories about swoony heroes and the women who get to play with them, she is reading all types of romance novels or taking care of her army of cats and her teenage son (who also speaks fluent sarcasm).

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