



UNHARMED



H A R P E R S E C U R I T Y O P S

A. K. EVANS

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Harper Security Ops: Banks & Lamise

A.K. Evans



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PROLOGUE



Lamise

“If you’re watching this video, it’s likely I’m already dead.”

I tapped on the screen to pause the video.

If I thought I’d been living in a nightmare for the past six months, I couldn’t have been more wrong.

This was the third time I’d heard that phrase, having watched the video in its entirety twice already, and I’d decided to torture myself further by starting it again.

I was completely dumbfounded.

Part of me wondered if I’d actually woken up this morning. Had I dreamt this whole thing up?

What the heck happened? What had I missed?

Sadly, none of the questions I asked myself came with any answers, and the worst part about it all was that the words I’d just heard were the truth.

He was dead.

Graham was dead.

My fiancé.

It was barely over six months ago, with just under a year left until our wedding, when it happened.

Devastation.

God, I didn’t know devastation like that existed. Or maybe I knew it did, but I never understood the magnitude of it. I

didn't fully grasp how it could feel like your entire world had stopped spinning.

Everything, absolutely everything, I had planned for my future, went down the drain in the blink of an eye. So fast. So quick. One day, everything made sense. The next, heartbreak and despair.

I'd never forget that day.

It was a Saturday. Graham and I always had a lunch date on Saturday afternoons. But before we did that, Graham went out in the morning for his run, and he took our Boxer, Henry, with him. They'd go for a run before heading to the dog park for a bit.

I'd gone about my morning just like I always did—cleaning the bathrooms, vacuuming the upstairs, and throwing in two loads of laundry in the home we shared together. It was always about fifteen minutes after I'd finished all of those tasks and showered when Graham and Henry returned.

Henry would always climb into his bed after his morning out and take an afternoon nap. Graham would grab a quick shower before the two of us would leave for our lunch date. Sometimes, especially in the spring and fall, we would plan an afternoon out, doing something fun. Recently, we'd been spending time together while taking care of different tasks related to wedding planning.

That day, we'd had an appointment to meet with one of the potential caterers. Unfortunately, things took a devastating and unexpected turn.

Twenty minutes after the time passed when I would have expected Graham to be home, I decided to call him.

He didn't answer.

So, I sent him a text.

No response.

Ten minutes after that, the doorbell rang.

I opened the door, saw two police officers there, and instantly knew something bad had happened.

Part of me—the naïve part—expected the officers to tell me that I needed to go with them, because Graham had been in an accident and was on his way to the hospital. Or maybe it wasn't an expectation so much as it was a wish.

I didn't get my wish.

The officers had informed me my fiancé died. I learned he'd been out running through the wooded trail five miles from the dog park like he always did, and somewhere along that trail, he died.

Graham was bitten by a poisonous snake. He succumbed before anyone found him.

It was the worst day of my life.

And on top of losing Graham, I lost Henry, too. He'd gone missing, which was so out of character for him. He adored Graham, and for a long time, I kept telling myself Henry must have taken off in hopes of finding help for Graham.

Utterly devastated, I made finding Henry my focus. He was all I had left of Graham. Sadly, after weeks of no luck, I gave up my search. It was the hardest thing I'd ever done.

From that point forward, it was all a blur. I didn't get out of bed for days. No, weeks. I didn't want to do anything or go anywhere.

And everyone else just kept going about their business like nothing happened. How was that possible? Why hadn't time stopped? Why hadn't the world slowed down just a bit to give me the time I needed to wrap my head around the fact I'd lost it all?

That was one of the tough lessons.

Death was a part of life, and no matter how much I wanted to rewind, go back, and get more time, I didn't have any say in the matter.

Nobody knew how much time they had left.

By the time I found the strength to try to join the land of the living again, weeks after Graham's funeral service, it was right at the beginning of fall. And with the season change, a

whole slew of new problems arose with Graham's family. They'd never liked me, so I should have expected as much.

And in another situation, I might have responded differently than I did. But I was in the very worst time of my life, so I wasn't prepared to fight them. I did what I had to do to get away from them.

I suffered through the holiday season, feeling alone and absolutely miserable. I'd lost everything. My fiancé, my home, and my dog.

But today, just a few weeks into the new year, something came over me. I realized I needed to find a way to pick up the pieces of my life.

So, I started to unpack the boxes inside my apartment, and that's when I stumbled on Graham's phone. I didn't know what prompted me to do it—nostalgia, perhaps—but I plugged it in and charged it, so I could open it up and go through the pictures. I figured he'd have photos or videos of the two of us I didn't have on my phone, and I wanted them.

I never expected I'd turn on the phone, go to the camera roll, and find a video of Graham by himself, especially not one like this.

Slowly, I took a deep breath and tried to prepare myself to watch the video in its entirety once more. But there was no amount of preparation that would help. Nothing was going to ease my trembling hands, churning stomach, and racing heart. Not when I knew what I was going to hear.

Though I probably shouldn't have, I slid my finger across the screen and dragged the video back to the start. Then I pushed play.

"If you're watching this video, it's likely I'm already dead. And I need you to know the truth." Graham paused and swallowed. There was such an edge of nervousness in his tone. "There was a mix-up at the dog park. Something completely unintentional happened, and by the time I realized my mistake, I panicked, and it was too late." There was another extended silence, and this one was the one that set my emotions running

wild, because Graham got emotional. “I did something I’m not proud of, but I did it to keep you safe, Lamise. I never would have done it if I thought I had a choice. I didn’t have a choice, not if I wanted to protect you. But now, things are spiraling, and I might have done it all for nothing. Anyway, I wanted—” Graham stopped speaking and grew visibly and chillingly alert as he looked away from the phone and off to his side, terror in his eyes. Something washed over his expression, something that indicated he’d accepted what was coming. He turned to face the camera again, dropped his voice lower, and said, “I don’t think I have much time. I’m so sorry, Lamise. Please know how much I love you. I hope things don’t go south, but if they do, please take care of yourself, be safe, and find happiness again.”

That’s where the video ended.

For several long moments, I stared at his handsome face. Handsome and terrified. The worst part about it was that I didn’t know if he was terrified for himself or for me. Maybe it was both. Clearly, he believed I was in danger.

I spent months believing the man I’d fallen in love with had tragically and unexpectedly passed away. Now, I knew that wasn’t the truth at all.

My fiancé had been murdered, and someone made it look like an accident.

ONE



Banks

Smiles were tough to come by these days, so whenever there was a situation that presented itself and something allowed me to feel even a hint of positivity, I ran with it.

So, when I descended the stairs and saw what I did when I entered the family room in my house, I didn't stop myself from leaning into the feeling it gave me.

My boy.

Rhys.

He was my only reason for finding the strength to get up and do what needed to be done each day. Everything I did was for him.

Because she was gone.

My boy's mom, my wife.

Violet.

Fuck, I missed her. And every time I looked at our son, I saw her. It was just as one of my coworkers had said to me several months ago when I'd gone to him to vent my frustrations and get some advice on how to cope with Violet's death.

Before I'd walked out of Jax's office that day, he told me to remember that the best parts of Violet were in my son. He wasn't wrong, because Rhys had her smile, which had been my favorite of Violet's features. I wondered how he'd change

as he got older, and what other things I'd notice in his personality that reminded me of his mom.

As much as I wanted all of that I could get, I hoped it would get easier to cope with experiencing it. There was no question life had been particularly trying lately.

It was difficult not to feel like I was carrying the weight of the world around on my shoulders when I was the one responsible for my wife's death. Doing what I did for a living, I should have known how much she was struggling. I should have noticed some signs.

But I didn't.

I was so caught up in how great I felt, how exciting life had become for me, that I missed it all.

My wife suffered in silence after giving me not only her heart but the miracle of our child, and guilt ate away at me.

Rhys was six months old now, and his mother had been dead for half of his life.

God, if I allowed myself to think for too long about it, my day would quickly take a downward spiral into a pit of despair and hopelessness.

That was precisely the reason why I decided to focus on anything that prompted me to smile. It was far better than the alternative. And it was those things that helped me to get through each day.

Because they almost always started and ended with Rhys.

My eyes fell on the scene in front of me, and I gave myself a few moments to soak up the good vibes.

Rhys was happy as a clam as he listened intently to his grandmother talking to him, making a huge fuss over him as she always did.

My mother had been a godsend. I had no idea what I would have done without her. Really, it was both of my parents, but my mom stepped up to the plate to help me in a way nobody else had. I was beyond grateful for everything she'd done for us.

Though, I guess I could understand it.

Being a parent now, I understood that unconditional love. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do for my son if he needed my help. And I guess that's how it was for my mom with me.

Or, that was what I had initially thought it was. But I soon realized that while my mom was doing what she was doing for me, it was more about Rhys. Not long after he was born, she'd shared her feelings and claimed that while a parent would always love their children, that love couldn't even begin to come close to the way a grandparent felt about a grandchild.

Regardless of the reason, I was utterly grateful for everything my mom had done from the start.

She'd been there from the day we lost Violet until now. In the beginning, it had been about doing what she could to simply help us survive. I was distraught over losing my wife, being busy blaming myself, and Rhys was far too young to understand what was happening.

My mom made sure he was cared for during those moments of weakness when I needed to just curl up in my bed and let go of the emotions.

As time went on and I began to heal, my mom backed off a bit. She knew how important it was for me to bond with Rhys on my own, and for months, I'd been doing that. It was always just the two of us—Rhys and me.

My mom came back into the picture on a more regular and planned basis now that I'd finally gone back to work.

I'd taken a substantial amount of time off from my job, because it was necessary. Not only did I need the time with Rhys to be able to bond with him, adjust to life as a single father, and grieve properly for my wife, but I wasn't exactly in the line of work that allowed me to be distracted. I knew I couldn't go back until my mind could handle being there.

Understandably, it took some time.

It had been a few weeks now, and I was feeling better and better with each day that went by. Obviously, I still missed

Violet like crazy, but I was slowly learning I couldn't allow my grief to consume me.

Rhys needed me, and I had no choice but to be the father he deserved, the father Violet would have wanted me to be to him.

Belatedly noticing I was standing there, my mom's face lit up as she looked at her grandson in her arms. "Look who's here, Rhys. Daddy's over there, watching you."

My son smiled as both of his hands, clenched in tiny little fists, started moving toward his mouth. He was ready to eat. Again.

I crossed the room, moving toward them, and lifted him in my arms. Just holding him made everything feel a little less heavy. After kissing his chubby cheek and neck, I asked, "Are you hungry, little man?"

Rhys didn't respond with words. Instead, he shoved his fists in his mouth, giving me my answer.

My mom stood from the couch and declared, "He's always hungry, because he's growing too quickly. I'll get him his bottle."

She wasn't wrong about that. It felt like he was just born yesterday. Now, he'd put on quite a few pounds, filled out his clothes better, and his face, arms, and legs were certainly of the chunky variety. The kid was thriving, and it was one thing I could be proud of in all that had happened ever since he was born.

I took a step back and allowed my mom to pass, so she could make her way out into the kitchen ahead of us. As she moved, she said, "I hope you have a few minutes to spare this morning before you leave for work, because I need to talk to you about something important, Banks."

Part of me wondered if my mom already knew about the arrangement I had at the office. Or maybe it wasn't necessarily an arrangement so much as it was an understanding. They had no expectations of me when it came to returning to work and doing the job I loved to do. After Violet died, they did what

they could to support me completely, only asking that I take the time I needed to grieve and heal before coming back.

Considering how much I'd kept hidden from all of them when it came to my personal life, I appreciated it more than I would have ever been able to tell them.

As it was, I'd kept my private life just that—private. Nobody knew when Violet and I had gotten together. They didn't know when things had turned serious between us, and I hadn't shared the news of my marriage until Rhys was born.

Things happened quickly between Violet and me, but it was our journey, one I loved being a part of. Nobody else needed to know about the things I wanted to keep between the two of us.

But a baby changed things, and there wasn't a chance I'd want to keep the people closest to me from being in our lives and his, no matter how private a person I was by nature. At that point, Violet and I were solid in our relationship, and Rhys was a beautiful addition to our lives.

When we made it to the kitchen, I replied, "Yeah, I've got time. There's nothing particularly pressing happening at work for me at the moment."

"That makes me feel marginally better about telling you this then," my mom returned.

Immediately, I grew concerned. "What's going on?"

As soon as she had Rhys's bottle in the warmer, she turned around to face me and offered a sympathetic look. "I tried to put this off as long as I could, but I'm afraid I can't prolong it much more."

The second the words were out of her mouth, I understood where the conversation was heading. "Your knees," I guessed.

She nodded. "I canceled the surgery back in the fall, because there was no way you could have gotten through this without some help. And I wouldn't change it for anything. Being with this little guy every day is honestly my greatest joy. But the pain has gotten so bad in my knees, I need to have them done now. In fact, as each day passes, I want it even

more, because one day, he'll be up and running around, and I'll want to chase after him. There's not a chance I can do it now when I'm in this much pain."

I nodded my understanding, feeling bad she'd put off doing what she needed to do for so long. "I get it. It's okay."

My mom needed to have both of her knees replaced. As she'd just reminded me, she'd had the surgery scheduled for last fall, but Violet died a week before she was set to have the procedure done. My mom couldn't go through with it, knowing what I was dealing with, so she canceled the surgery. Too much was happening, everything was spiraling out of control, and there's no telling how Rhys and I would have made it through without her love and support.

"Are you sure? I feel horrible about this, because it's not going to just be the day of the surgery that I'll be unable to come here. The recovery time is going to be months, and I won't be able to watch him at all during that time," she explained.

"I'm sure. Don't worry about it."

Seemingly frustrated, my mom shook her head in disgust. "If he was still an infant, I'd have your dad take off from work for a bit longer, and we'd work it out together, but at his age now, he's going to start crawling around everywhere. It's too risky for him, and I'm not willing to put him in a dangerous or uncertain situation."

Feeling beyond grateful for everything she'd done for the two of us and still holding my son in my arms, I moved toward her and wrapped an arm around her back, my hand landing on her opposite shoulder. "It's okay," I insisted.

Tears filled her eyes as her attention shifted between Rhys and me. "I feel awful about this."

Shaking my head, I ordered, "Don't. You've been taking care of us for long enough. It's time for you to take care of yourself."

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "You can't take him with you to work."

It was at that moment when the bottle warmer started beeping to indicate it was ready. My mom pulled it out, tested it, and Rhys started squirming uncontrollably in my arms the second he spotted it.

“Hold on, boy. We know you’re hungry,” I told him.

Rhys didn’t listen. He reached his hands out as his grandma moved toward him. My mom held the bottle out, and I took it from her, Rhys getting his hands on it nearly at the same time. Once he had it in his mouth and was happily eating, I returned my attention to my mom. “I don’t have an immediate solution, but I’ll start working on one. This wasn’t supposed to be a long-term thing for you anyway. You’re supposed to be his grandmother, not his full-time caretaker.”

“I’d do anything for him, though,” she reasoned, seeming slightly offended that I’d even think to suggest he was a burden on her.

“I know that. Trust me, I know there isn’t anything on this earth you wouldn’t do to see that he had everything he needed,” I assured her. “And that’s why you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do right now to take care of yourself. You need to make sure you can run around with him once he starts doing that.”

Nodding, she wiped away the tears threatening to roll down her cheeks. “They want to schedule the surgery a week from this coming Monday. I wanted to check with you first and make sure you’ll be able to have something figured out by then.”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“He’s my son, Mom. I’ll get it figured out one way or another. If there was something truly pressing at work that needed to be handled, and I couldn’t get anything arranged before I was needed on something there, I’d take him and let him hang with Avalon. I’m sure she’ll have no problem watching him for me for an hour, if necessary. But starting today, I’ll start doing some research on child-care options.”

She sighed, lifting her finger up to the side of his face and brushing it gently down his cheek. “I hate to think about him not having someone’s undivided attention, if he goes to daycare.”

I couldn’t say I disagreed.

It had been one of the things Violet and I had discussed at length before Rhys was born. She was going to stay home with him, because it was what we both felt would be best for him. Fortunately, we had been in a position to do that.

Now, things were different. Violet and I weren’t going to be raising Rhys together. I was a single father. I had to do it on my own now. Unfortunately, that meant I had some tough choices to make.

“I know. Me, too. But he’ll be alright. And you know I’m not going to just stick him anywhere. If I find a place that I think will be a good fit for us, I’m going to do my research. I’ll even get either Jax or Blaze to do a little private investigation work beforehand, just to be on the safe side.”

“I feel guilty,” she murmured.

“Don’t. You need to do this, and you’ve already gone beyond the call of duty for us by canceling this surgery once. Take the appointment, and get it done. I promise it’s all going to work out.”

Whether she knew I wasn’t going to allow her to put this off any longer, especially since I knew how much pain she was in, or if she finally believed what I was telling her, my mom acquiesced. “Okay. I’ll call when he goes down for a nap and get myself on the schedule.”

“Good.”

Her eyes roamed over my face for a long time. “You’re doing good, Banks. I’m really proud of the way you’ve stepped up for your son. I know how difficult this has been for you, and I think you should know you’re doing an excellent job. Violet would be proud of you.”

Just like that, my emotions clogged my throat. There were so many feelings I had about how I was doing as a father and

what Violet would have done differently for Rhys. Sadly, she wasn't here to give me that input. She couldn't tell me what the right thing was for me to do in every situation for our son, so to hear my mom tell me she believed Violet would have been proud felt good, even as it saddened me.

She should have been here. She was missing everything.

Not wanting to send myself spiraling, I dipped my chin and rasped, "Thanks, Mom."

She offered a half-hearted smile and held out her hands. "I'll take him, so you can get going."

I bent my head down, kissed the top of my son's head, and placed him in my mother's arms. After, I gave her a kiss on the cheek and said, "I'll see you later this afternoon. Call me if either of you needs anything."

"We will."

I gave Rhys another kiss, and a moment later, I was out the door and on my way to work, feeling nothing but despair, wondering how I was going to bring myself to put my kid in a place I knew his mom and I never wanted him to be.

TWO



Lamise

It had been three days since I'd found Graham's phone and watched his video.

Three days of trying to make sense of everything he said and all that he didn't say.

Three days of feeling myself and my emotions slipping into something I couldn't begin to describe.

Because I felt as though I was all over the place.

I'd grieved for Graham for months. I went through the heartbreak and devastation. I'd cried countless tears and used more tissues in a matter of weeks than I'd used in nearly twenty-eight years of life.

And just when I thought I'd had a breakthrough and was finally ready to start trying to pick up the pieces and move on with my life, I had to find his phone in that box.

Now, everything was a mess. It was like losing Graham all over again, if everything I'd surmised from his video was the case. If he was murdered and not the unsuspecting and unfortunate victim of a snake bite, how could I just go on like it was all the same?

What was I supposed to do?

I'd tried for three whole days to come up with a solution. A plan. Anything that seemed appropriate in this situation.

I came up with nothing.

I didn't know what to do, but I knew I had far too many possibilities as options.

Should I go to the police? It seemed like the most obvious choice. It was logical; it made sense. Unfortunately, I wasn't feeling very compelled to take that road for a multitude of reasons.

So, I considered another option. I could try to research it on my own first, without involving the authorities. The problem was that I didn't have a clue as to where I'd even start. I didn't exactly know the first thing about private investigation when it came to an actual criminal case.

And it was that thought which had me considering another slew of questions.

With all that he didn't manage to share on the video he'd left for me, there was one thing Graham had made clear. He believed I might be in danger. Heck, he'd claimed he'd done something he wasn't proud of just to try to protect me.

Was I still in danger?

I sighed for what felt like the millionth time in a matter of days.

Why did this have to happen to me?

All I'd been hoping to do was get my life started again. I was supposed to be looking for a job. This shocking video had put a halt to that, because I couldn't manage to focus on anything for the last three days other than watching that video over and over and asking myself a bunch of questions that didn't seem to have any answers.

Realizing that no matter what I ultimately decided to do about Graham's video, there was one thing that wasn't going to change.

I desperately needed a job. And while I looked for one, I needed to make sure it was inconspicuous. I had to make sure I found a job that wouldn't make me any more vulnerable than I might have already been.

God, I wished I had more time.

Time to figure this out.

Time to just be.

I no longer had that option, though, because I'd been forced into this situation by Graham's family.

Despite the plan Graham and I had for our future, his family—namely his mom and his sister—put a stop to that.

My fiancé and I had talked at great length about what we wanted, about the life we wanted to live together, and he had this overwhelming desire to want to take care of me. I wasn't opposed to working, but the idea of being home to take care of my husband and the family we'd eventually have was far more enticing to me than the job I had been working for years at a company which provided businesses with solutions for the data and analytics within their company.

The job had paid decently enough and offered benefits and retirement options, but it wasn't a job I was even remotely close to being in love with. And while money was necessary, happiness was far more important to me.

I knew not everyone would have agreed with my life choices, but I was happy with the way things were. I liked my life just like it was when Graham was alive. But apparently, it was possible for happiness to overshadow judgment. Because if one thing was true, it was obvious I had been foolish.

No matter what Graham and I had wanted and discussed regarding our lives and future together, nothing was solidified. We weren't married yet, and nothing had been documented. So, I had no claim to anything other than the joint checking and savings accounts we had. Between the two accounts, I had about thirty thousand dollars, and when the rest of his assets went to his blood relatives, I was too distraught over losing him and Henry to fight them for it.

That's why I packed up what I could that meant something to me from the house and moved into my own apartment. But the money I had was only going to last so long, which was why I needed a job again.

If only things had been better with his family, I might have been in a different situation. I might have told them about the video and shared it with them. We could have decided together what the best course of action was. I could have leaned on them for support throughout this nightmare; we could have relied on one another.

Over the last three days, I had briefly considered sharing Graham's video with them, but as quickly as the thought popped into my mind, it was gone.

Because I remembered how it had been and recalled how much stress the whole situation had created for Graham and me just months before he died.

Even now, I could remember some of our conversations about his family like they had happened yesterday.

"I don't know what else I can do. I'm trying my best," I said after we'd gotten back from dinner one night. Graham had invited his family out for dinner, so we could share the news of our engagement.

"Don't worry about it," Graham urged me. "We knew they weren't exactly thrilled about our relationship from the start, so I expected this news would come as a shock to them."

"It worries me, though. We've been together for more than a year now, and they haven't softened at all toward me," I pointed out. "I don't think this is going to get any better."

Graham moved toward me, wrapped his arms around my body, and allowed his eyes to roam over my face. "I wish I could change it. I wish I could fix all of this. I know it's happening, and I'm doing my best to try to get them to come around, but there's no question this isn't going to happen overnight. At the end of the day, no matter what happens, you are the one I want to spend the rest of my life with. I don't want it to come to that, but if it doesn't turn around, I'm going to do what I've got to do and cut them out."

My shoulders fell. "I'm not asking you to cut your family off."

“I know. But they aren’t making it easy for me to not lean toward doing that. I want to give them the opportunity to do the right thing. If they choose not to, my priority is your happiness and mine.”

I sat with those words for a bit, considering the reality of them. Graham was prepared to give his family up for a life with me. It wasn’t what I wanted for him, but I thought it spoke volumes about how serious he was about me and the life he wanted us to build together. Given that my family didn’t live close, I had hoped things would improve with Graham’s family. Unfortunately, not only did they not improve, but they also got worse.

I’d remained working at my job until the point Graham and I had gotten engaged, and I moved into his house with him. Looking back now, I realized how foolish it was to do that, but the thought never crossed my mind that Graham would die before we could get married.

When his mom and sister found out I left my job, they were quick to share their feelings on it. And they did it when he and I managed to get separated for a brief period during a party for one of his relatives a few months before he died.

“So, Graham said you left your job. Is planning a wedding going to take up so much of your time that you can’t be bothered to work until after you get married?” Graham’s sister, Laura, scoffed.

Before I had the chance to answer her, Graham’s mother, Beth, noted, “You aren’t the first woman to get married. Plenty of women have planned weddings while they continued to work.”

Realizing they had no intention of ever allowing things to get better among us, I decided to no longer accept their crap. “Actually, I didn’t just leave my job to plan the wedding. I’m doing that while I’m taking care of our home.”

Laura rolled her eyes. “Yeah, the home that my brother paid for.”

“What are you planning to do once the wedding has passed?” Beth questioned me.

“What do you mean? I’m going to continue doing what Graham and I discussed and decided would be best for us.”

There wasn’t a question in my mind that if Graham had shared with his family members that I’d left my job that he wound up having a similar conversation. The truth was that they were asking me questions they already knew the answer to, and I refused to entertain the conversation further.

“So, you’re going to mooch off my son for the rest of your life,” Beth declared.

“I’m sorry you see it that way.”

She shook her head in disgust. “There’s no other way to see it. He’s going to go off to work every day while you sit around, doing nothing.”

That wasn’t what was happening, but I wasn’t going to stand there and try to convince her otherwise. Neither Beth nor Laura would change their minds.

“Believe what you want. I don’t care. Graham and I are happy, we’re going to be together, and there’s nothing you can say or do that’s going to change that. How we choose to live our lives will be just that—our choice,” I seethed. I’d gotten myself worked up enough that I couldn’t stop myself before I added, “Just a word of advice, though. You don’t have to like me, but I’m going to be Graham’s wife. You can choose to accept his decision to marry me or not. But fair warning, if you can’t figure out how to be civil with me, you’re going to risk losing him, because he’s going to choose me over you every single time.”

Beth gasped as Laura fired back, “I can’t believe you just said that.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Well, believe it, because it’s the truth.”

Without giving them a chance to respond, I walked away and went in search of Graham.

Later that evening, after we'd gotten home, I told him about what had happened. He was understandably angry and insisted he'd had enough. The next day, he met with his mother and sister—a meeting I hadn't been a part of—and he gave them an ultimatum. Either they turned things around, or he was done with them.

They'd apologized to him and promised they'd do their best to be civil with me. Without any other family gatherings before he died, there was never an opportunity for them to prove they cared to make a change.

And now I was here after all these months had passed, wondering where to go next.

With no good plan and a desperate need for advice, I decided to make a phone call. Two rings later, my sister, Jolene, answered. "Hey, Lamise. How's it going?"

"Not so good," I confessed.

"Having another rough day?" she asked.

I sighed. I couldn't decide if I would rather that have been the case. On the one hand, that might have been easier. But with this new bit of information, I couldn't say I was angry about knowing the truth. Or, part of it, anyway.

"Not exactly."

"What's the matter? Did those two bitches contact you about something?"

Leave it to my sister to jump to that conclusion. Ever since she learned about the way Graham's family treated me, she despised them.

"No. Though, I'm wondering if I would have preferred that to have happened instead of this," I murmured.

There was barely a moment of silence before she replied, "That doesn't make me feel good at all. Now you have to make me stop guessing, because I can't even begin to come up with what could have possibly happened so bad that would make you ever want to have any communication with those two again."

“First, you have to promise me you aren’t going to say anything to anyone about this,” I begged. “I desperately need your advice on what to do about something.”

“I’m a little offended that you think you’d ever need to ask me to make that promise,” she returned.

“Once I tell you, you’ll understand why I’m requesting it.”

My sister hesitated, and I had a feeling it was because she knew just how serious this conversation was about to get. “I promise,” she finally said, her voice just a touch over a whisper and filled with concern.

I inhaled deeply and let out a sigh before I revealed, “Three days ago, I decided to start unpacking some boxes here in the apartment. The first one I opened had Graham’s cell phone in it. I powered up the phone, thinking I was going to find some photos or videos of the two of us together that I didn’t have on my phone.”

“Oh, Lamise,” Jolene murmured. “Tell me you haven’t been in tears for the last three days reminiscing over the time you two spent together.”

“I wish I could, Jo. The last time his camera was used was on the day he died, and he used it to record a video he wanted me to see,” I informed her.

“Really? What did he say?”

I swallowed hard. It was one thing to know what I knew and to replay all the thoughts I had about it inside my head, and it was something else entirely to have to admit it out loud to somebody, even somebody I trusted implicitly, like my sister.

“He knew he was going to die,” I rasped.

“What?”

“I think Graham was murdered.”

“I... what... are you... I don’t understand.”

That made two of us. Granted, our confusion was for two very different reasons at this point—me wondering why

Graham didn't find a way to communicate with me precisely what was going on that morning before he left for his run with Henry, for starters, and Jolene likely not fully wrapping her mind around the words I'd just shared.

"He left me a voicemail that he started by saying that if I was watching the video, it was likely he was already dead," I explained.

"How would he know that? Was it taken after he was bitten by the snake?" she asked.

If only that had been the case.

"No, Jolene. Graham recorded the video that morning while he was still in his car, well before he was bitten by a snake. I don't—" I paused for a moment, trying to pull myself together. I hadn't managed to do that when I forced myself to continue. "He was so afraid. He knew he was going to die, and his only concern was leaving me with something to help me understand what happened to him and to warn me."

By the time I finished speaking, I was a mess of tears and overwhelming sadness. "Warn you? Warn you about what?"

I went on to tell my sister about more of the details in Graham's video message to me. I shared how he revealed there had been a mix-up at the dog park that led to him doing something he wasn't proud of to protect me, but beyond that, I didn't know any specifics about what happened or what he'd done.

"Oh my God," she rasped. "What are you going to do, Lamise?"

"That's why I called you. I've been thinking about this for three days now, and I don't know what to do."

"I'm thinking, going to the police is the best place to start," my sister declared.

"I had a feeling you were going to say that."

"You can't just do nothing. What other option do you have?"

I hesitated for a moment, because if I was honest and told my sister exactly what I'd considered doing, she'd lose her mind. But since I'd already shared the whole situation with her and wanted her support, I had no choice but to give her the truth.

"I was thinking I could start trying to figure out what happened by going to the dog park," I reasoned.

"Are you out of your mind?!" she shrieked.

"I have to know what happened to him, Jo," I said softly, hoping she'd understand my need for answers. "It's like I've lost him all over again."

The silence stretched between us. There were a handful of people who knew just how difficult losing Graham had been for me. My mom, my sister, and my best friend, Tabitha, were the three people who'd stepped up to the plate to support me following Graham's death. In the beginning, all three of them were there round the clock, staying with me when I refused to get out of bed or scouring the town with me for Henry.

Eventually, my mom and sister had to go back home, where they lived nearly two hours away. Tabitha picked up the slack in their absence. There was no question I wouldn't have survived if it hadn't been for the three of them.

"I know how difficult all of this has been on you, Lamise. I can't imagine what this new information has done to your heart and your mind, but if what you are telling me is the truth, you can't go out on some investigative mission on your own. You need to take Graham's phone to the police and allow them to handle it."

I couldn't miss the tone in my sister's voice. She was pleading with me to listen to her.

"I'm not sure I would know what to do even if I tried to do this on my own," I replied. "If I went to that dog park, I'm not even sure who or what I'd be looking for."

"Promise me you're not going to go looking for trouble," she begged.

It wasn't hard to give her what she wanted. "I promise."

Jolene and I talked for quite a while longer, and we went through every possible scenario. In the end, I decided to listen to her advice.

I took the phone to the police.

But before I did that, I backed it up on my computer. I refused to lose those final remaining pieces of him.

THREE



Banks

“Can I talk to you about something for a minute?”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized just how stupid that question was. I’d just walked into work at Harper Security Ops, and my eyes immediately fell upon Avalon.

She was our receptionist, and she was almost always sitting at her desk whenever any of us walked through the door. The woman was perfect for the position, too, because there wasn’t anyone who loved people as much as Avalon did.

Having worked here for so many years, Avalon was someone we’d all looked at like a little sister. Or, well, most of us, anyway.

Damon Knight, one of the guys I worked closely with on a regular basis in the kidnap and ransom unit, was probably the only guy who didn’t view Avalon the way the rest of us did. After being such good friends for years, the two of them finally admitted their feelings to one another. The rest of us were happy for them, even Avalon’s older brother, Magnus—another member of the kidnap and ransom unit.

As expected, Avalon perked right up in her seat, smiled at me, and answered, “Of course. What’s going on?”

That was precisely the reason why I knew my question had been stupid. I’d never known Avalon to be the kind of woman who’d ever turn down the opportunity to talk to someone face-

to-face. If given the choice, she'd have preferred that over talking with someone on the phone.

Though I'd expected the physical and verbal response I received from Avalon, the tone of her voice indicated she'd been caught off guard.

That wasn't a surprise, either.

I was a private guy, so it was almost unheard of for me to ask to have a chat. It likely served to make Avalon even more eager than she already was.

Wanting to ease her curiosity and hopefully get some answers for myself, I replied, "You talk to a lot of people, so I was wondering if you might have some advice or a recommendation for me?"

"A recommendation for what, specifically?" she countered.

I inhaled deeply and sighed. "Since I've started coming back to work, my mom has been watching Rhys for me. She loves it, of course. Unfortunately, back in the fall, she was supposed to have her knees replaced, and she wound up canceling the surgery after... well, you know."

I didn't need to offer the sordid details, because Avalon knew I was referring to Violet's death. She confirmed that with a simple nod of her head and a sympathetic look on her face.

"Anyway, it's gotten to the point where my mom's in far too much pain to keep putting off the surgery. I told her to just schedule it, and I'd get things figured out for Rhys. I'm wondering if you know of any places that might be a good fit for my son."

The sympathetic look remained in place on Avalon's face. "I'm sorry, Banks. I wish I could say I've got a name to give you, but I don't. I'm more than happy to ask around for you, though."

This was beyond frustrating.

The thing was, I'd done some research on my own for the last two days on daycare centers, but none of them were places

that stood out to me. Truth be told, I couldn't stop myself from thinking about my son being one priority of many in that setting. I knew people did it all the time, and I was certain there were plenty of parents who struggled with it. The whole idea left me feeling unsettled.

That was why I came to Avalon. Even though she didn't yet have children of her own, with the way she became friendly with just about anyone, I thought she might have been able to offer some help.

"It's okay," I assured her. "Don't go out of your way or anything like that, but if you happen to talk to anyone who has any suggestions, I'd appreciate if you'd pass them along to me."

"I can absolutely do that for you," she promised.

I gave her a nod. "Thanks. This has been particularly frustrating, because it all makes me feel uneasy."

"How so?"

I swallowed hard as I dropped my gaze to the countertop, where I was resting my forearms. I wished it had been easy to just talk about certain things, but it wasn't. After all this time had passed, I thought it would get better, but some stuff was just difficult to face no matter how many days passed.

"Violet and I talked a lot about our plans for Rhys," I started, returning my attention to Avalon. "She was going to stay home to be with him while I worked. That's what we had been doing, and it was working out great for all of us. Well, I thought it was, and it was clear I was wrong about so much there. But the bottom line is that we had many discussions before Violet delivered him. In the end, we'd decided that neither one of us wanted to see him in a daycare, where he wouldn't likely be getting the time, attention, or affection we wanted him to have. It sucks that I now have to do the one thing we didn't want to do in order to be able to provide for him."

Sadness washed over her. "I'm so sorry, Banks. I wish there was something I could say to fix this and make it better. I

know there's nothing I can say that's going to make it right for you, though. Just remember that you're doing what you've got to do to be the best dad you can be for Rhys. In the end, when he's old enough to understand, he'll realize how much you love him."

"I know. It's not exactly been a walk in the park trying to figure out this single dad thing, but I know I'll get there eventually, because Rhys needs me to and because I want to be a good dad to him."

"I hope you know we're all willing to help you in any way that we can," she returned.

I nodded. "I do."

And I did.

If there was one thing that had been made abundantly clear to me from the start of this whole mess, it was that my coworkers went above and beyond the call of duty for me. I was beyond grateful for them, and I tried to look on the bright side, because there weren't many opportunities to do that these days.

Just as I was about to walk away, Avalon spoke again. I should have known—this was who she was. "So, how is the little guy doing?"

A smile formed on my face. Thinking about him or being with him was one of the only times I found myself capable of feeling any positivity. I realized the grieving process had its ebbs and flows. There would be good days and bad, but there was one constant in all of it.

Rhys.

No matter how bad I might have been feeling, one thought of him could turn it all around for me.

"Rhys is doing really well, actually. Growing like a weed."

"He's so adorable, but it's been far too long since I've seen him. I bet he's changed a lot."

Nodding, I confirmed, "He has. I swear, even going home every day after being here for a few hours, I feel like he

changes and grows so much. It's crazy."

"Well, I know it's not an ideal situation or a permanent solution, but I'd be happy to have him join me here if you need an extra set of hands until you work out where you want to put him for daycare."

"I'd love nothing more than to have him here, but it's not the best setting for him, either," I noted. "That said, I appreciate the offer, and if it comes down to it, I might need to take you up on it for just a little while until I get things figured out. If nothing else, at least I'd have a few more days of not having to worry so much about him."

Avalon's face lit up. "That sounds great. And don't think it's a hardship for me. If you ever need someone to watch him, even if it's so you can run an errand on a weekend or something, I'd be happy to do it. I'll need some practice for when Damon and I decide to start having some babies."

I lifted a brow. "Are you planning on having that happen anytime soon?"

She shook her head. "No. Well, not immediately anyway. I want to get through our wedding this spring before we take that step."

"Probably not a bad idea."

I could have added more to that, noting how things had gone down for Violet and me, but I didn't trust myself. It was possible if I started talking about her, about how we found out she was pregnant with Rhys and immediately decided to get married, I might set myself up for a bad day at work. It was much safer to lock Violet away in my heart and mind, burying the possibility of losing my hold on my emotions at the same time.

"So, Rhys is doing well. What about you? How are you managing?" Avalon questioned me, the sympathetic tone evident in her voice.

Were there any words that could even come close to explaining how I was doing? I had not a clue, but that might have been because I wasn't sure I knew how I was really

doing. On the surface, I guess I was doing alright. I mean, I was back at work and trying to figure out the whole single parent thing. But I'd have been lying if I said that I didn't have days when I missed Violet like crazy, nights when I struggled to fall asleep as so many of the memories I had with her plagued my mind.

Just as I was about to respond to Avalon's question, I felt and noticed movement off to my left side.

My eyes went in that direction, and that's when I realized someone had already been in the office long before I walked in this morning. I had been so focused on talking to Avalon about any suggestions she might have had for a daycare solution for Rhys that I didn't pay attention to who was sitting in the waiting area when I walked in.

I hated to think my skills were slipping, that I might not be able to do my job properly, because I was so distracted by all of the unexpected changes in my life.

A woman had walked up, and after offering me an apologetic look, she shifted her focus to Avalon and said, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm all finished with this."

I took a step back to make room for the woman, and for some reason, I couldn't seem to look away from her. Something hit me in the center of my chest at the sight of this woman. She was shorter than my six-foot frame by about six or seven inches. She had long, straight, dark brown hair with a set of cobalt blue eyes. Her lips, nose, and cheekbones could only be described as soft and delicate. Gorgeous, even.

It was at that thought when a wave of guilt washed over me. How could I do that? How could I have just looked at a woman the way I looked at this woman?

She wasn't Violet.

She wasn't my wife.

And yet, my eyes were focused on her in a way they hadn't focused on any woman since Violet.

I hated the way it was making me feel.

Guilty.

So fucking guilty.

Fortunately, nobody seemed to notice the stress and turmoil I was in, since Avalon immediately piped up and responded. She reached her hand out to take the clipboard from the woman and said, “It’s no problem at all, Lamise. Did you have any trouble with the application?”

Lamise shook her head. “No. No, it was all pretty self-explanatory.”

“Great. Well, like I said when you first came in this morning, we don’t currently have any job openings, but we will keep your application on file for a year in case something does pop up,” Avalon explained.

I wasn’t sure if Avalon picked up on it, but I couldn’t miss the sound of desperation in the woman’s voice when she returned, “Yes, please. Anything at all. I’d be grateful for the opportunity to be interviewed and considered.”

“We will absolutely do that. If there’s a position that works with your credentials and seems like it could be a good fit, I’ll be certain to call you,” Avalon assured her.

“Even if it’s not a position that aligns with my credentials, I’d be interested. Well, I mean, other than the stuff I’m not qualified to do, but I’m sure you know what I mean. I just... I want to make sure you know that I’m not picky. Honestly, I don’t care what it is. I’ll fetch coffee, if that’s what I’ve got to do. Or, well, it’s not exactly something I listed on there, but I’ve got the skills as a homemaker, so I can clean, too. Not that I’m saying this office is a mess or could use a cleaning. I’m just putting it out there.”

While it might have been easy to mistake all that Lamise had just shared as her being a little overzealous, I had a feeling that wasn’t all there was to it. There was something else lingering there.

Part of me was proud of myself for being able to notice it. I had wondered how my skills I’d relied on for so long in my line of work would hold up after all that I’d been through and

the time I'd taken off to grieve. Considering I'd been questioning them just moments ago when I realized I hadn't even noticed Lamise was here, this felt good. Apparently, I hadn't lost all of my observation skills.

But there was the other part of me that forced me to consider if this was really about my ability to assess a person or situation and not about this woman, the woman I still hadn't managed to tear my eyes away from.

Avalon let out a laugh and promised, "I'll be sure to make note of that, and we'll definitely keep you in mind."

Lamise offered one final nod and said, "Thank you again, Avalon. It was lovely to meet you."

"You, too, Lamise. Have a great day."

Seemingly unable to do anything else, I watched as Lamise turned around and walked toward the exit. I kept my eyes on her as she walked through the door and outside.

"Bummer."

Hearing that single word from Avalon, I begrudgingly tore my gaze from Lamise and spun around to face my friend. "What?"

She jerked her chin forward. "About Lamise. It's a shame we don't have a position open for her, because she seems eager."

"Or desperate," I noted.

Avalon held my gaze. "Yeah."

For a few seconds, the two of us stayed there in silence. I didn't know what was going through Avalon's mind, but I had what felt like a million thoughts racing through mine.

Suddenly, I blurted, "A homemaker might have experience with kids, right?"

Something washed over Avalon's face. Surprise and a bit of something else, maybe? But as quickly as it was there, it was gone, and she answered, "Sure."

I quickly looked behind me and saw Lamise moving slowly through the parking lot. The most absurd idea popped into my head.

Why I was even considering what I was about to do was beyond me. It was crazy. I didn't know who this woman was, and I was actually entertaining the idea of something that could only be labeled as preposterous.

I should have just let her walk away and continued with my search, as I had been doing.

Instead, I turned back to look at Avalon and asked, "Is this a bad idea?"

She knew what I was asking and didn't hesitate to respond. "We've got private investigators here, Banks, and we can do a background check. I don't think you'd be putting Rhys at risk if you considered Lamise. Just make sure you do your due diligence before you make any rash decisions."

Avalon was right.

We could easily do a background check—something that would have been required had Harper Security Ops been hiring for any position.

I thought on it for a moment.

"It would allow me to keep Rhys home. He'd be the only priority for Lamise as opposed to one of many in a daycare center," I reasoned, trying to justify why I wanted to walk out the door to stop Lamise before she got in her car and drove off.

"I agree. But if you're going to try to make that happen before she leaves, you better go out now," Avalon urged me.

I turned around again, saw Lamise approaching a car, and didn't give Avalon another glance.

My feet carried me forward through the door, and my eyes remained pinned on the woman I refused to let walk away. And for some strange reason, the closer I got to her, the more I couldn't deny the way something stirred in my chest once more.

FOUR



Lamise

This had been a long shot.

It had been a week since my entire world had been rocked all over again, days since I'd called my sister and asked for her advice and ultimately gone to the police with the video on Graham's phone.

For some time, it felt like I'd been thrown right back into a pit of despair. No sooner had I left the police station, I'd gone back to my apartment and climbed into bed. I'd attempted to come to grips with the new reality I was living in, the one that meant my fiancé had been murdered. It wasn't exactly easy.

And with the exception of my sister and the police, I hadn't told anyone else about Graham's video. The police had indicated they'd be opening a case as it was clear not everything was as it had originally seemed.

Jolene had called me following my visit to the police station, worried out of her mind. She was terrified I was going to go back on my word and attempt to figure out what happened to Graham all on my own.

In an effort to reassure her, I had no choice but to make her another promise. I insisted I was going to do what I originally set out to do the day I wound up finding Graham's phone.

So, I got myself out of bed and started searching for a job. But it wasn't by pure coincidence I wound up at Harper Security Ops this morning. That had been a strategic move on my part.

Or, that's what I had intended for it to be.

Though there hadn't been any public postings for jobs, I still decided to make a stop there, hoping they might have something available.

I thought Harper Security Ops was the best place I could find employment, considering the uncertainty of the situation regarding Graham's death, and there were two big reasons for that.

In a worst-case scenario, if I was actually in danger, as my fiancé had indicated, I believed the guys at Harper Security Ops would be the perfect people to have around me.

If I was being honest, I didn't actually think I'd ever need to utilize their skills to keep myself safe. It had been months since Graham recorded that video and subsequently died. Months.

And in all that time, I'd never once been approached by anyone. There had never been any indication I was in danger or some other sort of trouble. For that reason, I believed it was likely the police were going to struggle to figure out exactly what happened to Graham. If they were unable to make any progress, my hope was that if I was working at Harper Security Ops, I might have been able to have one of my coworkers who worked in that department do some private investigation work in an attempt to figure out what everyone else had overlooked.

No matter what I had hoped would be the case, it didn't matter.

Because I'd just learned that they weren't hiring.

I had no choice but to go back to my apartment and figure out my next move. As I made my approach to my car in the biting January air, feeling completely despondent, I reconsidered my plan and decided I'd go visit my best friend, Tabitha. Somehow, a visit with her always made me feel better, even if it was only for a few hours.

But as I made the final approach to my car, I heard someone call out my name. "Lamise?"

I stopped moving at the sound of the masculine voice behind me and turned around. That's when I saw the man who'd been standing at the front reception desk inside Harper Security Ops making his way in my direction.

My body tensed at the sight of him making his approach.

It could have been because I didn't know him, but I had a feeling it had more to do with the look on his face. He was focused, intense, and maybe even a little bit scary. Even though he was still moving in my direction and hadn't said anything beyond calling out my name, it wasn't difficult to see there was a hint of something else lingering in his expression, something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

The man finally came to a stop a few feet in front of me. His eyes roamed over my face briefly before he introduced himself. "I'm Banks Huntington, and I work here at Harper Security Ops."

His voice was deep and gravelly.

And now that I had a name to put with the face of the man who'd been standing there while I spoke with Avalon about the lack of job openings, I gave myself the opportunity to take him in.

I was five feet five inches tall, and my best guess was that he was at least half a foot taller than me. It wasn't just his height that made him appear larger than me. Banks was fit, his body built by a strong, muscular frame, something I could easily see even though he was wearing a sweatshirt. The man had dark brown hair, just a few shades shy of being black. Or, I assumed that was the case based on his facial hair, a short-trimmed full beard that accentuated his lips, particularly the lower lip. Given the weather, it was no surprise he was wearing a beanie on his head. I couldn't quite work out if the look on his face was the result of the way his lips were pressed together in a hard line, or if it was something in his gray eyes.

Was it sorrow or intimidation? Did he seem like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, or was he attempting to appear menacing?

I couldn't work it out without needing to take too much time, so I decided to give him one last look. Banks was undeniably handsome—I could admit that much. He was the kind of guy I would have typically gone for. The problem was that he wasn't Graham.

On that thought, I forced a friendly smile onto my face. "It's nice to meet you, Banks. As you already know, I'm Lamise. Lamise Kelly."

Pointing over his shoulder, Banks said, "I couldn't help but overhear your conversation inside with Avalon. You're looking for a job?"

I nodded, feeling a shiver run through my body. "Yes."

"Right. I know it's cold out here, so I'll make this quick," he started. "I was curious what kind of work you were interested in."

That caught me off guard.

I couldn't understand why this guy who worked here cared what kind of job I wanted when Avalon had already told me they didn't have any open positions. Even still, I gave him an answer.

"It's just as I told Avalon. I'm not necessarily picky about it. I'm looking for employment, and I thought this would be a great place to work in whatever capacity I could be of service," I replied.

Banks nodded his understanding. "What kind of work experience do you have?"

"Nothing exciting," I huffed. "I worked for a long time at a company that provided businesses with solutions for their data and analytics within their company. It was a lot of data entry, collection, organization, and presentation. Completely mind-numbing."

His brows pulled together, and I couldn't stop myself from feeling like he was assessing me. It was clear he had some thoughts running through his mind, but whatever they were, he didn't share.

So, I decided to press him. “You seem to have some thoughts about my previous employment.”

Shaking his head, Banks lamented, “I’m sorry. I just... I thought you said something about having experience as a homemaker.”

“I do, and it was something I preferred over the job I had been doing.”

His eyes narrowed on me, leaving no room for misinterpretation. He was clearly trying to work something out. A moment later, he said, “So, you enjoyed being a homemaker, and now you want to work at a place like Harper Security Ops?”

Shit.

I couldn’t very well tell him the real reason I’d come to this place. Not only did it not matter at this point anyway, but I’d had a hard enough time telling Jolene and the police about Graham’s video. I intended to share the news with Tabitha, but I wasn’t worried about breaking down in front of her. If there was any chance of me being hired at Harper Security Ops on the off chance a position did open up, I had a feeling that a call wouldn’t come my way if I was a blubbering mess. The likelihood is they wanted to hire people who could be focused on doing their job and not distracted by the things threatening to send them into a tailspin.

So, I shrugged my shoulders. “Life doesn’t always work out the way we hope. I would have preferred being able to remain a homemaker, but that’s no longer an option. Now, I need a job, and I thought it might be a unique change of scenery to work at a place like this. Unfortunately, it seems that’s not an option, either.”

“Would you be interested in something a bit unconventional?”

“Pardon?”

Banks inhaled deeply. “Maybe I should ask another question first. How do you feel about children?”

I didn't know what I thought Banks was referring to when he asked about me being interested in something unconventional, but the mention of children was nowhere on my radar. I couldn't begin to understand why he was asking such a question.

That alone was enough to have me remaining silent to consider an appropriate response, but there was more.

I loved children.

From the moment Graham and I talked about me leaving my job and staying home, so he could provide for us and the family we wanted to have, my mind began to run wild. I started having visions of what that family would look like. Would we have a boy and a girl? A set of twins? Maybe we'd think we only want two kids and wind up with four or five.

"I love kids," I answered honestly, my voice betraying me and coming out as a rasp.

For the first time since he'd made his approach, something changed in Banks's expression. I wasn't sure I understood what it meant, but his features had softened considerably, and my eyes were drawn to his slightly pouty lower lip. "Okay. So, back to my original question. Would you be interested in something a bit unconventional?"

I had no idea where this was going, but given the way I was noticing so much about this man, I wasn't sure doing anything unconventional with him was a good idea. For that reason, it made no sense why I responded the way I did. "I guess that depends on what exactly this is about."

"I'm looking to hire a nanny."

"What?"

A small smile formed on Banks's face, and I instantly wondered why he didn't smile more often. It changed everything about him. He no longer looked like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. "For my son, Rhys. He's six months old. My mom has been watching him, but she needs to have a surgery to have both of her knees replaced."

Suddenly, the smile made sense.

The mere thought of his son had the power to transform Banks. It was heart melting to witness.

And experiencing that feeling was enough to have me ready to bolt. How could seeing the way this man reacted to the thought of his son have such a profound effect on me? I hadn't felt any warmth move through me in months.

Unsure I liked what that meant, I said, "I'm terribly sorry about your predicament, but I'm not sure I'm the woman for the job."

"But you said you love kids," Banks reasoned, an edge of desperation in his tone.

"I do."

"So, won't you consider it?"

My eyes roamed over his handsome face, the tip of his nose and his cheeks slightly pink from the cold.

"He's six months old?" I asked.

Banks nodded.

Gosh, that was quite possibly the perfect age. Babies started to fill out and develop personalities.

"You aren't worried that you don't even know me?" I pressed.

"Well, I'm hoping since you applied for a job at Harper Security Ops, you'd be okay with me needing to do a background check that would have been required if there had been a position available here," Banks noted.

I had expected as much and didn't have the slightest concern about being able to pass that check. But this man wanted me to be a nanny. I wasn't sure I was qualified, and given the range of emotions I'd felt being in this man's presence, I still didn't think this was a smart decision for me.

And yet, all those thoughts didn't stop me from coming out with another unexpected response. "How soon is your mom's surgery? And is this a temporary position?"

“The surgery is scheduled a week from Monday, so I don’t have much time left,” Banks revealed. “And I don’t want you to think that means I’m just willing to accept anyone at this point. I think there’s a reason you wound up at Harper Security Ops today.”

I nodded my understanding.

Banks continued, “Her recovery will be a couple of months, but the truth was that my mom watching her grandson was never meant to be her new job. She stepped up to help out when we needed her, but we want her to be able to go back to just being Grandma. This would be a permanent position.”

We.

Hearing him say that word, my eyes instantly dropped to his left hand. Sure enough, there was a ring on his finger.

I didn’t know why it hadn’t dawned on me before that moment, but Banks was already married. If I had been in a different headspace, I might have reacted differently to that realization.

But now?

This was the best revelation I could have made. There would be nothing for me to need to be concerned about with regard to the emotions I’d been feeling since I started having a conversation with Banks. The truth was that I was probably reacting to having a genuine conversation with someone new for the first time in months.

“Okay, Banks. I think I’d like to be considered for the nanny position,” I told him.

His brows shot up. “Really?”

“You are in a bit of a tight spot, being just over a week away, aren’t you?” I countered, feeling shocked by my ability to tease.

Apparently, Banks was capable of smiling not just over thoughts of his son, because the corners of his mouth tipped up. “That is true.”

“So, how will this work?” I asked, ignoring the way his smile transformed him. “Do I need to be fingerprinted or something?”

He let out a laugh, but abruptly stopped himself. A strange look washed over his expression, and he shook away whatever thoughts passed through his mind to respond to me. “No. You don’t need to be fingerprinted. I’ll work on having the background check done today, and if you’re available any time this weekend, perhaps we can have you come over to meet Rhys before we make any official decisions.”

I hadn’t had plans to do anything on the weekend for months. Hell, I hadn’t had plans to do anything during the week, either. “I’m free this weekend.”

“Perfect. Would tomorrow morning around ten o’clock work for you? Rhys is generally up from his morning nap by then.”

“I can do that. Ten o’clock would be great.”

“Nice. Can I find your number on the application you filled out for Avalon?” Banks asked.

“Yes, I put my cell number on the application.”

His chin jerked down slightly in response. “Okay. So, I’ll shoot over a text message to you with our address when I head back inside, and we’ll see you tomorrow at ten o’clock.”

“That sounds great. I’m looking forward to it, Banks.”

For a brief moment, I could have sworn I saw something uneasy wash over him, but before I could be certain, it was gone. “Yeah. And thank you for considering doing this. You’re really helping us out here. If all goes well tomorrow, we can discuss the specifics of salary and hours.”

“That sounds like a plan. Thank you for the opportunity.”

“You’re welcome. Now, I should probably let you get out of this cold. I’ll see you tomorrow, Lamise.”

Feeling much better than I had when I’d walked out of the Harper Security Ops building, I sent a smile his way. “See you tomorrow.”

At that, I turned around, opened my car door, and folded in behind the wheel. Only after I was inside and had turned it on did Banks shake his head as though ridding it of some awful thoughts, turn around, and walk away.

It hadn't been the job I'd been expecting, but there was no question it was something I believed I'd enjoy a whole lot more.

FIVE



Lamise

I had only minutes left to pull myself together.

I was nearly at Banks's house, so I could meet his son. Assuming all went well there, I'd presumably get the lay of the land, and we'd discuss some additional details for the nanny position.

Oddly enough, I was nervous about this unconventional interview.

When I walked into Harper Security Ops yesterday, I'd been hoping to get an interview for some administrative position within the company. I had been ready for that, prepared to rock the interview and secure a new job.

Now, I wasn't feeling so confident.

After leaving the impromptu meeting with Banks in the parking lot yesterday, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about the job opportunity he'd presented me with. The more I thought about it, the more I realized just how much I wanted the job.

It wasn't exactly where I envisioned my life would have been by now, but it was certainly much closer to the lifestyle I had been planning to have. Granted, if it all worked out and Banks officially hired me, I wouldn't be staying home to take care of my own house or family, and I'd be doing similar work for someone else, but I couldn't be upset about doing something I'd find much more enjoyable than data entry or filing paperwork.

At this point, I was merely hoping Rhys would like me enough for Banks and his wife to want to proceed with some version of officially interviewing me, so I could be considered for the nanny position.

Feeling both a mix of excitement and nervousness, I turned onto the street where Banks lived. As I made my approach toward his house, I couldn't miss the way my fingers curled a bit tighter around the steering wheel or how my belly started to tremble.

This wasn't going to work.

While I didn't have any of my own, I'd been around enough babies in my lifetime to know they could sense when people were on edge. If I didn't want to be told to turn around and head right back to where I came from, I had to find a way to get it together.

I couldn't screw this up.

Bringing my car to a stop in front of the house, I took a deep breath in an effort to calm myself down. Unsure I'd succeeded in doing that, but understanding I couldn't sit here all day, I turned off the car and exited it.

A moment later, I was knocking gently on the door.

Almost instantly, the door opened, and Banks was standing there with a baby in his arms. "I'm so glad I was walking down the last two stairs when you knocked. I wouldn't have heard you otherwise. Come on in."

I stepped inside and lamented, "I'm sorry. I know you said Rhys was usually up from his morning nap by ten o'clock, but I didn't want to risk disturbing him if he'd had a rough morning. I know that can happen sometimes."

"There's no need to apologize. I can appreciate the forethought. We've been pretty good about keeping Rhys on his schedule, and I think that helps tremendously with his mood," Banks shared.

I offered a small smile and allowed my eyes to drop to the gorgeous baby in Banks's arms. Suddenly, the change I'd seen in Banks yesterday when his whole face transformed at the

simple thought of his son finally made sense. Because looking at the little boy did nearly the same thing for me. The corners of my mouth tipped up even higher, forcing my small smile to grow into a huge grin.

“Is this him?” I asked.

“This is him,” Banks declared.

Hoping he wouldn't mind, I took a few steps forward and reached my hand out to Rhys. I took his tiny hand in mine and stroked my thumb gently over the soft skin. “Hi, Rhys.”

Rhys offered no response in return.

I lifted my gaze to Banks and noted, “He's adorable.”

“Thank you. Why don't we head into the family room, so he can play for a bit while you and I talk?” Banks suggested.

I found it strange that Banks indicated it would just be the two of us talking and that his wife wasn't going to be involved in the discussion. I couldn't imagine I wouldn't want to be present while the person who'd be watching my baby was being interviewed.

Despite my thoughts, I replied, “That sounds great.”

We moved into the family room, and I saw a handful of toys scattered on the floor on top of a large blanket.

“Feel free to grab a seat on the couch if you'd like, but I'm going to just get down on the floor here with him,” Banks said. “I hope you don't mind.”

“Not at all. In fact, I'll join the both of you, if that's okay,” I returned, not only because I wanted Banks to see that I wasn't uptight about anything but also because I was hoping Rhys might take to me a little better if I was willing to play with him.

“Of course, it's alright.”

The next thing I knew, Banks and I were sitting there in complete silence as we watched Rhys explore the little world around him. He reached for the brightly colored toys and

waved his arms around as he held them. Banks and I watched him with an avid fascination for a bit.

But eventually, Banks broke the silence and asked, “So, I started thinking after you left Harper Security Ops yesterday, and I quickly realized I should have asked some rather pertinent questions before we got to this point.”

Oh no.

Was he already reconsidering the job offer?

Not wanting to make a big deal about it and jump to any conclusions, I replied, “Well, I’m happy to answer any questions you have now. Was there something specific you were concerned about?”

He shrugged. “I mean, I know I asked how you felt about kids in general, and I’m relieved to know you love them, but I guess I probably should have confirmed that you had some experience in this capacity.”

Crap.

I wondered if I should just get up and walk out now.

“I won’t lie and say that I’ve got official experience as a nanny when I don’t, but I did have a couple of jobs as a babysitter when I was a teenager,” I revealed. “I’m not sure if that counts here, though.”

Banks tipped his head to the side and asked, “How old?”

A huge rush of air left my lungs. “Oh, gosh. I guess I was... maybe fourteen or fifteen. Something like that.”

Shaking his head through a soft laugh, Banks clarified, “No. I wasn’t referring to how old you were. I was wondering how old the children were that you were watching.”

I could feel the flush creep over my skin. I was already embarrassing myself, and it wasn’t even my first day on the job. “I’m sorry. Um, well, I didn’t watch anyone as young as Rhys. Most of the kids were toddler aged, maybe three, or older. But I did have one family I used to babysit for on occasion that had three children. There were two older sisters and a younger brother. The girls were five and three, I believe,

when I first started watching them, but the boy was ten months old. And I should also note that I do have a niece. Her name is Ruby, and I spent a lot of time with her from the time she was born.”

The moment I’d shared that information, I saw something shift in Banks’s expression. It looked as though he was relieved to know I had some experience watching children.

“So, you really do love children, then?”

“I do,” I confirmed.

He nodded several times, his eyes roaming over my face. “I’m really sorry if I seem to be a bit out of sorts here. We’ve not had to do this before, and it’s always been my mom or dad who watches him. Rhys has never been left alone with anyone who isn’t family.”

I didn’t know why, but something about seeing the way this was affecting Banks helped me. Maybe it made me realize that I wasn’t the only one who was nervous about this, even if our reasons for feeling that way were different.

It was heartwarming to see just how much concern Banks had for his son. There was a part of me—the part still hurt by my own father’s absence—that couldn’t fault the guy for wanting to make sure he didn’t make any mistakes when it came to his son’s care. Of course, I knew I wasn’t any sort of threat and would be a reliable choice if he decided to hire me officially.

“I can imagine it’s not easy, but I’m happy to answer any questions you have and help to ease your mind,” I insisted. “I understand you want to make the best decision for your son, so I’ll do what I can to make sure you know you’d be doing that.”

No sooner had I gotten those words out, a set of colorful plastic keys landed in my lap. I dropped my eyes to the keys, lifted them in my hand, and focused my attention on Rhys. I held the keys out in front of him, shaking them slightly, and said, “Hey, little man. Are you missing a set of keys? Or was this your way of telling us you want some attention?”

For the first time since I entered their home, Rhys smiled at me. His chubby cheeks and mostly toothless grin made my heart melt.

“Look at those two teeth you have starting there,” I noted. “I’ll bet it feels to your dad like you were just born, and here you are with two whole teeth, throwing around some keys.”

Rhys cooed at me, offering a bunch of baby gibberish in response.

“No way!” I replied. “Tell me all about it.”

Rhys continued with the sounds coming out of his mouth as he leaned forward on his hands, attempting to find a way to get closer to his keys.

“You want these keys, don’t you?” I asked him. “Are you crawling yet? Can you come over here to get them?”

Rhys was still sitting on his butt as he leaned forward on his hands, but that didn’t stop him from wiggling around and fighting to figure out how he was going to make it over to me, so he could get his keys.

I set the keys down right in front of me, reached both hands out to Rhys, and said, “I should probably just help you over here, if I want you to like me, shouldn’t I? How do you feel about meeting new people, Rhys? Would it be okay if I picked you up?”

Rhys managed to balance himself on one hand while he lifted the other up toward one of my hands. I took that as a sign he was okay with me picking him up.

So, that’s precisely what I did.

“Ooh, you’re a big boy,” I said, pulling him close and settling him in one arm, so I could lift the keys with my other hand and jingle them in front of him.

Rhys reached for the keys and hit my face the first time, but he got them on the second try. I watched and laughed as he began shaking them in his hand like a crazy man.

My eyes shifted slightly, and that’s when I remembered I was in the middle of an interview. It might have been an

unconventional one, but it was still a job interview.

“I’m so sorry,” I apologized to Banks. “I got a little caught up there.”

Something warm stole over his expression. “It’s absolutely okay. In fact, it looks like Rhys is fond of you.”

I offered a genuine smile in return, shifted my gaze momentarily to Rhys, and looked back at Banks. “I think he’s pretty spectacular, too.”

“So, do you think you’d like to be his nanny?” Banks asked.

Blinking my eyes in surprise, I said, “Of course. But... are you sure? Didn’t you want to ask me some more questions?”

“I did. But then I saw the way you just were with him and realized there wasn’t a question I could ask that would give me any more reassurance than that just did,” he explained. “Plus, I can still do a background check and look into your references, if I need anything else.”

I swallowed hard before my lips parted slightly. I hadn’t even been trying to impress Banks when I was interacting with Rhys. The little boy was just that fascinating, and it had been such a long time since I’d had the chance to hold a baby.

“Sure. Okay. Well, like I said, I’m happy to answer any questions you have,” I declared.

“Do you have any questions for me?” he countered.

I thought for a moment, realizing I probably should have come prepared with a list of concerns, but now that I was here, holding Rhys in my arms, I wasn’t sure I would have remembered them anyway.

“Well, assuming you’re serious about me being Rhys’s nanny, I guess my questions would just be with regard to his schedule. It’s clear to me, based on the way you timed this meeting this morning, that Rhys is on a schedule, and I know how important it is for a baby to stick to one of those. I’d just want to make sure I know what that schedule is, so this transition goes as smoothly as possible for him,” I answered.

Banks narrowed his eyes slightly, considered my words, and said, “I have an idea that I hope you’ll be open to.”

“Okay. What is it?”

“My mom is going to be here watching Rhys for the next week,” he started. “Would you mind coming by one or two days, whatever you think is necessary, to get a feel for how Rhys’s typical day goes? I’d obviously compensate you for your time.”

That was a great idea.

Rhys started wiggling in my arms, throwing his body slightly to the side in an effort to get himself free. After I put him down, I answered Banks. “Yeah, I can do that. I think it’s an excellent idea.”

The corners of his mouth tipped up slightly. “Perfect. Now, I do want to discuss my schedule.”

Right.

That made sense.

“Yes. What days and times would you need me here?” I asked.

“Generally speaking, Monday through Friday, normal business hours,” Banks shared. “That said, depending on whether I’m working on a case or not, it is possible I might need to stay late. It doesn’t happen regularly, but it does happen, and it usually is unpredictable. I’ll do my best to give you notice in case this happens, but it might not be much. Do you think this will pose a problem for you?”

If only Banks knew how I’d been spending my days for months now, he probably wouldn’t have asked me that question. Beyond having my mom, my sister, and my best friend stopping by to visit with me, or me heading over to Tabitha’s place for a change of scenery since I couldn’t think about driving much farther than that to visit with Jolene and my mom, I didn’t go anywhere.

“That shouldn’t be a problem at all,” I assured him. “Do you work on the weekends ever?”

“I haven’t since Rhys was born, but before that, I needed to do so on rare occasions. I wouldn’t expect you to give up your weekends if that happened now,” Banks insisted.

I shrugged and offered, “I wouldn’t mind. If you’re in a bind, need me, and I’m not doing anything else, it really wouldn’t be a problem for me.”

Appreciation washed over him. “I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks, Lamise.”

“No problem.”

For the next few minutes, Banks and I fell into a comfortable silence as we watched Rhys play and explore everything around him. I was surprised—and relieved—to feel so at ease so quickly. I had anticipated a bit of awkwardness, but there was none to be had in those moments, something I was especially grateful for.

“Alright, well, I think we should probably discuss salary,” Banks finally said, ending the silence.

“Sure.”

Truth be told, the longer I was there, the more I was finding myself ready to admit I’d come and watch Rhys for free. It was nice to be somewhere other than my apartment around people who didn’t look at me like they couldn’t imagine living a day in my shoes after all the loss I’d suffered.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t tell Banks about my noble thoughts, because I did need to have an actual job, so I could continue to support myself.

On the bright side, Banks offered a reasonable and fair salary for the position, and by the time I walked out of his house just before lunch, I did it with a smile on my face.

It was nice to feel like I was finally making progress on getting my life back on the right track.

I didn’t suspect everything would turn around overnight, but I was on the right path, and I was looking forward to seeing how taking care of Rhys changed my life.



Banks

“Are you sure you checked her out?”

Holding my son in my arms for those last few minutes every morning before I had to leave to head into work, I sent a reassuring smile my mom’s way and promised, “Yes, Mom, I did. I’m going to do a little extra digging into her references this week, just to be on the safe side, but I’m confident about her.”

Eyeing me curiously as she nodded her head slowly, my mom returned, “I’m just worried. I feel so guilty, and I don’t want anything to happen to him.”

It was Monday, one week before my mom was set to have her knee replacement surgery, and I’d called her last night to ask her to come over just a bit earlier this morning, so I could tell her about Lamise.

I’d just explained how I happened to be there when Lamise handed in an application and resume for a position at Harper Security, and how an idea popped into my head.

While I could appreciate her concerns, since I’d had many of the same ones, I didn’t think she needed them in this case. “I get it, but I think this is going to be great. In fact, I think it’s going to be far better for him and for my own peace of mind to know he’s going to be here at home with someone looking after him instead of him being in daycare. I was struggling to choose one, and it wasn’t like I didn’t try. I visited the three I kept seeing pop up during my searching. I knew from the

minute I walked into each of them that they weren't going to be the place for him.”

I watched as some of the tension left my mom's body, and her shoulders relaxed slightly. “I know you would never do something to put him in danger, but I can't help worrying about him. I really just think it's my guilt that's taking over and making me feel like I'm letting the both of you down.”

“Don't,” I ordered gently. “We both love you, and neither one of us wants to see you in pain. Plus, I think you'll agree with me on Lamise, because you'll have an opportunity to meet her.”

There was no missing the surprise in my mom's tone when she jerked back slightly and replied, “I am?”

I nodded. “I hope you don't mind, but I wanted to give everyone the opportunity to have a smooth transition into this new arrangement, so I worked it out to have Lamise come here twice this week. She'll be here today and Friday.”

“I'm going to get to meet her?” my mom asked.

“Yes. She'll spend the day here with you, getting the lay of the land and learning more about Rhys's schedule, where we keep things, and how a typical day here goes. At the same time, it'll give Rhys the opportunity to get more familiar and comfortable with her, and it'll probably give you some of the same peace of mind that I feel now about having her be the one to look after him once you go in for your surgery,” I answered.

My mom didn't immediately respond as she pondered all that I'd just shared. I used her silence as an opportunity to think about all that had happened over the last few days and the relief I felt.

I'd wholeheartedly believed I was going to be in a situation where I was going to have to do something that made me feel particularly uneasy, and when I was feeling the absolute worst about it, Lamise showed up.

Granted, the whole thing happened by chance, and for a brief period of time after I'd stopped her outside the Harper

Security Ops building to propose the job to her, I'd wondered if I'd made a big mistake.

I'd acted on impulse and a strange feeling I had in my chest over the sight of her. As a father—one whose only concern was his son—I couldn't go around making irrational decisions based on feelings.

Rhys deserved better from me.

Fortunately, any of the concerns I'd had vanished when Lamise showed up on Saturday morning to meet my son in an unofficial interview of sorts. While she'd made it clear she liked kids, I hadn't expected she'd be such a natural around him.

Within just a few minutes of having her there with us, I knew she was going to be perfect. She was completely comfortable with Rhys and didn't seem to care that I was sitting right there watching as she had a full-blown conversation with him, pretending she could understand all of the gibberish that came out of his mouth.

All of my fears about how I was going to get through the next few months while my mom was recovering had dissipated.

Surprisingly, that wasn't all.

Those worries were all replaced by an overwhelming sense of confidence. Lamise wasn't only going to be a woman who'd be able to prevent Rhys from having to go to daycare, but she was also going to be the reason Rhys thrived.

In just those first few minutes, I was confident she was going to be more than just someone who would look out for his physical well-being. I was convinced she'd do what she could to stimulate his mind.

God, I was relieved.

And my mom had nothing to worry about. Unfortunately, she still hadn't said anything, so I called, "Mom?"

"Yeah?"

“I promise I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t think she was capable of caring for him the way you or I would,” I assured her.

She jerked her chin down slightly and said, “I know. I trust you.”

Before I could say another word, a gentle knock came at the door. My brows shot up as my mom’s eyes came to mine. “Looks like she’s here.”

Holding her arms out, my mom said, “I’ll take him while you let her in.”

After placing Rhys in my mom’s arms, I moved to the door and opened it. That was when I wished I would have held on to my son, because now neither one of us had the ability to focus on anything other than each other. And I’d have been lying if I said it was easy to look at Lamise and not be affected.

I hated that.

Because she wasn’t Violet.

A smarter man might have recognized that fact and not put himself in the position to have to feel that guilt. Or maybe on the surface, it would seem smart. The truth was, after seeing the way Lamise was with my son, I’d be nothing more than a selfish man if I didn’t hire her as his nanny.

I was a father now, and my son’s needs had to come before anything that would make me feel better.

“Hi, Lamise,” I greeted her, pushing any feelings of discomfort to the back of my mind.

Lamise smiled in return, a smile that was friendly enough but didn’t light up her whole face. “Good morning, Banks. I hope I’m not too early.”

I shook my head and stepped back. “Not at all. You’ve got perfect timing.”

As she stepped inside, she asked, “Is he awake?”

“He is. He’s in the other room with my mom.”

Once I closed the door behind her, Lamise shared, “I have to admit, I did a lot of thinking about your little guy this weekend. He’s just too adorable.”

Just like that.

Lamise was quickly reminding me why she was the best choice to be his nanny.

Of course, I realized she could have been a crazed woman with the ability to bring him harm, but I believed the chance of that being the case was slim.

“Thanks. Come on in, and I’ll introduce you to my mom,” I urged her.

Lamise fell into step beside me as we made our way back to the family room, where my mom was caught up in playing with Rhys. The moment we entered the room, my mom’s eyes came in our direction while Rhys continued to play with the toys in front of him.

“Mom, I’d like you to meet Lamise Kelly. Lamise, this is my mom, Robin Huntington.”

My mom moved to stand, but Lamise rushed forward and insisted, “Oh, don’t get up for me, Mrs. Huntington. I’m happy to get down on the ground with both of you.”

Shock and surprise washed over my mom’s face. She sat back down again and stared at Lamise for a few moments before she said, “It’s nice to meet you, Lamise. And please, call me Robin.”

Lamise extended her hand to my mom, who reached out and shook it. Once she released it, Lamise focused her attention on Rhys, who was now happily playing with his stackable rings. Placing her hand gently on his head, she cooed, “Hey, baby Rhys. How’s it going?”

My son lifted his gaze to Lamise, and as she continued to talk to him, he broke out into a grin.

It was then my mom returned her attention to me. I shot a knowing smile her way.

Realizing they were all going to have a great day together and needing to get myself to work, I stepped forward and crouched down beside them. “I would love nothing more than to be able to stay here, but I’ve got to get going. Lamise, my mom can show you the ropes here, and hopefully you’ll have a pretty good idea of how things go by the time the day is over.”

“That sounds great.”

After giving her a nod, I said, “Mom, I know you’ve got your pre-op appointment later today, so I’ll be here to make sure you can get to that on time.”

“Call if that changes,” she remarked.

“I will.” Reaching out for him, I lifted Rhys in my arms one last time, kissed him, and said, “You’ve got these ladies to yourself all day today, little man. Be on your best behavior.”

“He’s an angel compared to you as a baby,” my mom interjected.

I rolled my eyes, kissed Rhys one last time, and turned my attention to Lamise. “Any questions for me before I go?”

She shook her head. “No. I think I’m good.”

“We’ll be fine here, Banks. Get to work, so you can get back on time,” my mom ordered.

Confident they were all going to be fine, I set my son down, got up to grab my things, and left.

And on the way to work, I found myself feeling just a little less stressed than I had been in a very long time.



“So, how’d it go?”

It was a vain attempt and foolish notion to walk into work expecting I wouldn’t be stopped.

Though I knew precisely what Avalon was referring to with her question, with Damon standing there, my brows

pulled together. “How did what go?”

Avalon shot me a dubious look. “This weekend and the impromptu meet and greet you set up with Lamise and your son. Did he like her?”

My eyes slid to Damon, and the confusion was written all over his face. “He’s a little young to be going out on dates already, isn’t he?”

Letting out a laugh, I shook my head and moved toward the reception desk. “Yes, he is. Lamise is actually a woman who stopped in here on Friday, looking for a job. Since Harper Security Ops isn’t hiring, and I was in need of some childcare, I offered the position to her.”

“Ah, that makes sense,” Damon replied.

“And?” Avalon pressed, evidently wanting some clarification.

It was going to take me some time to get used to all of this sharing. I wasn’t exactly very good at it, but I figured if there was anyone who made it easy, it was Avalon.

I sighed. “And it went well. They got along great. She’s actually at my place right now with my mom, so she can get a feel for what a typical day is like for Rhys.”

Avalon’s whole face lit up with excitement. “Oh, that’s great news. I’m so happy for you. And for her.”

Nodding my agreement, I said, “Yeah, as long as I don’t go home to find she’s taken off because it’s more than she thought it would be.”

“Do you think that’s a possibility?”

Based on what I’d seen from Lamise so far, I didn’t think it was likely. Even still, it was hard to maintain a positive attitude these days.

So, I shrugged. “She’s seems eager about the job, and she’s a natural when it comes to interacting with Rhys, so I’d like to think we’ll be okay, but you just never know.”

“Well, I hope it works out the way you want, and you know if you ever need anything, Damon and I are happy to help,” she offered.

“I do, and I appreciate that.”

“Anything at all, man,” Damon added.

I jerked my chin down, offering a nod of respect. “I should get to work.”

Avalon didn’t hesitate to respond. “Okay. Talk to you later, Banks.”

Needing to return to what felt comfortable, I walked away from my coworkers and the conversation that had the power to lead me in one of several directions I wasn’t prepared to go.

I wanted the distraction of work for a few hours, and I did manage to get it. That said, being in the kidnap and ransom unit, I was a guy who generally liked to be able to be in the action. Though I didn’t like knowing that it would mean someone’s life could have been in danger, there was a part of me craving that action.

There had been one case I’d helped on since Violet died that I thought was going to make me feel like I was back, but things had sort of worked themselves out just as I’d arrived with another coworker of mine on the scene.

On the bright side, not having to make any rescue attempts today not only meant that nobody was in that kind of danger, but it also meant that I was able to leave work on time to make it home, so my mom could make it to her pre-op appointment.

I’d given her a call as I walked out of the building late that afternoon, and by the time I pulled up at my house, my mom was ready to walk out the door.

“I hope you had a good day, Banks. I wish I could stay and chat, but I’ve got to go. Rhys was wonderful today.”

“Okay. Good luck at your appointment. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sounds great.” She turned around, took a few steps toward the family room, and peeked her head around the

corner. After waving, she said, “Bye, Rhys. Grandma will see you tomorrow. Lamise, it was wonderful meeting you.”

“You, too, Robin. I’ll see you later this week.”

A moment later, my mom walked through the front door and out to her car. I closed the door behind her and made my way into the family room.

And when I walked in, I felt that same feeling settle in the center of my chest. Lamise was sitting on the couch, and my boy was sitting on her lap with his back to me. He was cuddling close to her, the way he would cuddle when he first woke up from a nap.

He looked completely content, and she looked... fuck, I couldn’t even begin to admit to myself what I thought about the way she looked holding my son against her chest.

My throat grew painfully tight, and I couldn’t work out if it was because I liked what I was seeing or if it was because I hated that it wasn’t Violet sitting there.

“Hi, Banks.”

Lamise’s sweet voice made the ache in my chest grow stronger, and I had to compel myself to swallow past the pain in my throat.

I forced myself to speak. “Lamise.”

“Your mom wasn’t lying,” she started. “Rhys had a great day, and he just woke up a little bit ago from his nap. He’s still getting acclimated.”

Nodding, I moved deeper into the room, so I could see Rhys’s face.

As I approached, Lamise gently stroked her fingers against the back of my son’s head. “Your daddy’s home, Rhys,” she whispered quietly to him.

I made it to the couch, sat down beside them, and expected Rhys would lift his head up and reach for me.

He didn’t.

He stayed where he was, resting his cheek against Lamise's chest while he looked at me. Knowing it would be much easier for me to focus on him and not the scent of Lamise's perfume, I pinned my eyes on my boy and asked, "What kind of greeting is this, little man?"

He showed off his two teeth as he started to smile at me.

"I don't think it's very funny," I told him. "You always come right to me as soon as I get home from work. What's this all about, Rhys?"

He started singing.

It was the sweetest, most delicate sound that came out of him, and it was clear he was singing.

Yep.

No matter how much I thought having Lamise here with my son was a bad idea for me, there was no question she was the best choice for him.

Since she already had her hand on his head, I placed my hand on his back and patted him gently as I returned my attention to Lamise. "So, he was good? You aren't second-guessing taking the job?"

"Are you kidding me? He was an angel. If I'm honest, I'm not sure how I'm going to last until later this week without seeing him. He's so cuddly and happy. He puts a smile on my face, and it's been a long time since I've been able to do that. I'm not going anywhere."

Almost as soon as she got all of that out, I could see the look of regret wash over her face. Evidently, she realized she'd shared more than she'd intended. I had wanted to ask her what she meant by it when she said it had been a long time since she'd smiled, but I didn't want to pry for more information about something she was already regretting having shared.

"I'm relieved to hear that. And while I'm not expecting you to do it, you are certainly more than welcome to be here throughout the week, if you'd like. You don't have to wait until the end of the week to make one more visit," I said, not understanding why I would ever make her such an offer.

She shook her head. “That’s sweet of you to say, but I think I’ll let your mom have her time alone with Rhys this week. She’s probably going to want all she can get before she goes in for that surgery.”

“And that’s really kind of you to do for her,” I reasoned.

At that moment, Rhys finally lifted his head from Lamise’s chest and reached for me. “Aw, see? He missed you. He just wanted to get a few extra minutes of cuddling in.”

I lifted my son out of Lamise’s lap and pulled him close, so I could press a kiss to the side of his head. “Hey, buddy. I missed you today.”

Rhys grabbed at my face with both of his hands.

“That’s my cue. I should get going, so you can enjoy the rest of your night with your baby, and I’ll be back on Friday.”

Lamise stood from the couch, and I did the same. “Sounds great. We’ll look forward to seeing you then.”

She reached out, gave Rhys’s hand a gentle squeeze, and said, “Me, too.”

Rhys and I walked Lamise to the front door, and I waited until she was safely in her car and pulling away before I stepped inside and closed the door again.

I then spent the rest of the night with Rhys, soaking up all the time I could with him before it was time for him to go down for the night. We ate, we played, and Rhys got his bath.

And when I laid my head down on the pillow after my own shower, I glanced over at the framed picture of Violet and me on the nightstand.

“You’re supposed to be here, Violet. You’re going to miss it all.”

She never responded.

SEVEN



Banks

“I’m happy to report I’m ending this week feeling much differently than I started it.”

Since the words my mom had just shared indicated something positive, and I knew the one thing that had been troubling her earlier in the week, I could only assume what she was referring to. And considering it was early Friday evening, I’d just gotten home from work, and Lamise had just left the house while my mom hung around, I was even more convinced of what my mother’s words were all about.

Even still, wanting to be certain, and positive she needed to share, I asked, “Care to enlighten me?”

Her eyes went in the direction of the front door. We couldn’t see it from where we were in the kitchen, but it was clear what, or who, she was thinking about. Contentment was written all over her face.

“I like her,” she finally declared.

“Lamise,” I stated, confirming what I already knew would be the case.

Shaking her head in disbelief, my mom said, “I don’t know how you did it or why it worked out the way it did, but you couldn’t have found anyone better than her to look after Rhys.”

I’d been feeling similarly since she showed up at my house last Saturday morning. “What makes you say that?” I asked,

wanting to get more information from her perspective.

“Banks, she’s delightful,” my mom started. “I know I’ve only had two days of being around her, but I’ve been with her all day, and I think she’s wonderful. She’s so engaged with Rhys when she’s with him, and from what I can see, he adores her. Honestly, I can’t begin to express just how relieved I feel knowing that she’s going to be here with him, and I’m no longer worried about something bad happening to Rhys when I go in for my surgery next week and have months of recovery ahead of me.”

It was the same thing I’d felt.

Lamise didn’t hesitate to get right down on the floor to engage with my son. Other than the conversation being one sided and slightly different when it came to a particular topic, Lamise talked with him in a way I’d seen her hold a conversation with both myself and Avalon before.

She was engrossed in what was happening, giving Rhys the time and attention she’d give to an adult. In fact, I was inclined to believe she gave him more than she’d give to an adult.

And that wasn’t something I could dismiss so easily.

Apparently, my mother couldn’t, either.

“I told you she was going to be a great fit.”

“She really is,” my mom confirmed. “I didn’t want to make any judgment calls too soon, and I told myself that Rhys’s reaction to her on Monday was purely a fluke. It wasn’t, because he was the exact same way with her today.”

That was easily the best indicator that I’d made a good choice. I had also noticed just how much Rhys liked his new nanny.

I couldn’t say I blamed the kid, not if what I saw when I was here with the both of them was any indication of the way she was when I wasn’t around.

Considering Rhys was my son, I also told myself that he had a bit of my ability to read people. He might have only

been just over six months old, but I believed he could sense things like this. For whatever reason, he was drawn to Lamise and was obviously very comfortable around her.

“I don’t think I could ask for more than that. As long as she cares well for him, and he likes her, I’ll be happy,” I assured my mom.

Smiling brightly at me, she replied, “Lamise asked me for my phone number today. She said if it was okay with you, she’d give me some updates about Rhys’s days when I’m recovering.”

“Why wouldn’t I be okay with that?” I countered.

“I thought the same thing, and when I asked her, she suggested that you might not be okay with her snapping a photo or two on her phone to send to me.”

Respect.

While Lamise probably figured I wouldn’t have a problem with my mom hearing about whatever was going on with Rhys, she didn’t want to cross any boundaries when it came to pictures of my son being on her personal phone. I liked knowing that she had some morals.

“I’ll make sure she knows that it’s okay.”

A satisfied look stole over her expression. “So, do you have any plans for this weekend?”

Shaking my head, I answered, “Nothing crazy. I’m just going to spend some time with my kid. It feels good to be going back to work on a regular basis again, but I’d be lying if I said it’s easy to be away from him. I’ve missed him this week.”

My mom’s fingers curled around my arm, and she offered a gentle squeeze. “You’re doing what you’re doing to take care of and provide for him. I know these last few months haven’t been easy on you, but I’m really proud of you, Banks.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

I couldn’t say more than that, because I didn’t trust myself not to get a bit emotional. Rhys had officially had more time

alive on this Earth without his mom than he did with her at this point.

It was sad.

It was proof that life went on, even when we didn't want it to or wished we could go back and change something.

But Rhys was also thriving.

So, if moving forward was the only way to make sure that continued to happen, I had no choice but to continue putting one foot in front of the other, no matter how much it hurt to feel like I was walking away from the life I had planned with Violet.



Lamise

“So, you’ve got my favorite spot on the couch, the softest blanket, the best chocolate I own, and the cuddly pup in your lap. I’ve given you all I can give to make this as comfortable as possible, and now I want to know what you needed to talk to me about.”

I wasn't quite sure I knew where to start.

Exactly one week ago, I had intended to hop in my car in the Harper Security Ops parking lot and drive over to Tabitha's house to tell her what was happening in my life.

I never made it, because Banks had stopped me before I could even open my car door. And after that discussion with him, knowing I was going to be at his house the next morning, I drove straight home.

At some point in the middle of the week this past week, I reached out to my best friend and told her I had some shocking news to share with her and that I hoped I could do it this weekend.

Tabitha wanted me to give her the details over the phone.

I refused.

That's why I was here now, having just left Banks's house and ready to spill my guts.

Of course, with all that had happened over the last two weeks or so, I was unsure of where to start. To be fair, Tabitha wasn't lying when she said she'd given me all she had to give me to make this a comfortable space for me to share what I needed to share.

Truth be told, I'd have just settled for Rocky and been ready to share.

Rocky was Tabitha's Russell terrier, and he'd just curled up beside me on the couch after giving me the world's most rambunctious greeting when I arrived. Seeing how excited he got when I showed up usually left me feeling a bit melancholy. I loved the way Rocky could get me to smile and feel happy without much effort, but seeing him always made me sad about Henry. I missed my dog's pouty face.

As I stroked my hand over the top of Rocky's head, I resolved myself to the fact there was a lot to share and no perfect way to do any of it. Unsure I'd make it to the second thing I wanted to share if I started with the news about Graham, I decided to switch things around.

"I got a job," I blurted.

Tabitha gasped. "What? Are you serious?"

I nodded.

I couldn't miss how excited she was when she pressed, "Where? When? Why didn't you tell me?"

Tipping my head to the side, I noted, "I'm telling you now. I had what you could call two days of training this past week, and I officially start on Monday."

My best friend shifted in her seat on the couch to get herself comfortable. "Where are you going to be working? I assume you didn't go back to your old job, right?"

I shook my head. "No. No, I'm not sure they'd be able to pay me enough to go back there. Doing that would surely

make me feel even more depressed.”

Her brow lifted. “So, something exciting then. I don’t even know what you’re doing, and I’ve got to tell you that I’m already so happy for you. I mean, obviously, you know how much I know what you went through was awful, and I hate that you’re even in this position, but I’m thrilled to see you making the effort to get your life back on track. Graham would want that for you.”

I knew Tabitha was just doing what she felt compelled to do as my best friend by bringing up the fact that Graham would want the best for me. Technically, after watching that video of him where he’d indicated as much, I didn’t need the encouragement from her.

But since I couldn’t bring that up to her just yet, I simply nodded my head and returned, “Yeah. It’s not easy to think about moving forward without him, but I can’t sit around for the rest of my life not doing anything. Fortunately, I can say that I’m feeling the best I have in a very long time.”

A look of approval washed over her. “I’m so glad for that. Okay, so tell me about the job.”

My lips twitched slightly as I considered how she’d react. “I got a job as a nanny.”

Her chin dipped down, and she narrowed her eyes on me. “What?”

“It was purely by chance that I stumbled into the position, but like I said, I had two days of being around this little boy, and I’m feeling the most content I have in months.”

Nodding her head slowly as she tried to digest the news I’d just shared, Tabitha asked, “So, you’re a nanny for one boy?”

“Yes. His name is Rhys, and he’s just over six months old.”

“Six months old? I thought you were going to tell me you were doing this for a toddler or little kid. Six months old is still a baby.”

Visions of Rhys with his chubby cheeks and chunky arms danced in my head. “He’s the cutest, cuddliest, most adorable baby in the world.”

For several long moments, Tabitha just stared at me in silence. I allowed her to do it, continuing to stroke my hand over Rocky’s head and down his body.

Eventually, she let out a breath, held her hand up over her heart, and advised, “Please understand that there isn’t anything I’d want to do to risk you losing that look on your face, but I don’t think I understand what’s happening here. What’s going on?”

“A little over a week ago, I told myself I couldn’t continue to put off finding a job any longer, so I started doing some research. I found a place I thought I’d like working, and when I went to fill out an application and submit my resume, I learned they weren’t hiring.”

Tabitha’s brows scrunched together, indicating her confusion.

I continued. “I wound up walking out of the building, and just before I made it to my car, a man had called my name. He worked for the company and had been standing there when I was speaking with the receptionist. As it turned out, he was looking for a nanny for his son and asked if I’d be interested in the position.”

My best friend’s eyes nearly fell out of her head. “Just like that? He has a new baby and decides to just hire you on the spot?”

“Not exactly. I wound up going to their house last Saturday to meet Rhys and have an unofficial interview of sorts. It went well, so then I was hired,” I explained.

It was unsurprising why Tabitha seemed to be having such a difficult time with this whole thing. I mean, even if we both knew I wasn’t a threat to Rhys in any way, it was strange that someone would hire a person without specific credentials to be a nanny for their six-month-old baby.

For that reason, I thought it was wise to offer her some additional clarification. “Banks works at a place called Harper Security Ops.”

“Banks?”

“He’s the baby’s father, the guy who stopped me in the parking lot last Friday,” I shared.

“What does where he works have to do with anything?” she pressed.

“Background checks. He was able to easily do a background check on me and see that I’m not some criminal.”

Tabitha sat back in her seat, repositioning herself one more time. “What did you say was the name of the place he worked again?”

“Harper Security Ops.”

“Okay, I’m confused.”

“About what?”

She shot me an incredulous look. “Well, Lamise, you just told me that you didn’t actively go seeking this position as a nanny. You said you found a place you thought you’d like working. I’m not a genius, but I feel like I know you well enough to know that a place with that name isn’t exactly the kind of place where you’d be excited to work.”

This was it.

Even though it was clear she still had some questions about my new job, this was the opportunity to share with her about Graham’s video.

I swallowed hard, knowing there was nothing I could do to prepare her for what I was about to share. “I think Graham was murdered.”

For the second time since I’d started speaking, Tabitha sat up straight and gasped. “What?!”

Wanting to give her a minute to process that news, I merely nodded my head to confirm she’d heard me correctly.

There was no question she wasn't even remotely close to pulling herself together when she asked, "What would ever make you say that?"

Realizing how horrible it was to receive that news without much of an explanation, I didn't wait to respond. "I found his phone when I decided to empty a box at my apartment. I'd plugged it in and charged it, hoping to go through and find some photos or videos of the two of us, and instead, I found a video from him that indicated he knew he was going to die."

"Are you kidding me?"

I shook my head.

Tabitha's eyes darted back and forth, clearly trying to make sense of this. "What? I don't understand. What did he say? Who would do something to him?"

I shrugged. "That's what I don't exactly know just yet. He started the video by stating that if I was watching it, it was likely he was already dead. He then went on to tell me that there was a mix-up at the dog park that led to him doing something he regretted, but he did it to keep me safe. I don't know, Tab. I still haven't figured it out."

Blinking her eyes rapidly, she asked, "But what about the snake bite?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

I then went on to tell her more about the video—how he'd taken it in his car, how he looked so terrified, and all the words he'd said to me.

"So, what are you doing? Did you go to the police?" she questioned me.

"I did. I talked to Jolene a few days after I saw the video for the first time, and she urged me to take it to the police. I started to wonder if I had reason to be concerned for my safety, because it was clear Graham was. Of course, considering it's been months since he died and nobody has attempted to contact me, I'm inclined to believe he was just being cautious."

Tabitha sat back in her seat once more, devastation, confusion, and concern marring her features. For a long time, I watched as she went through a range of emotions and attempted to come to terms with the news.

“Gosh, Lamise, I don’t even know what to say,” she said, looking like a shell of herself, much like I suspected I did for those first few days.

“I know. It’s just too much to wrap your head around, right? I considered going to the dog park, but I wouldn’t even know what to look for,” I shared.

She shook her head. “Why would you ever dream of doing that?”

“Because I want to know what happened to him.”

“You should let the police handle this,” she advised. “I honestly can’t imagine what could have happened there. I’ve been there a million times with Rocky, and nothing has ever seemed strange to me. Graham didn’t share what was going on that had him looking so terrified and believing that he’d wind up dead?”

As though he sensed I was starting to lose my hold on my emotions, Rocky nuzzled himself closer to me.

“No,” I whispered. “It was clear he believed he ran out of time to share all that he wanted to share, and I think he wanted to make sure he told me how much he loved me and wanted me to be happy instead of giving me the details that I am obviously desperate for now.”

“This is just awful, Lamise. I’m... I’m in shock, I think.”

“Join the club,” I murmured.

A moment later, it was obvious Rocky wasn’t the only one who realized I was on the verge of breaking down. Tabitha moved from her seat, shifted close to me, and pulled me into her arms.

That’s when I burst into tears for the first time in more than a week.

EIGHT



Lamise

A healthy dose of anticipation moved through me as I drove away from my apartment and to Banks's house.

Today was my first official day on the job.

Technically, I might have been there twice last week, but with Banks's mom still there, it didn't feel like I was legitimately working. Then again, if what I'd seen last week was any indication of what I could expect this week and those that followed, it was safe to say I probably wouldn't ever feel like I was working.

This week, I'd be there on my own. I'd be solely responsible for caring for a little boy that was quickly stealing my heart in all the very best ways possible. Rhys was such a joy to be around. He was a happy baby, and I found it was difficult to feel anything but contentment when I was with him.

The closer and closer I got to the house, the more I felt the trembling in my belly. That feeling was all the result of excitement rather than nerves, though. I couldn't wait to get there.

When I finally pulled up outside the house, I didn't hesitate to grab my purse and my bag carrying my lunch and stop myself from running to the front door. Making it there, I knocked gently, as always, worried about waking Rhys if he happened to still be sleeping.

It wasn't more than fifteen or twenty seconds later when I heard the lock and the door opened. And what I saw in front of me forced me to stop a moment and say a silent prayer of thanks. It was hard to feel any sadness at seeing Rhys's happy face first thing in the morning.

"Good morning, Banks," I greeted him before shifting my attention to Rhys. I reached my free hand out to him and stroked my thumb over the back of his little hand. "Hey, Rhys. How are you doing, buddy?"

"Good morning, Lamise," Banks returned. "Come on in."

Banks stepped back and allowed me to come inside. Once he closed the door behind me, he asked, "Ready for the madness to begin?"

I couldn't stop the corners of my mouth from tipping up into a smile. "This is so very far from madness, if you ask me."

"Give it some time," he warned me. "I think you'll eventually change your mind about that."

There wasn't a chance.

Not at all.

I had the words Graham had said in that video bouncing around in the back of my mind. He wanted me to find happiness again. Maybe I wouldn't ever have it the way I had it with him, because I truly didn't believe it was possible to ever experience that again, but I could find a sliver of happiness by spending my days looking after an adorable boy who made it impossible to do anything but smile and laugh. Banks might not have been able to understand why I'd enjoy that, but it didn't matter to me. I understood it, and I was the only one who needed to get it.

"I can promise you that's not going to happen," I replied.

He offered a nod and a small smile in return. "Fair enough. I figured before I leave this morning, I can do a quick rundown of everything, just to make sure you've got a refresher, since this is technically your first official day."

While I hadn't forgotten anything I'd taken in last week when I was here with his mom, I didn't think it was wise to stop Banks from doing what he needed to do. He'd had his mom looking after his kid for so long. This was likely a big adjustment for him, and he was probably doing this more for himself than he was for me. I couldn't imagine it would be easy for me if I was in his position, so I said, "That sounds like a great idea."

For the next ten minutes or so, Banks ran through every pertinent piece of information he believed I needed to have. Truth be told, he shared more than was likely necessary. I figured it was going to take him a few days to get to a place where he was comfortable with me being here with his son on my own. Until that happened, I'd endure his unnecessary reminders about Rhys's schedule, food, and location of things for his kid.

When he finished, he asked, "Is there anything I missed? Do you have any questions for me?"

I shook my head. "I think you covered it all."

"Right. Well, to confirm, you do still have my number in case of an emergency, right?"

"Rhys and I are going to have a great day today, and nothing bad is going to happen, but yes, I do have your number in my phone in the event something unexpected comes up," I assured him.

His eyes roamed over my face briefly before he turned his attention to his son. "You better behave yourself today," Banks warned him, as Rhys smiled at his dad. "I mean it. Don't give Lamise a hard time on her first day. We want to make sure she comes back tomorrow."

I didn't want to ruin the moment, but I couldn't stop myself from speaking. "While I understand the need to parent him and lay down some ground rules, I think you should know there isn't anything he could do that would send me running in the opposite direction."

"That's good to know."

Done with his lecture, Banks kissed his son several times on the cheek and hugged him close before holding him out to me. I happily took Rhys into my arms and cuddled him.

A moment later, Banks said, “Okay, so I guess I’m going to head out of here and get to work. I’ll call later this afternoon, just to check in and make sure everything is alright.”

“Sure.”

At that, we walked out of the kitchen and toward the front door together. Once there, Banks opened it and started to walk through, but he stopped himself. My brows pulled together just as he turned around, looked at me, and said, “I almost forgot. I talked to my mom on Friday after you left here. She had mentioned that the two of you exchanged phone numbers and you were going to send her some updates on Rhys’s days as a way to help her through her recovery.”

“Oh, right. Yes, I’m sorry. I forgot to mention that. Is that okay with you?”

Banks nodded. “It is. In fact, not only am I okay with you sending her updates and pictures of Rhys occasionally, but I’d love to get some from you as well.”

Glad that he wasn’t upset by my idea, I stood a little taller and tightened my hold on Rhys. “I can absolutely do that,” I promised him.

He held my gaze briefly before he offered a gentle nod and said, “I’ll see you two later. Have a good day.”

Banks leaned forward, gave Rhys one more kiss, slid his eyes to mine, and walked out.

After confirming the door was locked, I looked at Rhys and said, “It’s just you and me, kid. Are you hungry, or do you want to play?”

He grinned at me before he leaned forward and tried to eat my face, so I took that to mean he was hungry.

For the next few minutes, I busied myself with getting Rhys fed and settling us both in for our first day alone

together. Once he ate, we sat and played on the floor in the family room for a while, Rhys doing a whole lot of baby talking in the process, and me being more than happy to chat with him.

Time passed so quickly, and before I knew it, the time had arrived for Rhys to go down for his morning nap. After getting a fresh diaper on him and getting him settled in his crib, I turned on the monitor and picked up the laundry basket on the way out.

I tossed a load of Rhys's clothes into the wash before making my way through each room on the first floor where the two of us had left a mess, either with toys or dishes.

I'd gotten through that rather quickly, and that's when it hit me. When I was here last week, I had Robin to keep me company. Now that I was alone, I suddenly had nothing to do. My only options were to turn on the television, scroll through my phone, or sit and stare at the walls.

Of course, I chose to do none of those. I allowed my eyes to drift to the pictures and confront the one thing I hadn't addressed up to this point.

Banks's wife.

Rhys's mom.

I still hadn't met her, and I thought it was the strangest thing ever.

There were a few pictures of her throughout different parts of the house I'd been in—Rhys's room and the family room—proving her existence along with the ring on Banks's finger, but she didn't seem to be around ever. I started to wonder what kind of job the woman worked that she hadn't been around to meet the woman who'd be caring for her son.

It was all so strange.

Maybe she was some celebrity that worked long stretches of time on a movie set or something.

No.

No, that wasn't it, because I'd seen pictures of her, and I didn't recognize her.

It was entirely possible Banks and his wife were separated and heading for a divorce. But if that was the case, would he still be wearing a wedding band?

I glanced down at my own left hand, saw my engagement ring sitting there, and realized just how much of a hypocrite I was being. If I was still wearing an engagement ring Graham had given me when there was no possible chance of me getting married to him now that he was dead, who was I to judge Banks for continuing to wear a ring after a separation from his wife.

But even if they were on the brink of divorce, I still thought they'd come together to make decisions related to their son's well-being. Wasn't the fact that I was caring for him for several hours a day something his mother would want to be involved in?

At this point, it was all just speculation, and I could have been wrong about everything. I'd spent so much time thinking about something that clearly wasn't an issue for Banks or Rhys that I lost track of time.

Fortunately, Rhys was right on schedule and started stirring. I didn't immediately run upstairs to snatch him out of the crib. Instead, I watched him on the monitor for a few minutes, wanting to give him some time to wake up. After giving him that time, loving listening to the sounds of him jabbering on and on, I grabbed my phone off the cushion beside me and climbed the stairs.

When I walked in, I moved to the crib and asked, "Did you sleep good?"

Rhys continued making his baby noises while he happily kicked his legs.

"Tell me more," I urged him, leaning over the edge of the crib and just watching him.

He didn't disappoint.

A few seconds later, I decided this was the perfect moment. I pulled up the camera on my phone and snapped a still shot before I switched it to the video setting.

As soon as I pushed the button to start recording, I said, “Okay, Rhys. Now, you can tell your daddy and your grandma all about your dream.”

Continuing to kick his legs while he waved his arms around, Rhys shared, in his own special way, all the details of his dream.

I sent off two separate text messages—one to Robin and one to Banks—with a single line caption for each of them. In Robin’s, I’d simply indicated that I hoped that little video would make her morning after coming out of surgery. I didn’t expect she’d respond anytime soon, but that didn’t matter. I merely wanted her to be able to have something to make her smile when she got out of surgery.

The text to Banks was a bit different. He still got the video, but my goal was to make sure he knew that everything was okay at the house.

LAMISE

Just woke up from his nap, and he’s happy as a clam.

I hadn’t expected a response so quickly, but no sooner had I slipped my phone back into my pocket, lifted Rhys in my arms, and moved him to the changing table to put a fresh diaper on him, my phone chimed.

I set Rhys down, pulled out the phone, and smiled at what I saw on the screen.

BANKS

I love that kid so much.

Sliding the phone back into my pocket, I focused all of my attention on Rhys again.

After giving him a bottle, we got back to playing. And though it was a couple of hours, it felt like a matter of minutes. Before I knew it, we were sitting down to have lunch. Only after his face was nice and messy did I pull out my phone to snap another picture.

“What do you think, Rhys? Does your dad encourage messes, or is he a bit of a neat freak?”

Rhys was entirely too focused on eating to give me any answers. I figured I’d get an answer when I sent the silly picture off to Banks with a short text indicating it was lunchtime.

Sure enough, Rhys had barely managed to get another bite of food before my phone chimed on the table.

BANKS

That looks about right.

Smiling, I brought my eyes to Rhys’s messy face and said, “It doesn’t seem like Dad minds a mess.”

After his lunch, I got Rhys cleaned up and ready for his afternoon nap. Once he was down, I went about folding his clothes that were finished in the dryer before I cleaned up the kitchen. Then I ate my own lunch after I sent off a text to my sister, letting her know about my first day on the job.

JOLENE

I’m so glad you’re enjoying it. Can’t wait to hear more!

While Rhys didn’t nap for an extraordinarily long time, I found the day dragged when he was asleep, and I had nothing else to do. I was going to have to bring something with me to stay entertained when I didn’t have Rhys to focus on.

But eventually, he woke up, and the rest of our afternoon passed in a flash. Before I knew it, Banks was walking through the front door again. He walked into the family room and found me sitting on the couch with Rhys in my lap. Rhys had finished cuddling a little bit ago, and we'd been playing peek-a-boo for the last twenty minutes. He was giggling like crazy, and fortunately, Banks had the chance to witness it.

I looked up at him from the couch and said, "There's no better sound in the whole world."

Something warm and sweet stole over Banks's expression. I recognized the look, but I couldn't quite place it.

As he moved in our direction, Banks replied, "I have to agree with you. I could be having the worst day ever, and if I hear him laughing like that, it turns it all around for me."

I had to wonder what could ever make Banks have a bad day when he had this little guy to be with, and suddenly, the thoughts I'd had earlier about the possible separation from his wife popped into my head.

Instantly, I felt bad. Maybe it wasn't the same as what I had experienced, but it was still loss. And if there was one thing I understood, it was the pain that came along with loss.

So, I offered a nod and said, "I hope you know how lucky you are. This kid is so much fun."

Something flashed in his eyes briefly, and if I hadn't been paying attention, I would have missed it. Though I didn't know what it was about, there was certainly no question it was hurt.

Banks quickly recovered. "He really is the best. I can only assume the two of you had a great day then?"

I nodded. "We did. Didn't we, Rhys?"

I was holding on to Rhys's wrists as I asked the question. I brought his hands up to his face, covered his eyes for a moment, and pulled them down quickly. The minute his eyes locked on his dad, and Banks joined in playing peek-a-boo, Rhys's giggles filled the air.

My heart had melted into a puddle.

After a few minutes, I said, “Well, I should probably get going, unless you need me for something else.”

Banks shook his head. “No. No, we’re good. I do have to thank you, though, for what you did today. Not only just being here with Rhys and taking such good care of him, but sending me those texts throughout the day. It helped to ease my mind, and I appreciate you doing that for me.”

“You’re welcome.” After giving Rhys a kiss on the head and a cuddle, I shifted him in my arms and held him out to his dad. He happily went, allowing Banks to have the chance to kiss and cuddle his son.

Not wanting to monopolize any more of their time, I stood and gathered my things. Before I had the chance to say anything, Banks asked, “Heading home?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“Is it far?”

Shaking my head, I answered, “Not really. It’s not quite a twenty-minute drive back to my apartment.”

Understanding washed over him as he stood and followed me to the door. “Okay. Well, drive safe.”

“I will. I’ll see the both of you tomorrow morning.”

“Sounds good. Say goodbye, Rhys.”

My eyes went to the little boy in Banks’s arms as I reached up to give his hand a squeeze. “See you tomorrow, little guy.”

A moment later, I released his hand, offered Banks a nod, and turned around to walk away toward my car.

It was, by far, the best day I’d had in a very long time.

NINE



Lamise

It was almost over.

It was early Friday evening, and Banks was due to walk through the front door at any minute.

While I could understand his desire to get home from work to be with his son, I had to admit that I wasn't necessarily looking forward to him returning. My reasoning had nothing to do with Banks himself.

It was simply that I loved what I was doing.

When he offered me the position, and I'd accepted this job, I hadn't anticipated my new role as a nanny would ever bring me such joy and fulfillment.

But it had.

It was better than I could have ever imagined, and after all that I'd been through over the last several months, I was going to soak up every last bit of goodness I could get.

I hated that it was Friday. I hated that I wouldn't be back until Monday morning. How was I going to survive the weekend?

It all seemed so crazy to me, too, considering we'd stuck to a routine for Rhys's sake all week long.

On the surface, it looked like there wasn't much room for excitement, but the truth was that every day with Rhys this week had felt like an adventure for me.

We'd had such fun.

Or, well, I knew I had.

Of course, Rhys had spent a good chunk of his time when he was awake, laughing, playing, and having a blast. So, I had to assume he enjoyed this week at least as much as I had.

Craziest of all was that until I'd gotten through this week, I hadn't realized just how much I'd needed something like this in my life.

Maybe it was that I'd dealt with so much heartbreak and devastation for months, followed by the shock and horror over the last few weeks after learning everything was not as it had seemed.

Not knowing the truth about what happened to Graham was brutal. The video he'd recorded and left for me had rendered me utterly useless and overwhelmingly depressed for several days.

Even now, when I gave myself the opportunity to think about it when I was driving home from work, or when it crept into my thoughts after I climbed into bed each night, I was still just as devastated by the news as I had been when I first heard it.

It didn't seem to be getting any easier to deal with, especially in the moments when I had nothing else with which to occupy my mind. And considering it had been two weeks since I'd gone to the police, and there hadn't been any news, I was left with so many unanswered questions.

Being here with Rhys provided the perfect distraction from the nightmares in my life. He was sweet, lovable, and curious. He made me smile, and I loved watching him as he explored the world around him. Spending time with him over the last week, looking after him, had filled some of the holes in my heart.

And now, I was going to have to find a way to get through the next two days without being around him, because just as I finished fixing his clothes following a diaper change, I heard the lock at the front door.

Banks was home.

Reaching my hands out, I lifted Rhys in my arms and said, “Somebody’s here to see you.”

A moment later, the front door closed, and Banks peeked his head around the wall to look into the family room. Rhys was staring right back at him, and he was clearly very delighted to see his dad was home.

He started wiggling in my arms so much, I had no choice but to put him back down on the blanket on the floor. And for the next few seconds, Banks and I watched with avid fascination as Rhys not only rocked back and forth on his hands and knees, but as he struggled to figure out how to get closer to his dad.

Banks crouched down and asked, “Are you ready to start crawling, little man? Come on.”

Rhys lifted one hand, moved it slightly forward, and began rocking again. When he did it with the next hand, I started to think he was going to master the art of crawling, just like that.

But following his third attempt to lift his hand, his arms collapsed, and he grew frustrated.

“Oh, good try, Rhys,” I declared.

Banks decided not to make his son wait any longer. He moved into the room, lifted Rhys in his arms, and stood as he held his hand out to me.

Banks hadn’t ever touched me before, and though this was just a simple gesture to help me up off the ground, it caught me off guard. For that reason, I hesitated briefly, but ultimately, I placed my hand in his and was immediately surprised how he’d just been outside in the cold and had hands that warm.

As soon as I was on my feet, I let go of Banks’s hand, but my eyes managed to find their way to his. He had a strange look on his face, something I couldn’t begin to read.

Following an awkward silence, he cleared his throat and asked, “Did everything go okay here today?”

Grateful for the distraction from whatever was happening in that tense moment, I nodded. “Yes, we had a great day today, just like every other day this week. He’s such a joy to be around.”

Banks smiled at me. “I’m really glad to hear that, Lamise. And I’m not sure I’ve said it enough yet. I don’t know if it’d ever be possible for me to thank you properly for the way you’ve made this whole transition so painless. Rhys is very lucky that you’ve come into his life. We both are.”

God, was I going to start crying right here? Why was he saying things like this to me now?

I mean, I realized it was the end of my first official week, but I wasn’t sure I was up to receiving a performance review already. I needed more time before I was prepared to hear such good news.

Blinking back the tears, I swallowed past the tightness in my throat and rasped, “Oh, Banks, it’s nothing. Honestly, I’m the lucky one. Rhys is the best little boy in the world. Truthfully, this doesn’t even feel like a job.”

“Well, I’m happy to hear that. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried you might get through this first week and change your mind about this, since it wasn’t what you’d originally hoped to find in a job,” he shared.

Shaking my head, I insisted, “I’d much rather be here with him instead of in an office doing anything else.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

Banks turned his attention to Rhys and said, “Do you hear that, buddy? Lamise likes being here with you, so you must have been on your best behavior.”

My lips tipped up in a smile at hearing Banks talk to his son like that. “You should probably reward him with something special this week,” I teased.

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

I shrugged. “I’m thinking he might like a visit with his grandma.”

Banks lifted a brow and assessed me. “Have you been talking to my mom?”

Licking my lips, belatedly noticing Banks’s eyes dropping to them, I answered, “Rhys and I might have had a video chat with her this afternoon. I hope that’s okay.”

I’d assumed since Banks had indicated he was okay with me sharing photos or videos of Rhys with his mom, that he wouldn’t be upset if I’d gotten on a video call with her. But when he made no move to speak, I started to think I’d crossed a line I shouldn’t have.

Granted, I wasn’t in his line of work, so I couldn’t be sure, but perhaps there was some reason related to safety and technology that I was unaware of. Too concerned that he was going to fire me for doing something he hadn’t approved of, I started to panic.

“I’m sorry, Banks. I didn’t mean to overstep. I should have asked for your permission before doing something like that. I just... I just assumed that since you were okay with me sending her pictures or videos of him that you’d be okay with this, too. It was wrong. I’m sorry. Please don’t fire me,” I begged.

Wow.

It had become more and more clear throughout the week how much this job was helping me, how much I needed it. But I wasn’t sure I understood the full magnitude of it until now, until it was on the line.

Banks tipped his head to the side, and his features softened. “I’m not going to fire you, Lamise.”

I nodded my head furiously as I shifted back and forth on my feet. The relief was so immense, tears filled my eyes. I tried to blink them back again, but two escaped and spilled down my cheeks.

“Why are you crying?” Banks asked, his voice laced with concern.

I swiped away my tears, feeling completely mortified, and couldn't think of anything to say other than the truth. "I love this job," I rasped. "This week has been one of the best weeks I've had in months, and I didn't want to do anything to screw it up. If you fired me, I just... I don't know what I'd do. I know it's only been a week, but I adore your son already. I'd be devastated if I only ever got just this one week with him."

In a move I hadn't expected, Banks stepped forward, closing the distance between us, and curled his arm around my back to tug me close. I hid my face in his chest, relief moving through me, as I tried to ignore the way it felt to be held in a masculine embrace for the first time since before Graham died.

I tried.

I tried so hard not to let it happen, but there were too many emotions already moving through me.

With the scent of him surrounding me and the warmth and comfort I felt in his strong arms, more tears spilled down my cheeks.

God, it felt good.

And at the same time, it felt so wrong. It was wrong to enjoy the way it felt, because Banks wasn't my fiancé.

"Are you okay?" he asked hesitantly a few moments later.

I pushed back slightly, forcing him to loosen his hold on me, and hating that it took me out of his embrace. "I'm sorry. I'm okay now."

He nodded his understanding, but it was clear he was still on the fence about whether or not to believe me. If he got whatever confirmation he needed on that, I'd never know, but Banks didn't hesitate to offer me a bit of reassurance.

"You should know I'm not the least bit upset that you found a way to communicate with my mom and give her a glimpse of Rhys right now, since she's trying to recover and can't be here with him," Banks insisted.

“Okay,” I murmured, unsure I could trust myself to say anything else.

“I mean it, Lamise. I would never be the one to be upset about something like that,” he maintained.

That’s when it hit me.

If Banks’s initial reaction to what I’d done hadn’t been about him being upset about it, then it could only mean one thing.

Someone else was going to be upset about it.

“I get it. I just assumed your reaction meant that you were unhappy with what I’d done, but now that I have your explanation, I understand it’s not you. If it would help, I’m happy to explain the mistake to her and apologize for it,” I offered.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Your wife,” I replied.

“Pardon?”

“Rhys’s mom,” I clarified stupidly, as though Banks wouldn’t know that his wife was also Rhys’s mom. “I’d be more than happy to apologize to her about this mix-up. It was an innocent mistake, but I accept full responsibility.”

The silence stretched between us, and I started to think, especially judging by the look on Banks’s face, that I’d done something far worse just now.

“Why are you talking about Rhys’s mom?” he questioned me.

Offering a sympathetic look, I explained, “I realize this probably isn’t an ideal situation for you, and I wanted to ease the burden. Going through a divorce is hard enough, I’m sure. Sharing custody with his mom probably already has its challenges, and you don’t need me adding fuel to the fire. I just wanted to let you know that I’d be happy to meet her and talk to her about what happened today.”

There was another extended silence. With each second that passed, it was becoming more evident I hadn't done anything to make this situation any better.

"I'm not divorced," he clipped.

My eyes widened.

Shit.

Shit, what had I just done?

"Oh," I whispered. "I'm so sorry. I just... I saw the ring on your finger and pictures around the house. Since I hadn't met her, I just assumed you were going through a divorce. God, Banks, I'm mortified right now. I think I should just go."

I didn't know why, but I had hoped he'd offer some clarification on the subject, considering all that I'd just shared, but I got something far worse, instead.

"Yeah, I think it'd probably be a wise idea if you left now," he said. His tone indicated he wasn't exactly agreeing with me so much as he was advising I get my things and get out of his house.

Horrified, I managed to hold his gaze for just a brief second or two before I returned a nod and stepped back from him. Then I went in search of my things, gathered them up in my arms, and didn't even pull on my coat before I returned my attention to Banks.

For a brief moment I thought I was going to say something to him to... I don't know, apologize? But there was a look on Banks's expression that had me biting my tongue. Shit, at this point, I wasn't sure if I had a job any longer, but I was too terrified to ask, convinced I'd made this horrible situation even worse.

So, without another word and no reaction from him to stop me from doing so, I gave Rhys one last look, felt my heart shatter into a million pieces as tears rolled down my eyes, and turned around to walk out the front door.

A moment later, I was gone.

And Banks never came after me or reached out over the phone afterward.

Then again, why would he?

It wasn't like he knew how much I enjoyed and despised being held in his arms.

I'd assumed he was divorced, and if there was one thing I managed to figure out in the hours that passed from the second I left his house, it was that Banks was not only not divorced, but he was also still very much in love with his wife.



Lamise

I was beginning to wonder if I'd ever know anything besides loss and devastation.

It was later Saturday morning, and I still hadn't gotten myself out of bed, because I had not an ounce of energy. I'd barely gotten a wink of sleep last night.

For weeks now, I'd had a hard time sleeping, because thoughts and questions about what happened to Graham had plagued my mind. As difficult as it had been, it made sense to me. I understood why I was losing sleep, and I accepted it, even as much as I hated it.

But this was something else.

Last night, I couldn't stop recalling the look on Banks's face every time I closed my eyes.

That had made it difficult enough. I didn't need anything else.

But then I'd remember my entire week with Rhys, and the notion of sleep became something I could only hope to experience one day. In my current state, it was an unachievable task. An impossibility.

I had no idea what was going to happen. Would I ever get to see Rhys again?

Banks hadn't officially fired me, but it was blatantly obvious he didn't want me around yesterday. Would he just need a few days to cool off? Was I supposed to just show up at

his place on Monday morning, bright-eyed and bushy tailed, ready to work?

While I didn't expect I'd get one, I was desperately hoping I'd receive a phone call from Banks before I was set to go back to work on Monday morning. I wanted anything he could possibly give me to assure me he still wanted me there. Without that, I wasn't sure what I'd do.

Why had I been so stupid to even mention his wife?

It seemed perfectly logical at the time. I mean, I'd had myself convinced, based on all the evidence I'd gathered throughout the week, that Banks was going through a divorce.

How could I have gotten it so wrong? Worse, had I destroyed the best thing that had happened to me in months?

If I'd spent the last few minutes of my time at work yesterday wondering how I was going to get through the next two days without being able to see Rhys and believing it was the worst-case scenario, apparently, I had no idea just how bad things could get.

Granted, I had initially thought those two days would be awful, but I'd give anything to go back to that. At least I wouldn't have been here questioning whether I still had a job and would ever see Rhys again. At least I would have had a slight bounce in my step, knowing something good was ahead of me.

Now, I had nothing.

At this point, I was content to stay in bed for the rest of the day. There was no need to torture myself further by getting up and having any expectations for the weekend. Rolling over, curling up tight with a blanket, and getting used to living in misery sounded like the perfect way to spend the next two days.

I was already off to a great start.

Of course, the moment I'd resolved myself to the fact that I'd have no choice but to accept my fate, I heard the familiar sound of my phone ringing from beside me on the bedside table.

At the thought it could be Banks calling me, I quickly flipped over in the bed, reached my hand out, and swiped up the phone to look at the display.

So, maybe I wouldn't be getting the call I wanted, but at least I was getting a call I'd be happy to take. I could use the distraction right now, anyway. I'd just have to be sure not to reveal anything about the uncertainty surrounding my job. As far as I knew, I hadn't been fired.

I slid my finger across the screen, held the phone to my ear, and murmured, "Hello?"

"Are you still in bed, Lamise?" Jolene scoffed.

Just hearing her voice helped to improve my mood. "I am."

She let out a laugh. "Oh, I wish I could sleep in. I'd give anything."

"Are you suggesting my niece is making that impossible for you to do?" I countered.

Jolene didn't miss a beat. "I'm not suggesting anything. I'm flat-out telling you that's how it is.

"Well, I think you're making it sound worse than it is," I reasoned. "She's delightful."

"Of course, she is. I just wish she'd be delightful at eleven in the morning instead of six," my sister explained.

I got it.

Though I didn't expect she'd ever be the kind of woman who'd keep herself in bed until eleven, Jolene still deserved the option to be able to sleep in and do that on occasion, if she wished.

Rolling to my opposite side, I asked, "So, to what do I owe my appreciation for this phone call?"

"It's nothing, really. I just wanted to be nosy and see how things went for you this week at your new job. I still can't believe you're a nanny."

In an instant, my whole mood shifted. Granted, I'd chosen to ignore the one glaring thing that had gone bad during my first week on the job, but I wouldn't burden my sister with those details now. She'd already supported me through some of the worst days of my life. The last thing I needed to do was share more devastating news with her.

After I'd called and cried with her over the phone about the video I'd found on Graham's cell, I took the first opportunity I had to give her some good news. So, no sooner had I left his place that Saturday when I first went over to meet Rhys, I got in my car and immediately called my sister.

She'd been thrilled to hear the news, which was likely the result of two things. First, being my sister, it was just in her nature to be happy for me whenever anything good happened. But beyond that, I knew it came as a big relief to her that I was doing something to move forward. I hadn't forgotten about Graham, and I didn't intend to just let this whole thing go, but I did need to continue to press on and find some happiness. And finally, knowing I'd handed off Graham's phone to the police to have them investigate his death instead of attempting to figure things out on my own had helped with her excitement. Maybe it was more about relief than anything else, but the result was the same.

"It was honestly one of the best weeks of my life," I revealed. "Certainly, the absolute best in months."

"Really?"

"Yes. I loved it."

There was an extended silence before my sister returned, "I'm so happy to hear that, Lamise. And I'm so proud of you."

I secretly wondered if she'd be saying the same thing if I had shared the full truth about my week with her, or more specifically, how my week had ended. Of course, Jolene being proud of me likely had more to do with the fact that I'd gotten myself to the point where I put in enough effort to find myself a job and less to do with what the actual job was.

“You know nobody will ever take the place in my heart that’s just for Ruby. I love my niece like nothing else in this world. But when I tell you that this little boy has stolen my heart, I’m not joking,” I revealed.

“Oh, this is so sweet.”

“I’m not kidding, Jolene. Maybe it shouldn’t be this way, and maybe it’s not healthy. I have no clue. I’m not sure there are words to tell you how much Rhys has changed my life in just one week. I’m happier. So much happier. And I look forward to getting up in the morning, just to go to work. That never happened at my old job.”

There was no missing the giddiness in my sister’s voice when she replied, “I love this for you. I’m so happy that you’re happy. Tell me more.”

So, that’s what I did.

I told my sister all about my week with Rhys—what we did, how he laughed, the way I felt when he cuddled with me.

When I finished, she said, “I’m so glad you found this family that needed you. I think, in a way, maybe you needed them just as much, because I can hear it.”

“Hear what?”

“The lightness in your voice,” she answered. When I remained silent, she added, “From the moment you told me it was one of the best weeks of your life, I could hear it. I could hear just how much things have changed for you, and I think that change happened in the best way possible. Like I said, I’m sure this family is lucky and grateful to have you, but honestly, I’m so glad you have them.”

It was with those words that I felt my emotions clog my throat.

She was right.

In just one week—plus the two days I’d been there with Robin the week prior—the Huntington family had changed my life. I’d been motivated, excited, and happy.

And I might have ruined all of that yesterday. It seemed impossible that I'd feel so devastated after such a short time, but maybe that was just it.

The reason I was so devastated now might have been because I'd gone for so long without feeling any sense of joyfulness that I hadn't realized how much I'd been missing it. Now that I'd gotten a small taste of it, I didn't want to give it up. I'd waited months to feel that, and it wasn't fair I had to possibly give it up already.

"I'm happy they found me, too," I rasped.

Maybe I wasn't giving my sister the full truth, but I wasn't lying to her, either.

"The last thing I want to do is bring you down after all of that, but I do have one other thing I want to talk to you about," Jolene said.

Graham.

I knew she was going to want to talk about it.

I understood her trepidation, but considering the conversation about the Huntington family had the power to pull me right back into a dark place, I figured it was wise to talk to her about the man who was supposed to become her brother-in-law.

"What do you want to know about Graham?" I asked.

"Well, I was just wondering if you've heard anything since you took the video to the police."

"Not yet. Or, at least, nothing worthy of reporting. I did reach out earlier in the week to see if they had any updates yet, but there wasn't anything new," I shared. "At this point, I think it's going to be a waiting game for me, but it's hard. I know you said I sound happier, and I'll be honest and admit that I am ever since I started working as Rhys's nanny, but when I come home at night, all alone, my thoughts run wild. I just want answers. I know Graham's never coming back, and I know I'll never get to hug him or have him hold me again, but I still want to know what really happened to him."

“I wish I could fix this for you. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to take this pain from you.”

“I know. I love you for it,” I replied.

And I did.

Because I knew Jolene wasn’t kidding. Though I had so many moments of darkness and despair over the last several months, there was no question I had an abundance of love and support from my mom, my sister, and Tabitha.

So, I expected nothing less than what I just got from Jolene now. She meant every word of what she was saying, and somehow, as she quickly reminded me of just how much she loved me, she did it by giving me words that wrapped around me like a warm hug.

On thoughts of a hug, my mind quickly flashed back to yesterday when Banks had wrapped his arm around me and pulled me close, holding me near while he had his baby in the other arm.

It felt so good.

No.

No, I had to stop this.

I couldn’t sit here and continue thinking about a married man, a man who wasn’t Graham, and how good it felt to be held close to him in a warm and comforting embrace.

Redirecting my focus, I added, “I really wish this was something simple for them to investigate, but sadly, I have this feeling it’s going to be one of those things that takes time. It’s just so frustrating to have to wait for some answers.”

“You know you have me here for you while you wait,” she offered.

“I know. So, tell me how my favorite niece is doing. What’s Ruby been up to since we last spoke?”

“You mean, other than waking me up at some ungodly hour in the morning?” Jolene countered.

“Yes. Other than that.”

“Well...”

And just like that, my sister went on to tell me all about my favorite little girl in the world. Somehow, through the heaviness of our conversation only minutes earlier this morning, and all of the sadness and uncertainty I felt about my situation with Banks and Rhys, my mood improved tremendously at hearing about Ruby. I couldn't wait to see her again, so I could give her a squeeze.

Jolene and I ended our call a little while later, and after I stayed in bed for just a bit longer, I realized I couldn't do this. I had to get up and do something.

The weather wasn't exactly warm, but if I bundled myself up, I could get outside and get some fresh air. Maybe it wasn't the wisest idea considering my fragile emotional state, but I decided I'd take a trip to the cemetery to visit Graham.

Not long after I'd made that decision, I'd parked my car down the road from the cemetery and started my trek. On my walk along the sidewalk, my eyes were pulled toward something else.

I don't know why it hadn't occurred to me before I drove here, but now that it was smacking me in the face, I couldn't ignore it.

The dog park.

It was right next to the cemetery.

And seemingly of their own accord, my feet carried me past the cemetery and in that direction instead.

I went in, sat down on a bench, and just watched. I wasn't looking for anything, and I truly didn't expect I'd find something that would lead me to learning about an important detail regarding Graham's death.

But given this was a place Graham not only spent a lot of time, and a place he indicated where something bad had happened, I wanted to sit for a while. Maybe what I was hoping to find was a bit more peace over losing Graham and Henry. Watching the other dogs run around, my heart ached. I missed my dog as much as I missed Graham. Sadly, the pain

never seemed to go away. It had only eased when I was spending my days looking after Rhys.

I sat on the bench in the dog park for a long time, allowing what felt like hundreds of thoughts and memories to run through my mind. But after a while, it got cold, and I had no choice but to get up, so I could head back to my car.

And that's when it happened.

I'd exited the park, began making my way to my car, and had just passed the entrance to the cemetery when I heard a familiar voice call my name.

"Lamise?"

I froze, wondering if I was hearing things correctly, or if I'd made it all up in my head. At that point, anything was possible.

I waited a bit longer before deciding what to do, and that's when it happened again. "Lamise?"

This time, the voice was pained, and that's what forced me to turn around. What I saw nearly broke my heart.

Banks was standing there with Rhys in his arms. They were both bundled up, the tips of their noses red from the cold.

It was already more than I could handle to see them there like that, but it was the realization of what they were doing there that did me in.

My mind flashed back to the conversation I had with Banks last night. I talked to him about his wife, about the wife I thought he was in the process of divorcing. He'd claimed the opposite, and now I knew why.

Banks wasn't divorced or going through one.

He wasn't married, either.

Banks had just walked out of the cemetery with his son, and it was because Banks was a widower.

I wanted nothing more than for the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

ELEVEN



Banks

If there was one word to describe the way I felt, it was guilty.

Everything had been going great.

For the last week, I'd been feeling especially grateful that I'd been standing at Avalon's desk when Lamise came in to submit a job application and drop off her resume.

For the last week, I'd been able to go to work and not have to worry that my son wasn't being cared for properly.

In fact, I was beginning to feel extremely lucky.

Then, last night happened. There was so much that made me feel a variety of conflicting emotions.

At first, it was the way Lamise had casually shared about having a video chat with my mom, so my mom could see Rhys.

I hadn't intended to remain silent, but I was so caught off guard by Lamise's actions. The woman was a miracle. She proved that further when she started to panic, thinking I wanted to fire her, and she wouldn't be able to see Rhys.

At that point, even if I knew what to say to her, after seeing her get so emotional about the possibility of never seeing my son again, there wasn't a chance I could open my mouth to speak.

She adored my son, and I couldn't have asked for anything more in the woman who spent her days looking after him.

But then, I foolishly remained silent for so long, and Lamise got the wrong impression. Obviously, she'd had the thought at some point before that conversation, because she'd indicated as much.

I hadn't considered it at all.

I didn't know why, but I never told Lamise about Violet. I guess it was only natural she'd make assumptions about what was going on. I still wore my wedding band, and there were pictures of Violet throughout the house.

No matter that I could look at it now and see how foolish it had been, it didn't change what happened in the moment last night.

After Lamise brought Violet up, along with what she believed the situation was between my wife and me, I could only manage to get angry. And while I knew it didn't seem that way in the moment, I wasn't necessarily angry with Lamise.

I was angry with myself.

Because it wasn't until Lamise said something about my wife that I realized what had just happened.

Only minutes earlier, I'd gotten comfortable, and for the first time since my wife died, I'd comforted another woman in an embrace.

Guilty.

God, so much guilt.

I didn't get any sleep last night, and that had nothing to do with Rhys. In fact, my son had been sleeping through the night since he was three months old.

My lack of sleep was all attributed to what had transpired before I'd all but kicked Lamise out of my house last night.

It was about feeling like I'd betrayed Violet.

It was about knowing how heartbroken Lamise was.

And now that she was standing in front of me, it was evident Lamise was just as forlorn as she'd been seconds

before she walked out of my house, maybe even more now than then.

Despite that, and knowing what I needed to do, I asked, “What are you doing here?”

There wasn't a chance I could miss the hesitancy and trepidation written all over Lamise's expression. Whatever she was feeling, she didn't share. Instead, she answered, “I was at the dog park.”

My brows knit together as my eyes dropped down toward her feet. There was no dog standing beside her. “But you don't have a dog with you.”

She dropped her gaze from mine, bit her lip, and inhaled deeply through her nose. When she returned her attention to my face again, she replied, “No, I don't anymore.”

Fuck.

With those four words, I understood what was going on.

If there was one thing I could grasp, it was loss. And now that I realized Lamise was suffering through it, everything else started to make sense. The way she was terrified I'd fire her or that she wouldn't see Rhys again. She got attached to him in such a short time.

I hated myself for how I treated her last night, and I needed to make this right. “I'm really sorry, Lamise. About your dog, and about what happened last night.”

Her lips parted, and I took in the pink tinge on her cheeks and the tip of her nose.

Not giving her a chance to respond, I said, “Listen, I don't know if you have any plans right now, but I'd really like the chance to talk to you and clear the air. But it's cold out, and I need to get Rhys home for his nap. Would you mind following me back to my place?”

“Oh, Banks, I don't want to intrude on your—”

“You won't be intruding,” I insisted. “Please. Please come back to my house, so we can talk.”

Lamise considered my request for all of a few seconds. Then, with a slight nod, she agreed, “Okay. I’ll meet you back at your place.”

Until she confirmed she’d join me, I hadn’t realized just how much tension I was holding on to. My grip on Rhys had grown firmer than necessary, so I loosened my hold, offered her a nod, and said, “Thank you.”

She threw her thumb over her shoulder and said, “I’m down at the end of the block.”

“We’re across the street,” I noted.

Her neck twisted, so she could look that way and locate my vehicle. Once she did, she said, “Okay, well, I guess I’ll see the two of you in a few minutes then.”

Nodding, I confirmed, “Yes, you will.”

The two of us stood there for several awkward moments, neither one of us seeming to want to walk away first. I didn’t know what it was, but I couldn’t begin to tear my eyes away from her. It was almost as though I was back in the Harper Security Ops office, seeing her for the first time.

Only, this time wasn’t the first time. I’d seen her several times, held her in my arms, and if I wasn’t mistaken, broken her heart.

Fuck, I was the biggest kind of asshole.

Lamise was the first one to break the connection between our gazes. She turned and started walking down the sidewalk away from Rhys and me to get to her car. I could admit that if it hadn’t been for the fact I needed to get Rhys out of the cold, I might have stood there a lot longer, watching her as she walked. It was possible I might have even escorted her there.

But I did have Rhys with me, so I only watched her for the first few seconds before I turned with my son and crossed the street.

Throughout the entire drive back to my house, I tried to come up with the right words to say. Obviously, I knew I needed to apologize to Lamise. Above all else, I wanted her to

know just how sorry I was for how I reacted yesterday and the way I not only allowed her to leave yesterday, but also how I essentially kicked her out.

That alone was enough to have me feeling like I had quite the mountain to climb. But I knew it wasn't even close to it.

Because I needed to tell her the truth. I needed to tell her about Violet, because not setting things straight wasn't an option.

But I wasn't sure I could recount it. I didn't know how I'd get through that without breaking down, and I worried how Lamise might react to it.

Long before I had come up with the perfect speech, we had pulled up outside my house. As I was getting Rhys, who had fallen asleep, out of the car, Lamise arrived.

I waited for her to get out and walk up to me before leading us to the front door. Once we were inside, and I'd closed the door behind us, I turned to her and said, "I'm just going to get him settled in his crib. Can you give me a few minutes, please?"

Her eyes were on Rhys, and her features softened. "Of course."

"Make yourself comfortable," I urged her. "I'll be right back."

She dipped her chin in response.

Just as I said it would, it took me a few minutes to get Rhys settled in his crib. The moment I entered the family room again and saw Lamise sitting on the couch, a tentative look on her face, I apologized, "Sorry about that. We've had a busy day, and he's wiped out."

"It's okay. I don't have anywhere to be."

With her confirmation of that, I found myself relaxing even further. The truth was, I had been concerned about whether she'd have plans with her fiancé and would need to leave quickly. I'd seen the engagement ring on her finger, and I realized it was possible they had plans for this weekend. But

I didn't exactly think this conversation was one that should be rushed, so it was a relief to know she had some time.

Before I sat down, I asked, "Is there anything I can get you? Something to drink?"

Lamise shook her head. "No, Banks. I'm fine. Thank you."

That was it.

Time to get the conversation started.

I sat down, allowed my eyes to roam over her face, and finally spoke. "Before anything else, I need you to know that I'm terribly sorry for how I reacted yesterday. You did not deserve to be treated the way I treated you, Lamise."

"I appreciate your apology, Banks. But it really isn't necessary. I'm sorry for assuming anything about your situation. It was insensitive. The last thing I want to do is make assumptions again, but I have to believe, based on what I saw today, that you have a good reason for reacting the way you did."

"I might have a good reason, but it doesn't excuse my behavior," I maintained. "I think it's important for you to understand just how grateful I am to you for the way you care for Rhys. Honestly, I don't know how I happened to be there at the right time, but I'm not going to sit and dwell on it, either. Instead, I'd rather just make sure you know how much of an impact you've made here. We're very lucky to have you here."

Something changed in her expression. It started off as surprise, but it quickly turned to relief. When tears filled her eyes, I started to think that I'd gotten it wrong. But then she rasped, "Can I still come here to watch him for you?"

Damn.

Not that there'd be any doubt about how seriously she took her job as Rhys's nanny and how much she adored him, but if there had been any questions lingering about it, that reaction would have cleared everything up.

"I hate that you think I wouldn't want that," I replied.

More relief moved through her as her shoulders relaxed, and she sat back in the seat and closed her eyes briefly.

Following several long beats of silence, I finally blurted, “Rhys’s mom died when he was three months old.”

Lamise’s eyes shot open as her hand reached out instinctively to my arm. Whether she’d intended for it to or not, her touch offered a sense of comfort I hadn’t felt in a very long time. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Banks.”

“Thank you. Violet and I weren’t together for very long before she got pregnant with him. I wasn’t even married to her for a full year. For some reason, I can’t seem to bring myself to take off the ring.”

Lamise remained silent a moment before she asked, “May I ask what happened to her?”

This was the part I didn’t know if I’d be able to handle sharing. The last thing I wanted to do was paint Violet in a bad light, but I couldn’t be sure how Lamise would react to the news.

After I took a moment to consider that, I realized Lamise hadn’t done anything to indicate she was that kind of woman.

So, I inhaled deeply to prepare myself to share the truth, and after I exhaled that breath, I shared, “She had suffered from post-partum depression, and before I recognized what was happening, it was already too late.”

I felt a reassuring squeeze on my arm. “Oh, Banks. I’m so sorry. She didn’t tell you?”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure she knew what was happening. Or maybe she did, and she didn’t want to appear weak in some way. There are so many questions I’ll never have answers to.”

“You probably feel like you’ve got no choice but to move forward when all you want to do is rewind and go back to a time that didn’t hold so much hurt,” Lamise declared, her thumb absentmindedly stroking over my skin.

I didn't know how she knew it, but that was precisely how I felt.

Of course, after I gave myself a minute, it hit me. She understood, because she'd lost her dog. Loss was loss, and I felt compelled to give her the same opportunity to share what happened to her dog, if she wanted to take it.

"What happened to your dog?" I asked.

Rapidly blinking her eyes, Lamise tried to rein in her emotions. It broke my heart to see her like that, because the more I talked with her, the more I realized just how big of a heart this woman had.

"That's just it. I don't exactly know what happened to him," she revealed, pulling her hand away.

I tipped my head to the side and assessed her. "Was he sick?"

She shook her head. "No. No, it wasn't anything like that. It's just that... well, Henry went missing the same day my fiancé died."

In an instant, my entire body locked. "Are you serious?"

Nodding, Lamise confirmed, "Yeah, it happened last summer. Graham was a runner, and he took Henry with him. They'd always go out on a Saturday morning. Graham would take Henry to the dog park, and they'd go for a run along the wooded hiking trail near the park. A little while after they were expected to be home that day, officers had shown up instead to tell me that my fiancé had died from a snake bite."

Christ.

She couldn't be serious.

How was it possible that we'd both lost the people we expected to spend the rest of our lives with?

"I am so sorry, Lamise. I had no idea. In fact, you aren't the only one who made assumptions, because I saw your engagement ring, and when I asked you to come back here today, I was expecting you to tell me you had plans with him. God, I'm so sorry for your loss."

She bit her lip slowly, two of her fingers slowly spinning the engagement ring around her finger on the opposite hand. “Thank you,” she croaked.

“How is this possible?”

Curiosity washed over her. “What do you mean?”

The thought of Lamise suffering through the same kind of grief I’d gone through wasn’t something that should have made me feel good. And deep down, I couldn’t say that it did. But in some twisted way, it helped to know she could understand what I was feeling. I believed she’d just know how some things felt without me needing to say the words. That was something nobody else would be able to do for me, and I found comfort in that.

“We’re sitting here together months after the both of us lost someone important to us. I lost my wife; you lost your fiancé. It seems crazy we’d both be going through the same thing.”

“Now that I know you can understand what I’m feeling, I hope you won’t think I’m crazy when I tell you that the last week with Rhys has been the best week of my life in months,” she revealed. “I went home last night, and I was convinced you didn’t want me to come back. Getting up every morning was a struggle until I had something to look forward to. He’s made me feel happy for the first time, and I’d be devastated to lose this job. I don’t... I don’t think I can suffer another loss and survive it.”

By the time she’d gotten out those last few words, Lamise was just one step away from full-fledged sobs. Without thinking twice, I shifted myself closer to her on the couch, wrapped my arms around her, and tugged her close.

Suddenly, I wasn’t feeling guilty about this, because it was completely innocent. Lamise and I were both beaten down and broken from suffering some of the worst losses imaginable, and I didn’t think it was wrong for us to lean on one another for support.

In fact, I'd convinced myself that talking to anyone about Violet wouldn't work, because they'd never truly be able to understand what it was like. Sure, the guys I worked with understood the concept of loss probably better than anyone. But losing your buddies on the battlefield wasn't the same as losing the person you were in love with. Both were awful, but they were different.

Lamise would understand, because she was going through it, too. And because I believed she needed it as much as I did, I didn't hesitate to share that with her.

"I'm sorry for making you feel the way I did last night, but trust me now when I say that it'd be an incredible loss to us if you weren't here looking after Rhys. He adores you."

She nodded her head against my chest. "I think the world of him, too."

My arms tightened around her, and I had to admit it felt good to have her there. To know I was comforting a woman who'd lost as much as I had. I just had to remind myself that this moment was about me making her feel better and not the other way around. Because if I was honest, I had several seconds of wishing she'd wrap her arms around me, too.

"I don't know what your support system looks like, Lamise, but I want you to know that if you ever want to talk about it, I'm happy to listen," I shared. "If you don't want it, I understand, but I really believe the two of us could become good friends and help each other through what feels like a never-ending nightmare."

My offer was met with silence.

Just as I started to regret it, Lamise pulled back, forcing me to loosen my hold on her. She swiped at the tears that had spilled down her cheeks. "Are you serious?"

That was hope. I could hear the hopefulness in her voice. "Of course. I don't think there's anyone who can understand what I'm feeling right now better than you."

For the first time since I came home from work yesterday and was met with it, Lamise sent a genuine smile in my

direction. “I’d love that, Banks. Honestly, I think that’s an incredible idea.”

I smiled back. “I’m glad. And I’d love to hear more about this guy, Henry. What kind of dog was he?”

At that, the tension lingering in the air dissipated, and I shifted back slightly from Lamise to give her some space. Then, she told me all about a boxer named Henry.

TWELVE



Lamise

“How was he today?”

I wanted to laugh at the question, because I didn’t doubt Banks already knew what my answer would be. The truth was that Rhys could have been a monster by any parent’s standards, and I would have thought he was an angel.

Fortunately, I wasn’t going to have to make anything up, because Rhys had been a total delight today.

Banks had just gotten home from work, and though I always hated this time of day, I was grateful for it. Because at least I still had this job as Rhys’s nanny.

It was Tuesday during the third official week here, and things were going great. I said a silent prayer of thanks every day for being able to continue being here. I’d assumed the absolute worst was going to happen, but fortunately, Banks and I ran into one another and cleared the air.

We had this new understanding between us. Or perhaps it was more of an appreciation for what each of us had been through. Whatever it was, I didn’t care. I was merely grateful we had gotten to this place.

And I was so glad I’d decided to share the truth about both Henry and Graham with Banks. I hadn’t planned on doing it, but after he’d shared about Violet, I couldn’t hold myself back.

I wanted Banks to understand just how much looking after Rhys had helped me and why. I hadn't expected he would make the offer that he did.

Now, I had his friendship, and it was something he'd proven was genuine right from the start. Ever since we had that talk that day, I found that Banks and I were opening up to each other more and more.

He was no longer just my employer, or Rhys's dad.

He sent me the occasional picture via text of Rhys doing something that would make me smile. One time, he'd included himself in the picture, making my heart swell even more than I had been prepared for.

And there had been two or three nights when I'd already left his place for the night, and he'd reached out to make sure I'd gotten home okay, since there'd been some light snow.

He cared, and it was nice to have his friendship.

Of course, there was the one small thing I hadn't mentioned to him. I didn't know why, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him about Graham's video and the possibility that it wasn't a snake that killed him at all.

Banks was probably the best person to share that information with, and for some reason, I just couldn't do it.

Maybe I was worried that Banks would want to investigate with some of the guys he worked with, and if they were as good as I'd learned they were, I was worried they might uncover something unbecoming of Graham. I didn't want Banks to judge him.

Aside from that, everything had been wonderful since we'd talked, and my job made me happier than I ever could have imagined.

Smiling at Banks, I answered, "He was wonderful, as always. Weren't you, Rhys?"

I was holding Rhys up in a standing position on my lap. I had a firm hold on him while he bounced excitedly and yammered on and on at the sight of his dad.

Between the baby gibberish and the giggles, I didn't know what I loved more.

Banks crossed the room, stood in front of us, and bent down to kiss his boy's cheeks. As he did, he placed a hand on either side of Rhys's body, which meant he was covering half of my hands, too.

I tried not to react to his touch, but that was getting harder and harder not to do, especially when I saw the way his face lit up at the sight of his son.

Though it was completely innocent, Banks had touched me several times over the course of the last couple of weeks. He'd held me in his arms that first day as I broke down into tears. It felt nice to be held and comforted, but I tried not to think about it too much.

But as time went on, I'd experienced more. Gentle brushes of his hand against mine as he'd take Rhys from my hands at the end of the day, or he'd occasionally wrap an arm around my back, so his hand could settle on my opposite shoulder and give me a squeeze.

There was nothing behind it, but it still made my belly flip every single time.

"What did you do today, little man?" Banks asked Rhys as he settled himself on the seat beside me.

Rhys's eyes followed his dad's movements, so I helped him out and turned his body in that direction and set him down in my lap as I answered for him. "He did lots of playing in between his naps and eating. We had so many conversations, I'd be here all day telling you about them. And he worked really hard during his tummy time today. We did some crawling. He's getting much better at it."

Banks's brows shot up. "Really?"

I nodded. "Want to see?"

"Of course, I do."

Not wasting a moment, I stood, walked to the middle of the room and set Rhys down on his belly on the floor. Once he

was down, I started to walk backwards in the direction of the couch and urged, “Okay, Rhys. Show Daddy what we worked on today. Crawl over to him.” I stopped for a moment as Rhys pushed up onto his hands and knees. Then, as I continued moving backward, I said, “Good job, buddy. Now come this way.”

Rhys looked up at me with his wide eyes, and I was so caught up in him that I didn’t realize what was happening until it did. I’d misjudged how close I was to the couch, and I hadn’t even taken notice of the fact that I’d been slightly bent over, backing up, directly in front of Banks until his hands were on my hips.

“Oh, God,” I gasped. “I’m so sorry.”

Banks let out a soft laugh as he guided me to the cushion beside him. “It’s okay, Lamise. You were distracted by Rhys and his crawling.”

I heard the words he said, but I could barely focus on them. I was too caught up in how it felt to have him place his hands on my hips. It was firm yet gentle, and considering he’d been behind me, it felt far too intimate.

My eyes pinned on his, and I licked my lips.

I was completely caught up in him, something hanging in the air between us.

There was a look in his eyes—something I couldn’t read—and I couldn’t miss the way it felt between us.

Or maybe it was just me who felt it. Maybe I was desperate for something and imagining things that weren’t there for Banks.

Unfortunately, it was then Rhys let out a noise that sounded like a grunt mixed with a squeal, forcing both of us to tear our attention away from one another.

The next thing I knew, Banks and I were watching as Rhys made his way toward his dad’s feet. Once he got there, Banks reached down, picked him up, and kissed him on the cheek. “That was so good, Rhys. You must have been working hard with Lamise today.”

“He did,” I rasped, still having not pulled myself together completely. “But you shouldn’t be surprised. He’s good at everything he does.”

“Oh, yeah? What else did you do today?” Banks questioned his son.

“Well, despite the fact he’s been lifting his hands to his mouth and attempting to eat them for the last ten minutes, I promise he ate well today. He always eats like a champ,” I declared.

Banks returned his attention to Rhys and asked, “Are you hungry, little man?”

Rhys responded with a bunch of gibberish, forcing Banks and me to both start laughing.

“I should get going, so you two can have your dinner together,” I said, making a move to stand up.

“You don’t have to run out of here, you know. You’re more than welcome to stay for a bit. If you want, you can join us for dinner,” Banks offered.

I froze.

Banks’s invitation was completely unexpected, and it made me feel all sorts of things I couldn’t begin to process. I would have loved nothing more than to accept his invite and stay to have dinner with them.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t.

“Oh, man. I wish I could, but I kind of made plans with my best friend, Tabitha, tonight. She’s got a wedding to go to this weekend, and she hasn’t found a dress, so she wanted my help,” I replied.

His eyes roamed over my face. It was then I got the proof I hadn’t been making it up before. There had been something lingering in his gaze earlier. It was still unclear what it was, because I hadn’t seen the look until today, and he offered no insight as to what was going through his mind. “Okay. Well, maybe next time then.”

I nodded. “I’d love that. I usually spend most nights alone in my apartment, so it’d be nice to hang with the two of you some time.”

“We’ll plan something then,” Banks assured me.

With his promise in hand, I smiled at him and jerked my chin down slightly in acknowledgement. Then I reached out to Rhys, gave his hand a squeeze, and stood. After getting my jacket on and gathering up my things, I said, “I’ll see you both tomorrow morning.”

Banks and Rhys walked me to the front door. “We’ll see you tomorrow, Lamise. Drive safe.”

“I will.”

A minute later, I was in my car and pulling away to head to Tabitha’s place. And throughout the entire drive there, all I could do was think about how it seemed crazy I could still feel the touch of Banks’s hands on my hips.



“Oh, I love that one.”

“I’ll admit it’s the best one yet, but I’m dying to try on the blue one.”

A smile formed on my face.

It had been such a long time since I’d done this. With the exception of the shopping I’d done for a dress right before Graham’s funeral, I hadn’t gone shopping just for the fun of it since before he died.

Granted, today’s trip wasn’t necessarily about me, given that we were focused mostly on getting a dress for Tabitha to wear to the wedding this weekend, but that didn’t mean I hadn’t perused a couple of racks in the process.

I’d missed it.

I wasn't exactly a huge shopper, but I had often enjoyed getting together with my best friend or my sister on occasion for a day out at the mall.

"Then you should try the blue one on next," I ordered, sorting through the stack of dresses Tabitha still had left to try on to pull out the blue one.

After she made her way back over to me, so I could unzip the back of the dress she had on now, she asked, "So, how have things been going with the new job?"

"Great," I bubbled.

Lifting her hands to her shoulders to slide the dress down her arms, Tabitha spun around and lifted a brow, silently questioning me. When I pressed my lips together in an effort to stifle a smile, she asked, "There's something you're not telling me."

I shook my head.

"Spill it," my best friend demanded, tossing the dress she'd just taken off in my direction. As she reached for the blue dress, she noted, "You haven't had a look like that on your face in ages. What's going on?"

"Nothing."

Tabitha sent me a look that told me she wasn't buying a single word that came out of my mouth.

I caved quickly and sighed. "Fine. Maybe things have been better than great."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, I almost got fired," I blurted.

She gasped. "What? Why? And how could you possibly now say that things have been so wonderful, if that's the case?"

I inhaled deeply before I shared, "It happened at the end of my first week there."

Tabitha began stepping into the blue dress while I went on to tell her about what happened that day when Banks came

home from work. I explained how I'd shared details of the day Rhys and I had together, assumed his reaction about it was related to the wife he was in the process of divorcing not liking that I'd gotten on a video call with Robin, and Banks informing me that he wasn't getting divorced. Of course, seeing the distress on my best friend's face, I quickly went on to explain how I had assumed it was the worst-case scenario that night when I went home, but then ran into Banks the next afternoon as I walked past the cemetery.

It took her a couple of seconds, but it was clear understanding dawned when her eyes flashed. "His wife died?"

I nodded. "Yeah. That's the reason I never met her. Anyway, Banks all but begged me to go back to his house, so we could talk and clear the air, because he felt horrible about the way things went down between us the night before."

"Well, that's good. And you still have your job, so it's obvious you worked everything out."

For several long moments, I didn't respond. I zipped up the blue dress when Tabitha moved toward me. I sat silently as she allowed her eyes to roam over herself in the mirror. "This is a classic case of the dress looking far better on the hanger," she declared.

She didn't need my confirmation, because that much was already obvious.

What I gave her instead was something she hadn't been expecting. "I told him about Graham."

"What?"

"After Banks told me about his wife, I told him about Graham and Henry."

Her eyes roamed over my face for a long time, but I had not a clue what she was searching for or hoping to find. "What exactly did you tell him, Lamise?"

Shaking my head, I replied, "I didn't tell him about the possible murder. I just told him about the snake bite and how Henry went missing."

“And?”

“And we’ve found a common ground to build a friendship upon,” I remarked.

“What does that mean?”

I licked my lips and swallowed hard. “It means that no matter how much I love you, Jolene, or my mom, and all that each of you has done for me in this whole situation, the reality is that none of you can truly understand what I’m feeling. Banks does.”

“So, you’re leaning on each other for emotional support?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I guess you could say that. I mean, it’s not like we’ve had these deep philosophical conversations at this point, but I think there’s this mutual respect and understanding between us that wasn’t there before. It’s really nice to have that.”

Several long moments of silence passed between us. I started to think that perhaps the conversation was over, and Tabitha had said all she was going to say about it. Then she asked, “So, you’re just friends?”

“What? Yes. Of course.”

She cocked a brow. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“But you told him about Graham and Henry.”

Nodding, I confirmed, “I did. We were both in a very emotional state, and after he shared, I wanted to do the same.”

“After a week of knowing him,” she pointed out.

I had to admit, that was the one thing that seemed strange to me. I barely knew Banks, and yet, I didn’t hesitate to open up to him about Graham. It made no sense, so I tried not to think about that too much.

“I know, Tab. But you had to be there. I can’t explain it. And I know what you’re hinting at, but you’re off base.”

There's nothing going on. We're just able to understand each other in a way that others can't. That's all."

Another lengthy pause ensued, and I tried to tell myself it was because Tabitha was busying herself with getting out of the blue dress to put on another one from the stack. Though she was doing that, deep down, I knew her silence was about something else, something that she'd eventually share with me. And since I wasn't sure I was ready for whatever that would be, I pretended to busy myself with pulling the next dress for her to try on off the hanger.

Once Tabitha took that dress from me, stepped into it, and slid it up her body, she asked, "Have you thought about it?"

"About what?"

"Moving on."

"Of course. That's what I've been trying to do since that day I found Graham's phone," I shared.

Tabitha shook her head. "I'm not talking about moving on with your life, in general. I mean, romantically. Do you ever think about the possibility of falling in love again?"

I didn't know what to say.

Tabitha's question was a loaded one, and any honest answer I could have given felt like a betrayal. To say I hadn't thought about falling in love again would have been a lie. Months ago, I'd thought about it, but not in a way where I believed it was a possibility. It was more about wondering how I'd go the rest of my life being alone without anyone to love like I loved Graham.

Of course, once I had that thought, I realized I didn't *want* to love anyone else like I loved Graham. Though I didn't believe it was an actual possibility, I felt like I'd be being disloyal to him in some way, if I moved on like that.

Truthfully, I hadn't considered it much beyond those thoughts.

But now, I wasn't so sure.

Now, when I'd driven myself here to meet up with Tabitha and had to spend the entire drive trying to forget the feel of Banks's hands on my hips.

"It's so complicated," I murmured.

"Complicated?" she repeated.

"I love Graham. I'll always love him. And a few months after he passed, the thought of being alone for the rest of my life popped into my head. So, I guess I thought about the possibility of another relationship. But it all felt wrong to consider that."

"And now?"

I sent a look her way that I hoped indicated how much I was struggling to know what the right thing was to say. "If I've learned anything while working as a nanny these last three weeks, it's that I don't want to be alone. I'm happier when I'm working, because I'm not alone."

Understanding and a bit of sympathy washed over her. "Do you think it's simply being around other people, or do you think it's the people you're with right now that are making you feel that way?"

I huffed and murmured, "The million-dollar question."

Tabitha moved toward me, so I could zip up the dress. When she straightened up in front of me and spun around, I said, "I think that's the one."

She looked at herself in the mirror. "I think you might be right. And in an effort not to make this more difficult, I'm not trying on another one."

With her mind made up, I started gathering the unwanted dresses, so we could hang them on the garment return just outside the dressing room. Somewhere in the middle of that, Tabitha called my name. "Lamise?"

"Yeah?"

"It's okay to not want to be alone."

I offered a small smile and a nod in return, because I didn't trust myself to speak.

Fortunately, Tabitha didn't push the conversation beyond that.

But just because we didn't discuss it any further didn't mean it wasn't on my mind.

I didn't know what the future had in store for me, but at least I could recognize that things were changing. Only time would tell if it would all be for the better, and if the reason I had considered the possibility of another relationship again was because of who recently came into my life.

Sadly, I didn't know Banks well enough to know the answer to that question just yet.

THIRTEEN



Banks

There were just under two hours left until the end of the workday when I happened to be walking through the office and nearly collided with Pax, another member of the kidnap and ransom team.

“Whoa. Hey, what’s going on?” I asked him.

“Oh, man. I was actually running to grab either Nixon or Magnus, but if you’re available, maybe you could help,” he answered.

“Sure. What do you need?”

He let out a frustrated sigh. “Blaze is working on nailing down the exact location, but we’ve got a kid who was kidnapped. I’ve already got Damon ready to go, but we wanted at least another set of hands.”

Fuck.

A little kid.

“How old?” I asked.

“He’s just over a year old.”

Damn it.

It never felt good to know that anyone had been kidnapped, but in this scenario, it was especially difficult. Paxton had said it was a kid, but the truth was, at just over a year old, this kid was still a baby. Just like Rhys.

Apparently, I'd taken too long thinking about how horrific it was, and Pax assumed the worst.

"If this is too much too soon, or it hits too close to home with Rhys being so young, I'm sure Nixon or Magnus won't have a problem covering it," he assured me.

I shook my head. "No, I've got it. I just need to make a quick phone call. I'll meet you in Blaze's office."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Unless Rhys's nanny can't stay, I'm sure," I returned.

Confident I was telling him the truth, Pax turned and walked away toward the office where he'd find Blaze, one of the private investigators here at Harper Security Ops.

I slipped my hand into my pocket, yanked out my phone, and pulled up Lamise's name on my contacts list.

After the third ring, she answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, Lamise. It's Banks."

"Yeah, I know. I have you programmed in my phone," she replied with a light laugh.

I already knew that, but it seemed the woman had the ability to throw me a bit off kilter from time to time. "Right. Yes. I forgot."

"Is everything okay? Because Rhys and I are kind of in the middle of something right now."

"You're in the middle of something?" I asked.

"Yes. But I can't tell you about it, because it's a surprise."

I could only imagine what she was up to with him. It was probably better if I waited until I was there to get the surprise. I needed to be focused on my job, and if she shared, not only would it delay me getting to where I needed to be, but it was also likely to make me emotional. I didn't need that kind of distraction right now.

"Okay. Well, I won't keep you then, but I was curious if you'd be able to hang a bit longer today. I just got word that

there's a case some of the guys are working on, and they could use an extra set of hands. There's a baby that's been kidnapped, so I was kind of hoping you'd be—"

"Oh my God, Banks. You don't need to ask me that. Just go. Do what you have to do to rescue that baby," she ordered.

Despite the horror Lamise very clearly felt, I couldn't stop my lips from twitching. She was such a good woman. So good, she wouldn't even let me finish explaining what I needed. She just knew, and she didn't hesitate.

Needing to ignore that along with about a half dozen other things I couldn't bring myself to process when it came to Lamise, I pushed it to the back of my mind and said, "Thanks, Lamise. I really appreciate you being flexible."

"Don't mention it. Rhys and I will be fine."

"Okay. I'm not sure how long I'll be, but it's possible it'll be after dinner. Feel free to help yourself to anything that's there," I offered.

"I'm a big girl, Banks. I'll be alright. You be safe."

"Always. I'll see you when I get back then. Hopefully, it's not too late," I said, wanting her to know that I didn't want to take advantage of her.

"And if it is, it's okay. I promise. Now, go do what you've got to do, and don't worry about us."

It seemed all of my attempts to reassure her were completely unnecessary, so I decided to let it go. Instead, I said goodbye and made my way to Blaze's office. By the time I walked in, there was just enough time for Paxton and Damon to bring me up to speed on everything before Blaze announced he'd nailed down the location of where we'd find the baby.

The three of us didn't hesitate and were out the door in seconds. Though I hated there was a baby in danger, I had to be honest. It felt good to be back to working in the capacity that I had been before Violet's death. I'd come back to work quite a few weeks ago, but since I started back, I hadn't had anything this intense to deal with. I liked knowing that I could

be back to doing my job without having to worry about Rhys, either.

Obviously, I would always worry about him the way any parent would worry about their child, but this was different. I knew Lamise was with him, and she'd never let anything happen to him.

Rhys and I were both lucky to have her around. She really had been such a blessing in our lives.

Hours after I'd had that phone call with Lamise to make sure she was okay with staying late, I was finally back in Damon's truck as we returned to Harper Security. Pax had left in his own vehicle to head home.

Tonight had been a success, and the little boy had been returned safely to his parents.

"How'd it feel?" Damon asked.

"Pardon?"

"This has really been the first big rescue you've been on since you've been back to work," he started. "I was just curious if you're feeling alright."

Nodding, even though Damon's focus was on the road ahead of him, I confirmed, "I'm good. It's been good to be back, and tonight being a success helps, too."

"That's good, man. I'm glad for you. It kind of sucks, though."

I had no idea what he was talking about. "What does?"

"Well, I assume Lamise is still at your place with Rhys, isn't she?"

"Yeah. Why does that suck?"

He let out a laugh. "I'm not saying it sucks for you. It's great that you've found someone you trust to be with him. I'm just saying it sucks for her. It's Valentine's Day, so if she had any plans, she probably had to cancel them."

Fuck.

Valentine's Day.

It hadn't even crossed my mind.

Of course, there was no reason for the holiday to cross my mind, since I didn't exactly have anyone to celebrate it with. And now that Damon had pointed it out, I couldn't stop thinking about Lamise.

"I don't think she had plans," I told him.

"Really? Avalon told me she was gorgeous, so I guess I just assumed she'd have a date if she wasn't already in a relationship," he replied.

Avalon wasn't wrong.

Lamise was gorgeous. When I first took notice to how beautiful she was that first day she walked into the office to hand in an application and resume, I felt guilty for even noticing it. While some guilt still lingered, I realized it wasn't wrong to admit the truth.

Lamise was beautiful, in more ways than one.

"Her fiancé died last summer," I blurted.

That declaration caused Damon to take his eyes off the road. "What?"

"Snake bite while he was out with their dog, who subsequently went missing," I revealed.

"That's awful."

"Yeah," I muttered.

Following a beat of silence, Damon asked, "So, that just came up in random conversation when you got home from work one day?"

I wasn't very good at this whole sharing thing, but I'd learned the hard way that it wasn't always smart to keep everything to myself.

There was no time like the present to start sharing. "Not exactly. I never told Lamise about Violet, and she wound up assuming I was going through a divorce when she never met

Rhys's mom. Long story short, I finally told her the truth, and she ended up sharing what happened to her fiancé and her dog."

"Wow. It's kind of crazy to think the two of you happened to find each other," he noted.

While I knew he didn't necessarily mean it the way I took it, Damon's words rang in my head. Hearing him say Lamise and I had found each other had caught me off guard. Because I liked it and hated it all at the same time. Because it indicated, at least in my mind, that we were together in some way.

And we weren't.

Because Lamise wasn't Violet, and I wasn't Graham.

"We're just friends who understand what each other is going through," I told him.

"I wasn't suggesting there was anything more than that going on between the two of you, Banks. I can't even begin to imagine what I'd do in your situation; though, I'm not sure there's a right or wrong way to move forward after what you've been through. Either way, I'm glad you've got someone you can trust to watch Rhys and who can understand what you've been through."

That was precisely how I felt.

Based on what she'd said to me, Lamise felt the same.

Despite that, I had to wonder if she had Valentine's Day on her mind today. Was she thinking about how she didn't have anyone ready to take her out for dinner or to bring her flowers?

"Thanks, Damon."

"No problem. And as Avalon told you before, you know we're always free to watch Rhys for you, if you ever need us," he offered.

"I know. That means a lot."

A few minutes later, we pulled into the parking lot. Damon drove up, parked beside my truck, and said, "Good work

today.”

“Yeah. You, too. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sounds good. Later, Banks.”

“Later.”

I closed the door, climbed in my truck, and headed for home. It was much later than I had anticipated, so I hoped Lamise wasn’t upset when I walked through the door. As it was, I was already upset enough, considering I’d be getting home after Rhys was already asleep.

I loved my job, but I hated that I had missed having my normal evening routine with Rhys. The only silver lining was knowing he had someone with him who cared deeply for him.

When I got home, I didn’t waste any time getting myself inside.

No sooner had I walked through the door and closed it behind me, I turned and saw Lamise standing there, clutching the monitor in her hand.

“Hey,” I greeted her.

Relief seemed to sweep through her. “You’re okay.”

Tipping my head to the side, I assessed her. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay. Did you think I wouldn’t be?”

She shrugged. “I... I didn’t want to think the worst, but I could hear the alarm in your voice when you called earlier.”

My brows pulled together. “You didn’t seem worried at all. In fact, you urged me to go, so I could do what I needed to do.”

Lamise licked her lips as her eyes dropped from mine. It took her a few seconds to compose herself, and once she did, she returned her attention to me. “It probably does seem strange that I applied for a job at Harper Security Ops, and now I’m acting like I didn’t know what you did there. I mean, I didn’t know the full extent of it, but I knew enough. And you’ve been going to work for weeks while I’ve been here with Rhys. It’s not like I didn’t know where you were going.

It's just that... I don't know. I guess it hit me tonight that you have a job which puts you in harm's way."

She'd been concerned. Though I didn't like the idea of her being upset, I had to admit it felt good to know she cared not just about Rhys but about me, too.

"I'm good at my job, Lamise. And I've got a really great team working beside me, so there's no need to worry," I assured her.

She nodded. "Right. That's good. So, did you get the baby back?"

"We did."

More tension moved out of her body.

Since Lamise seemed to be struggling with her emotions, I decided it'd probably be best if I took charge and redirected the conversation. "So, was Rhys okay for you?"

Instantly, her mood shifted. Her face lit up at the mere thought of my son. "He was absolutely wonderful. We had so much fun today."

"He didn't give you a problem going down for the night, did he?"

Lamise shook her head and held up the monitor. "Not at all. He never gives me a problem."

I cocked a brow. "I'm not sure you'd tell me if he did."

Her lips twitched. "We might have a secret or two between us."

I laughed.

Ever since Lamise came into our lives, I found myself laughing more and more with each day that passed. It felt good at the same time it felt wrong.

How could I possibly find something to make me happy again when my wife had died?

"Speaking of secrets, are you going to tell me what you and Rhys were doing today when I called?"

She bit the corner of her lip, sending an unsure look in my direction. “Well, it would probably have been better if Rhys was awake, but I’m sure he wants you to have it now.”

Confused, I pressed, “What is it?”

Lamise jerked her head to the side and said, “I’ll show you.”

At that, she turned and started to walk away. My eyes immediately dropped to her ass.

Fuck.

Earlier in the week, she had been so excited about showing me how great Rhys was doing with his crawling, and she hadn’t realized she was backing up toward me while she encouraged him. I’d had no choice but to place my hands on her hips, or her ass would have been in my face.

That was another area I was struggling with.

It had been months since I’d been intimate with a woman. Not since Violet. For a long time, it didn’t even cross my mind. I was so consumed with grief and devastation; sex was the furthest thing from my mind. Even once I started trying to get back to normal with work and life, I still had no desire. I mean, my wife wasn’t here.

But now, I was feeling it.

Something had started stirring inside me since Lamise came into my life. While there was a part of me that believed it was about physical attraction and needs, there was another part that knew better. Something else was happening with her, and I’d been doing my best to try to ignore it.

But it was getting harder and harder to remain unaffected.

I’d had my hands on her hips; and though it had been innocent enough, I couldn’t deny just how good it had felt to touch her like that.

And the way she looked at me, like I was someone who could fix everything wrong in her life, was something I couldn’t seem to shake. That look made me want to be that man for her.

Yet I was torn.

How could I do it? How could I be attracted to her? How could I enjoy having my hands on her? Why did I want to be someone she could turn to?

Wasn't it wrong?

Lamise wasn't my wife, and I was here, feeling all that I was, watching her ass as she walked away from me.

Before Lamise turned around and realized what I was doing, I snapped myself out of it and followed behind her, redirecting my gaze anywhere but on her body.

The space in my house was an open concept, so the family room was open to the dining area and kitchen. Lamise had walked to the table in the dining area, opened one of the bags she'd brought with her today, and pulled something out of it.

"This is for you from your son," she said.

More curiosity moved through me as I took what she was holding out to me from her hands. It was two pieces of pink construction paper that had been stapled on the sides and bottom, creating an envelope of sorts. On one side, it had a single word written on it in what I assumed was Lamise's handwriting.

Daddy.

My throat was already tight at the thought of what I might find inside.

"What is this?" I asked, noting the rasp in my voice.

Lamise smiled brightly at me. "Open it."

I opened the top edge that wasn't stapled, saw a piece of white construction paper, and pulled it out. That's when my heart stopped beating in my chest.

My eyes immediately landed on the large red construction paper heart in the center of the page, and on top of that heart were two white footprints. Rhys's feet.

Along the top of the page was more of Lamise's handwriting: *Happy Valentine's Day, Daddy!*

And beneath the heart was just a bit more text: *Rhys Tyler, seven months*

I couldn't contain my emotions. My eyes got wet, and I needed to take a few settling breaths.

Lifting my gaze to Lamise, I said, "This means the world to me. Thank you for this."

She smiled brightly at me. "You're welcome, Banks."

Something came over me, and I couldn't stop myself. I moved toward Lamise, wrapped both arms around her, and hugged her. The instant I felt her arms around me, I let out a deep sigh.

God, it felt good.

"You have no idea how special you are," I told her. "I don't know what we'd do without you."

Lamise's arms tightened. "I feel the same way about the two of you."

Though I didn't want to, I eventually loosened my hold on her, looked her in the eyes, and felt the rapid beat of my heart. "I'm sorry I didn't get you anything. My mind has been—"

"It's okay, Banks. I wasn't expecting anything. Rhys and I had some time today, and we decided to do a fun project."

She was standing so close. I wanted to wrap her in my arms again, because I liked the way it felt too much.

Shaking my head, I replied, "No. You planned this, because I don't have construction paper anywhere in this house. Don't diminish what you did, because you don't want me to feel bad. I do, and I want to make it up to you. Would you allow Rhys and me to make dinner for you on Saturday night?"

"That's not necessary," she insisted.

I smiled at her, noting the sweet look on her face that said the opposite of what her words had. She wanted the time together as much as I did, but she was struggling to commit. I

couldn't say I didn't understand her hesitancy. This was new territory for the both of us. "I know. But we want to."

She thought on it for a few seconds, and eventually, she agreed, "Okay. I'd love to have dinner with the both of you on Saturday."

I smiled at her. "Good."

"Speaking of dinner, I did make some, and I figured I'd just double it, so you wouldn't have to worry about it if you got home late. I hope that's okay," she said.

"Talk about something being not necessary," I muttered. "Thank you, Lamise. I appreciate you doing that."

"You're welcome. I should probably get going, so you can eat and get to bed. I'll be back here in the morning."

Was it wrong that I didn't want her to go?

My eyes were pleading with hers when I begged, "Please be careful driving home. Again, I'm so sorry it's so late."

"I will be. Don't worry about it."

Not even three minutes later, I closed the door after Lamise pulled away. Then I walked to the kitchen and ate the delicious dinner she'd made while I stared at the project she'd done with Rhys to give to me for Valentine's Day.

I didn't know if it was going to be possible, but I knew I had to try to find a way to make her feel what she'd made me feel tonight.

FOURTEEN



Lamise

This was not the time to freeze.

I was already running late, since I'd gotten myself so worked up and excited last night and struggled to fall asleep.

It wasn't really my fault, though.

I never expected Banks to ask me to join him and Rhys for dinner on Saturday. When I came up with the idea to do a Valentine's Day project with Rhys, so Banks could have something special from his son on his first Valentine's Day as a father, I never did it with the intention of making him feel bad or even obligated.

Of course, that didn't mean I wasn't excited about the way Banks responded. Not only had the invite to dinner made me feel happy, it was probably the immediate reaction Banks had to the project I'd done with Rhys that left me feeling so out of sorts last night.

The way he got emotional, unable to stop himself from moving close and hugging me tight. It caught me off guard, but it felt so nice, too. It was the third time he'd hugged me, but only the second time he'd done it with both arms around me.

And every time he did it, I couldn't ignore how much I liked the way it felt. Part of me wanted to tell myself that it was merely because hugs from Banks were the first hugs from a man I'd received since Graham. Sure, my mom, my sister, and Tabitha had hugged me. But it wasn't the same.

I'd spent entirely too much time last night thinking about how much I liked the way it felt to be in his arms, the reaction he had to the art project, and the invitation to dinner that I found it difficult to find sleep.

As a result, I woke up later than usual this morning, and I didn't have a moment to spare if I was going to get to Banks's house on time for him to be able to leave for work.

So, this was not the time to freeze.

And yet, looking at the display on my phone, I couldn't bring myself to do much beyond inhaling and exhaling. Well, that and feeling my heart pound wildly against my chest.

Because while I didn't know the specifics of what this call was about just yet, I knew what the general gist of the conversation was going to be, and I wasn't sure I was prepared for it this morning.

Avoiding it wasn't an option, though.

I closed my eyes and let out a breath before I slid my finger across the screen. "Hello?"

"Hi, Ms. Kelly?"

"Yes, this is Lamise," I replied.

"Right. My apologies. This is Detective Shaw with the Steel Ridge PD."

"Hi, Detective. I assume you're calling because you have some news for me," I surmised.

There was a moment of hesitation before he revealed, "I can't confirm if this will feel like much news, or even good news, to you, but I wanted to give you something."

My fiancé was dead. I wasn't sure there was anything he'd ever be able to tell me that would feel like good news. Because if he told me Graham had been murdered, there was no question that was awful. But if he told me Graham's death had been precisely what I'd believed it was for months—that he'd died from a snake bite—then I'd be left wondering what the hell his video message was all about. I'd spend days and

weeks and probably months trying to decipher it, attempting to figure out why he looked so utterly terrified.

“I understand, Detective, but I’m prepared for whatever news it is that you do have for me,” I assured him, doing my best to sound firm and not like I was trembling on the inside.

Detective Shaw no longer hesitated. “I managed to speak with the coroner, and we’ve gone back over things. As it turns out, your suspicion is entirely possible. It is conceivable that your fiancé was murdered. I hate to say this, but there’re no conclusive answers at this point.”

“Do you have any information? What did the coroner say?” I questioned him.

“Well, I’m not sure what you recall about the specifics of Graham’s death—”

“I remember it all,” I declared, cutting him off.

There was a pause before he continued, “Okay, so then you’ll remember that Graham had all of the symptoms that pointed to the snake bite as being what killed him. As you may recall, he also experienced head trauma. The initial thought had been that Graham was bit by the snake, panicked, and tried to keep moving in hopes of getting help. Before that could happen, we believed he became disoriented from the venom and wound up stumbling around until he fell backward and hit his head on the rock found right beside his head.”

I already knew all of this.

They’d shared it all with me last summer. And when I learned about it, all I could remember thinking was how terrified he must have been knowing he’d been bit and that he wasn’t going to make it if he didn’t get help.

The whole story added up, so I never questioned it, even if it made me sad to think about how horrible the final minutes of his life were.

Of course, believing what I did after I’d watched that video he recorded made me feel even worse about what the end of his life was like.

“Yes, I’m aware of everything you’ve just shared,” I told him.

“Ms. Kelly—”

“Lamise,” I reminded him.

“Lamise. Sorry. I hate to tell you this, but based on the new evidence you provided us and after my discussion with the coroner, I do believe your fiancé was murdered.”

I swallowed hard.

I didn’t know why it bothered me so much to hear him say it, since I already believed that was the case. Worse, I tried to convince myself we all had it wrong. “How sure are you of that?” I asked him.

“Based on the coroner’s findings, the window in which Graham suffered the snake bite and the head trauma is so close that it’s not easy to pinpoint what happened first,” Detective Shaw started. “The explanation you got months ago was the most plausible. Snake bite, disorientation, then head trauma. But now, given that video he recorded not even two hours before someone found him on that trail and called 911, we’re thinking the head trauma came first.”

My throat was getting tighter and tighter by the second. “So, what happens now?”

“Well, this is where things get a little bit tough,” he replied. “Are you aware of anyone who might have had a problem with him? Any friends, family, or co-workers?”

Shaking my head from side to side, I answered, “Not at all. I mean, things were a little unsettled with his family, but that was mostly related to me. They were unhappy with him wanting to marry me, so I don’t think they would have ever done something to harm him. If I was the one killed, I could see them as suspects.”

“Okay, well, we’re going to have to do some additional digging,” Detective Shaw told me. “He never mentioned anyone from the dog park, did he?”

Graham didn't spend his time talking to me about random people he might have met at the dog park. He was friendly enough to people, so I didn't doubt he had conversations with individuals while he was there, but when Graham was with me, he kept his focus and attention on me.

"Nobody who stands out beyond what you'd normally expect from people at the dog park who get caught up talking about their pets," I said. "I can ask my best friend again, because she has a dog she takes there occasionally."

"What's her name?"

"Tabitha. Tabitha Boyd."

"Would you be able to give me her contact information? I'd love to sit down and talk with her," he said.

I went on to give the detective Tabitha's contact information.

When he had all the information he needed, he promised, "I'm going to do what I can to get to the bottom of this for you, Lamise. I appreciate your cooperation and patience as I try to do that."

"Thank you, Detective."

"Have a nice day."

"You, too."

I ended the call and stood there motionless for about five seconds, attempting to digest all of the news I'd just been given. Realizing no matter what I did now, I didn't stand a chance of making it to Banks's house on time, I quickly tapped out a text.

LAMISE

I'm so sorry I'm running late. I'm leaving now.

I didn't wait for him to respond.

Grabbing my things, I dashed out the door and hopped into my car. I used the drive to Banks's house to try to calm myself

down. The last thing I wanted to do was show up at his place a complete and utter mess of nerves. After the conversation I'd just had with Detective Shaw, it was entirely possible that could happen. Banks would probably never let me stay with Rhys ever again, and I'd be devastated.

So, I tried my best not to focus too much on the details of the conversation. There wasn't much I could do about it at this point anyway. Instead, I thought about my day ahead. That led to me thinking about my weekend ahead, which made me a mess of nerves for a completely different reason. At least it wouldn't be something that would prevent me from being able to continue as Rhys's nanny.

When I arrived at Banks's house, I wasted no time in my car. I reached over the center console, grabbed my things out of the passenger's seat, and was at the front door in a matter of seconds.

As soon as Banks opened the door, I immediately started apologizing. "I'm so sorry," I lamented as I stepped inside. "Did you get my text?"

"Yeah. I responded to you and told you not to worry."

I shook my head, feeling disappointed and frustrated with myself. "I had a hard time falling asleep last night, so I woke up late. Even still, I would have made it on time, but then I got an important phone call right before I was about to leave that I couldn't ignore. That delayed me leaving, which is why I'm here late."

"Lamise?"

"Yeah?"

"Breathe," he instructed gently. "It's okay. As long as you are okay, I promise you don't have to be upset about this. And considering I got back late last night and didn't get to have my nightly routine with Rhys, I enjoyed having a little more time with him this morning."

My shoulders slumped with relief. "Are you sure?"

Banks shot me a reassuring smile. "Positive."

I gave him a nod in return before turning my attention to Rhys. “Good morning, Rhys. Did you miss me?”

Rhys’s face lit up with a happy smile, and suddenly all of my troubles melted away. Calm. I finally felt calm for the first time since I woke up this morning.

“So, are you?” Banks asked.

“Am I what?”

“Okay,” he clarified. “I said as long as you were okay, I didn’t mind that you were running behind today. So, are you?”

I didn’t quite know how to answer that, sharing any part of the truth, without alarming him. But that didn’t mean I didn’t appreciate the way it made me feel to have him seeking some reassurances about how I was doing. Technically, I had noted my troubles melted away when I saw Rhys, so I decided that was the way to go. “I am now,” I promised him.

“You said you couldn’t sleep last night,” he pointed out, clearly concerned that something was wrong.

I felt another flutter in my belly at the sustained concern he showed for me. It was sweet of him, but I didn’t want him worrying about me.

I nodded. “Yeah. Um, well, it’s a combination of things, but mostly, I’m excited about dinner tomorrow with you and Rhys.”

That seemed to satisfy his curiosity as a look of understanding washed over him. “Ah, okay. Well, Rhys and I have had a discussion this morning, and we’ve got it all planned out.”

I lifted a brow. “Is that so?”

Banks turned his attention to his son. “Tell her, Rhys. We’re all set for tomorrow, aren’t we?”

“I’ll have to try to convince him to share the plan with me later today when you’re at work,” I teased.

Laughing, Banks insisted, “He’ll never reveal our secrets.”

Unable to stand it any longer, I set my things down, pulled off my jacket, and reached my hands out to Rhys. He didn't hesitate to lean away from his father and in my direction. I cuddled him close, giving him kisses on his neck and chubby cheeks. He giggled the entire time, and my heart swelled in my chest at the beautiful sound.

When I finally turned my attention to Banks, I saw he was watching me with a strange look on his face, something I couldn't quite read. Whatever it was, he didn't say, shaking his head as though trying to rid his mind of any thoughts plaguing it.

"I should get going. They're calling for some snow this evening, so I want to make sure I'm back here on time," he said, returning to business as usual.

"Of course. We'll be here when you get back," I assured him.

Half a second later, Banks leaned forward, kissed Rhys on the cheek, and pulled back slightly to look at me. Our faces were inches apart, and there was something intense happening between us. But no matter how strong that pull or how close we were to one another, nothing happened.

"I'll see you later," Banks declared, his voice seeming to have dropped a couple of octaves.

I didn't trust myself to speak, but I didn't want to appear like an idiot. So, I rasped, "See you later."

After Banks left, I shook off all the panic, excitement, nerves, heartbreak, and tension lingering from all that had happened since I opened my eyes earlier that morning and got busy, focusing my full attention on Rhys.

He was so playful and lovable, and he made it easy for me to ignore everything else going on around me. We played, laughed, and worked on crawling.

Eventually, Rhys went down for his morning nap, and I went about picking things up around the house, tackling the kitchen and some laundry. When I'd finished that and Rhys was still asleep, I thought I'd be able to pull out a book to

read, but my mind was too muddled. Knowing I had time before Rhys would be up, I decided to give my sister a call. She might not be able to offer me any advice, but she would at least be able to listen while I got it out.

“I’ve been hoping to hear from you,” she said when she answered my call.

“I guess that’s a good thing, considering I’ve got plenty to talk to you about,” I murmured.

“What’s going on?” Jolene worried.

I wasn’t quite sure where to start, so I blurted it all out in one shot. “Detective Shaw called me this morning to confirm that there’s enough evidence to suggest Graham might have been murdered, and last night, Banks asked me to join him and Rhys for dinner tomorrow night.”

There was a lengthy pause. My sister was probably just as mixed up about it all as I was. “Okay. Tell me everything. Start with the dinner request.”

So, that’s what I did. I told my sister about the Valentine’s Day project I did with Rhys for his dad, that I needed to stay late last night, and how Banks wound up asking me to join him and Rhys for dinner on the weekend. My sister then requested the specifics on what I’d heard from Detective Shaw this morning.

After I’d given her everything, she took a moment to let it all sink in. And finally, after what felt like forever, Jolene asked, “If I know anything about you, your emotions are all over the place right now. You’re probably devastated and heartbroken over the news you received from Detective Shaw, despite already believing what he told you was the case. In the same breath, you’re feeling excited, nervous, and perhaps a bit guilty about the dinner thing with Banks. How close am I?”

“Banks and Rhys,” I corrected her. “But other than that, you are correct.”

Jolene let out a laugh. “Right. So, let’s start with Graham. You had a feeling this was the case, and it’s the reason you went to the police to begin with. At least you know there’s

something happening there, and you're going to get answers. There's nothing that I can say that's ever going to make losing Graham okay. No matter how he died, it's devastating. He was supposed to be your husband. All you can do now is hope that they can figure out what happened to him, the people responsible are brought to justice, and you get the closure you deserve."

She wasn't wrong about any of that. To some degree, I'd done a lot of grieving for the loss of Graham prior to finding his phone with that video. Sure, watching that and understanding things were not as they seemed was sort of like losing him all over again, but it was different. I'd already been living for months without Graham. Learning the truth about what happened to him was where my life with him had taken me, sadly.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I replied.

"Of course, I am. Now, on the dinner with your boss front," she started.

As soon as she said the words, I felt a shudder run down my body and had to stop her. "Don't say that!"

"Why not? It's the truth."

Dinner with my boss.

Technically, that's what Banks was, but it never really felt like that to me. Maybe it was because I was in his home, looking after his son, and tidying up around the house. It felt less formal. It certainly never felt like work.

"I know. But it sounds awful."

"I think it sounds wonderful," she sighed.

Judging by the sound of her voice, I was convinced I would have seen hearts in her eyes if she had been standing in front of me.

"You do?"

"Yes, I do. Lamise, this is wonderful news. I don't know what his ultimate goal is, or what his intentions are, but I think

the two of you should have dinner together. You both deserve it.”

“But... but I’m worried,” I stammered.

“I don’t think you need to be. I imagine he’s going to be feeling a lot of the same things you will be feeling, all the way down to the guilt. And the thing is, while I understand why that’s the case, I don’t think either one of you needs to feel that way. You’re both allowed to find happiness. I mean, isn’t that what Graham said he wanted for you anyway?”

He had said that.

And it was obvious I was going to need to keep that in mind as I moved forward, if I didn’t want to constantly feel guilty for still wanting to be happy.

“It is,” I confirmed quietly.

“Enjoy yourself, Lamise. Nothing will make me happier than to know you’re not alone all the time when you’re not working.”

I smiled, feeling better about everything, even if I didn’t know where things would lead in either situation. For now, I had a lot going on, and I just needed to take it all as it came.

“Thanks for talking with me, Jolene.”

“Anything for you. You know that.”

It wasn’t long after I got off the phone with my sister when Rhys woke up. For the rest of the day, I spent my time focusing on him, considering my sister’s words about everything, and trying not to allow myself to get too distracted by all the *what ifs*.

After Rhys was up from his late afternoon nap, we got back to playing. He talked up a storm, and though nothing came out coherently, it didn’t stop me from talking with him as though we were having a full-blown conversation about something important.

We were so caught up in what we were doing that I hadn’t taken notice of the time. Before I knew it, Banks walked

through the door, and when he stepped into the living room, I could see the look of concern written all over his face.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I just looked at your car.”

My brows pulled together. “Is something wrong with my car?”

“Not if it’s dry outside. But considering how slow I had to go on the way home, I don’t think you can leave here tonight,” he answered.

“What?”

“Have you looked outside, Lamise?”

I moved my head from side to side. “No. Rhys and I have been busy playing and talking.”

Banks hesitated for a moment before he declared, “There’s too much snow outside. You can’t drive home in this weather.”

I glanced down at Rhys, made sure he was okay on his spot, and stood from the floor. When I looked out the window, I realized Banks wasn’t joking. The snow was coming down like crazy; the tracks where he’d just driven were virtually impossible to see.

I wasn’t a bad driver, but that could have also been because I didn’t make stupid decisions like driving in the snow. “What am I going to do?”

Having been so caught up in what I was looking at, I hadn’t realized Banks had moved toward me. He placed his hand gently on my shoulder and said, “You can spend the night here.”

“I... I can’t—”

“You can’t drive home in this,” he insisted.

I swallowed hard.

Banks noticed I was panicking, because he explained, “You can sleep in the spare bedroom. If there’s something you need, I’m sure I’ve got it here. If not, at least you’ll be safe.”

I looked back out the window, saw how much snow was falling, and accepted my fate.

It seemed as though I was spending the night with Banks and Rhys. Part of me was excited, but if I was honest, I was also terrified.

FIFTEEN



Lamise

“So, I guess tomorrow night is off.”

That came from me. Sadly, there was no mistaking the despondency in my tone, and that was awful. Because I didn’t want to upset Banks. I really was trying to make the best out of an unfortunate situation. Though, if I was completely honest, *unfortunate* was probably not the best word to describe my current circumstances.

It was Friday night, and I was spending it with Banks and Rhys, since the snow had been bad enough to strand me here. And the truth was, spending time with Banks and Rhys was the very opposite of unfortunate.

It was wonderful.

I was well aware of the fact that things could have been much worse. I could have insisted on leaving here and wound up stranded in the snow.

So, this really wasn’t anything to complain about at all.

“What would make you say that?” Banks asked me.

My eyes dropped to the food on the table—spinach and ricotta ravioli, something Rhys was experimenting with in his highchair, too—before I returned my attention to him and explained, “Well, I just assumed that with me having dinner with the two of you tonight, we’d switch tomorrow night’s dinner plans to tonight. This way, you won’t have to worry about having me over two nights in a row for dinner.”

Admittedly, it was painful to get those words out. I was disappointed about having tomorrow's plans canceled, but it was only because I had hoped to get myself a little done up.

Granted, I was well aware what we had planned for tomorrow wasn't exactly a date—something I wasn't sure either of us could handle or be prepared for—but it was still meant to be a special occasion.

“Tomorrow night is still happening, Lamise. In fact, we're looking forward to it,” he insisted, a smile spreading across his face.

I perked up. “Really?”

“Absolutely. This is, if you ask me, just a bonus,” Banks declared.

His response was wholly unexpected, but I absolutely loved it. It was nice to feel like he enjoyed my company and was looking forward to more of it.

“Well, the food is delicious, and the company is wonderful. Maybe I should start having an appreciation for the cold weather and the snow,” I muttered.

“You're not a fan?” he asked, his lips twitching slightly.

I wanted to focus on the lip twitch and what it could mean, but instead, I ignored it and shook my head. “While I can promise I'm not a fan of the extreme heat, it's not a secret I don't like the cold. And the snow isn't very high up on my list, either.”

“So, living in Pennsylvania, where you get to experience the best and worst of all four seasons, is your idea of a good time, then?” he teased.

I rolled my eyes, loving the easy nature of our conversation. “I feel like the stifling heat of the summer and the bitter cold of the winter months are months long, and we're always getting the extremes of both. I'd prefer more of the weather that's just comfortable. Spring and fall. It's perfect, but it always feels like we get two weeks of each of those before it turns.”

“Have you lived here in Pennsylvania all your life?” he questioned me.

Nodding, I confirmed, “Yep. Born and raised. Though, I moved here to Steel Ridge quite a few years ago.”

“What about your family? Where are they?”

For a brief moment, a wave of sadness washed over me. I would have given anything to have them closer to me.

“My mom and my sister, Jolene, live about two hours away. I mentioned my niece, Ruby, back when you were interviewing me for this job as Rhys’s nanny.” I paused a moment, focused my attention on Rhys, and reached my hand out to give his messy one a squeeze. “As you can already tell from the amount of cuddling I try to do with him, it’s one of my favorite things to do with Ruby. But every time I see her, I feel like she’s grown so much, and time is just flying by or slipping away.”

Banks allowed his eyes to roam over my face briefly before he asked, “How old is she?”

“Ruby? She’s four now, and she’s just got the best little spirit. Rhys reminds me a lot of her, because they’re both always so happy.”

Banks’s lips formed a smile. “I really did luck out with him, didn’t I?”

I nodded, returning the smile. “Definitely. But I think you deserve some of the credit for him being the way he is.”

He let out a laugh. “I’m not so sure about that. God, there are so many instances when I question myself. If there is one thing I know, it’s that I don’t have a clue what I’m doing, but I’m putting in a valiant effort to figure it out.”

Now, it was my turn to stare at him. My eyes roamed over his face, taking in every handsome feature as I wondered how it was possible for him to do all that he did for his son and feel any insecurity.

“Can I be honest with you for a second?” I asked, feeling uneasy about how he might react.

He jerked his chin down slightly, trepidation marring his features. "Sure."

"I told you about my mom and my sister, but I didn't mention my father," I started. "He wasn't around. Ever. So, I think it's important that you know, coming from a girl who didn't have her dad in her life, that you're already winning the game of fatherhood by simply being here to care for and raise your son. Making decisions about foods he eats or diapers you use aren't what really matters when it all boils down. Rhys is fed, happy, loved, and thriving. That's all he needs, Banks. If my father was even a quarter of the man you are, I'd feel extremely lucky. Honestly, Rhys won the lottery. You're an incredible father."

Clearly, my attempt to make sure Banks understood that being a good father had less to do with what he thought he was getting wrong and everything to do with what he was getting right left him momentarily speechless. It hadn't been my intention to make him uncomfortable, but given his situation, I had a feeling he didn't hear the words he probably needed to as often as he should, if at all.

"Thank you for saying that, Lamise," he croaked. I could have sworn he was blinking his eyes more rapidly, surely as a means of getting his emotions under control. "It really means a lot to me."

I smiled at him, feeling genuinely happy and relieved that I'd made him feel good. After everything he'd done for me, it was nice to feel like I could do something that wasn't related to me caring for Rhys. "You're welcome." Following a beat of silence, I figured it was best to switch topics. "So, what about you? Has your family lived here all your life, or are you from out of the area?"

"I've lived in Steel Ridge all my life," he revealed.

"Are you an only child?"

Banks shook his head. "No. I've got a sister, too, but she no longer lives in Steel Ridge. Like your sister, she's also two hours away from here, so between our work schedules and busy lives, I don't get to see her as often as I'd like."

“I understand that. It’s the worst feeling, and it always sucks when you think about it. Like, you know it’s only two hours away, so it shouldn’t be a big deal, but it’s also not convenient, and sometimes, especially in your case with a baby, it’s just hard to do all the things you want to do,” I declared.

As though he knew he needed to prove my words to be true, that he was always going to be the priority, Rhys started getting fussy in his seat. He’d had enough of his meal, a good chunk of what didn’t end up in his mouth winding up on him or the floor.

“Are you done eating, little man?” Banks asked him. “Or are you just not getting enough attention?”

Rhys made it clear it was a bit of both.

I let out a laugh as Banks stood and lifted Rhys out of his seat. I watched, noting the way he did it with such ease. Granted, Rhys’s weight wasn’t a challenge for Banks, but the effortlessness with which Banks lifted his son in his arms was captivating. Rhys really was a lucky kid to have such a strong and protective dad.

As Banks brought Rhys close to his chest, he said, “You know, you’ve had Lamise all to yourself today. Maybe we need to start talking about the importance of sharing.”

Before I could realize what I was saying and stop myself before I looked like a fool, I blurted, “Oh, don’t worry, Banks. There’s enough of me to go around in this house.”

His eyes landed on mine, my face burning with humiliation. Why had I just said that to him?

If he was upset by my words, Banks didn’t say. In fact, a knowing smile washed over his expression as he returned, “That’s good to know.” Looking down at his son, who was now settled in his lap, Banks declared, “Lucky for me, you’ve got an early bedtime.”

Getting his father’s attention, Rhys was back to being happy as a clam and started speaking a bunch of baby gibberish. It was good, because it gave me a moment to try to

come to grips with Banks indicating he was looking forward to having time alone with me.

Part of me wanted it and was even eager for it. But there was another part of me that was terrified. I didn't know if I knew how to do anything like this anymore—to be alone with a man I liked.

It wasn't easy to wrap my head around Banks's interest in spending time alone with me tonight, so it was a good thing Rhys had inserted himself into the mix. Banks and I focused nearly all of our attention on his little boy for the remainder of dinner and even in the time afterward, when we pushed the plates to the side and Banks set Rhys on top of the table.

The time ticked by quickly—something I noticed was always the case whenever I was around them—and Banks declared, “I should probably get him upstairs for his bath, so he can start winding down for the night.”

Nodding, I insisted, “Go. Take care of him, and I'll get everything cleaned up here.”

“Lamise, you don't have to do that.”

“Nonsense. You're giving me a place to stay tonight, and you've fed me. It's the least I can do. There is just one thing I need before you take off upstairs.”

“What's that?”

“A kiss.”

Banks's eyes widened, and his body jerked back. “What?”

I nearly burst out laughing at his horrified reaction. With a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth, I reached out for Rhys and said, “I need to give this boy a kiss before he goes to bed.”

Without waiting, I lifted Rhys in my arms, cuddled him close, and gave him several kisses on his cheeks as I squeezed him.

“Goodnight, Rhys.”

After getting my fill and giving Rhys more love than he could probably stand, I handed him back off to his dad, noting the strange look on Banks's face. Clearly, he thought I meant I wanted a kiss from him. Truth be told, I didn't know if that was the case just yet. I liked him, but being fond of someone wasn't necessarily the same as committing to a relationship—not that I was assuming Banks wanted a relationship with me.

“I'll be back as soon as I get him settled,” he said softly.

“Take your time.”

As Banks took off with Rhys, so he could give him his bath and get him ready for bed, I went about cleaning up the table and Rhys's highchair. After getting everything brought over to the sink and either handwashed or put inside the dishwasher, I went back and wiped the table and highchair down. Finally, I cleaned up the floor, particularly underneath where Rhys was seated. He'd made a mess, but it didn't bother me in the least. He ate and enjoyed himself, and that was all that mattered to me.

Once I had everything cleaned up, I made up a bottle for Rhys. I didn't want to intrude on their evening routine together, but I figured it'd be easier on Banks if he didn't need to come back downstairs to get it. So, I took it up and put it in Rhys's bedroom. As I was walking out of the room, Banks had stepped out of the bathroom carrying Rhys. Only Rhys's round face was showing, considering he was wrapped up in his blue hooded elephant towel.

“You look adorable, Rhys,” I said. Banks shot me a questioning look, so I quickly explained, “I put his bottle in on the table beside the glider, so you wouldn't have to walk back down for it.”

He smiled and gave me a nod. “Thanks, Lamise.”

“No problem. I'll head back down.”

Without waiting for a response, I turned and walked away. I waited downstairs on the couch for Banks to return, scrolling mindlessly through my phone. Surprisingly, the time passed quickly, and before I knew it, he'd walked into the room.

“Hey. Did he go down okay?” I asked.

Banks dipped his chin. “He did. Then again, I’ve been finding it takes him less and less time to fall asleep these days. I’m guessing it’s a combination of the constant stimulation he gets from you throughout the day mixed with a growth spurt.”

“That’s definitely possible. He certainly plays hard all day long, and he is a growing boy,” I noted.

“Before I sit down, would you like a glass of wine or a cup of coffee or tea?” he offered.

“Oh, um, are you getting something for yourself?” I asked.

“Probably some decaf.”

Nodding, I returned, “Okay. Then I’ll have a cup with you.”

When Banks entered the room again, he was carrying two coffee mugs. He handed one to me and sat down.

“So, I have to thank you again for offering me a safe place to stay tonight,” I said, nervous and needing to fill the air with small talk. “I can’t believe the snow.”

“It’s okay. Honestly, I would have been beside myself until I knew you made it home safely. And if you ran into any trouble on the way, I’d just feel guilty for not insisting you stay. Really, I should be thanking you,” he remarked.

I attempted to take a sip of the coffee as another distraction, but it was too hot, so I set it down on the table, sat back, and decided to give it some time to cool off.

There was a brief moment of awkward silence, and I cracked under the pressure. Being that close to him, it was easy to take in the scent and sight of him, both of which made it a little difficult to focus.

But I didn’t want to make a total fool of myself, either. So, I decided to speak, even if the conversation wasn’t exactly thrilling.

“So, should I assume you don’t like the snow then?” I asked.

“I like the snow. In fact, I think as Rhys gets older, I’ll like it even more. But I’m not thrilled with having people I care about driving around in it when the roads are bad.”

People he cared about.

Though I knew Banks was a good guy who wouldn’t want to see harm come to anyone, I had to admit it was nice to hear him say he cared about me. It was impossible to hold back the smile. “Fair point. Do you prefer the winter, or are you more of a summer weather kind of guy?”

He shrugged. “I like it all. I think that’s one of the best things about where we live. We get to experience all four seasons, even if the milder ones always seem to be shorter than I’d like. What about you? Do you really not enjoy the snow and cold?”

I laughed softly. “I wouldn’t say I’m a fan of it, but it’s certainly not my favorite, either. I just wish the timing of it would be more like I remember when I was younger.”

“What do you mean?”

Memories from my childhood flashed through my mind, some of the tension I’d been feeling dissipating. “I can remember waking up and having a white Christmas more than once. Now, it’s so rare to get any substantial snow before January. If I had my way, we’d have snow from the beginning of December through the entire holiday season, and as soon as we get past Valentine’s Day, I’d like for it to start warming up.”

“You’re not asking for much, are you?”

I shrugged. “I like the idea of being cozy for all those holidays, but after that, I think it’s nice to be outside.”

Banks studied me. “I guess it’s not a bad idea. I wonder what Rhys will like as he gets older.”

His words had me considering something. “With him being so young and everything else you were going through, this past holiday season probably wasn’t much fun.”

Shaking his head, Banks confirmed, “No, it wasn’t.”

“By the time the holidays roll around again, he’ll be over a year old. He’ll have so much fun opening presents. You’ll have to take a picture or two, so I can see how excited he is.”

“If you don’t have any other plans, maybe you can come over that morning and see it all for yourself.”

Just like that, Banks tossed it out. It was as though he didn’t think it was a big deal. Maybe it wasn’t to him. Truthfully, assuming I was still working as Rhys’s nanny then, I couldn’t say I wouldn’t want to stop in to see them. Of course, I’d have plans to visit with my mom and sister, but I could visit with Banks and Rhys first, and the fact he wanted me to spend time with them meant everything to me.

“I guess that all depends on whether or not I’m still working as Rhys’s nanny, right? I mean, what if you fire me before then?”

Both of Banks’s brows shot up. “That’s not possible. Why would I fire you?”

Unsure of what to say, I reached for the coffee mug and brought it to my lips to take a sip and buy myself some time to come up with a response. By the time I set the mug back down on the table, I hadn’t come up with anything particularly good.

“I don’t know. I guess I was joking.”

“You better be,” he advised. “My kid likes you too much. I don’t know what we’d do without you here.”

We.

He mentioned his kid liking me, but indicated they’d both want me around. My heart couldn’t handle all of these little things he said that made me feel so good.

Though I wasn’t sure it’d have the same effect on him, I wanted to try to give him back a bit of what he gave me. “It’s the same for me with the both of you.”

“Good.”

From that point forward, Banks and I shifted our conversation. He talked with me about his family, and I’d

shared more with him about my mom, sister, brother-in-law, and niece. I even told him about Tabitha, too.

I enjoyed getting to know him better, and I loved how engaged and interested he seemed to be whenever I was speaking about the people who were important to me.

It was nice, easily the best conversation I'd had in months. But eventually, it had to end.

"It's getting late, and Rhys will be up before you know it," Banks finally said.

"Yeah, I'm a bit wiped out from today, but I enjoyed talking with you tonight. It was so nice, I didn't even finish my coffee," I told him as I leaned forward to lift it off the coffee table before standing up.

As I moved to round the table, my foot hit the edge of it, and I clutched the mug in my hands. The remainder of the coffee spilled down the front of my shirt. This had to be a joke.

"Are you okay? Did you hurt yourself?" Banks was immediately attempting to assess me, concern littering his features.

"You mean, other than being completely humiliated right now?" I asked before shaking my head with a laugh. "Nope. I'm physically fine."

Banks relaxed, smiled, and jerked his head in the opposite direction. "Come on. I'll get you a clean shirt to wear to bed."

I licked my lips and allowed my chin to fall slightly in acknowledgment, but I was nervous. Was he going to give me one of Violet's shirts? I didn't think I could handle that.

We made it upstairs, and at the entrance to the guest bedroom, Banks declared, "I'll be right back."

I stood there, unmoving, watching as he walked toward his bedroom and waiting for him to return. When he came back, he held out a shirt and said, "This is one of mine, but it should do the trick."

As relieved as I was that he hadn't handed me one of Violet's shirts, there was another part of me wondering if I could put another man's T-shirt on. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Is there anything else I can get for you?"

"I don't think so."

His eyes roamed over my face for a long time. This felt like one of the more intimate moments I'd had with him. I mean, we were standing this close together just outside of the guest bedroom after he'd given me one of his shirts to wear to bed. What would happen next? Would he just turn around and walk away? Would he give me a hug before heading to his room? Or, given the way he was searching my face, was it possible he'd do something completely crazy and kiss me? And if he did that, would I kiss him back?

Following a brief stretch of silence, one filled with far too many nerve-wracking thoughts, he said softly, "Goodnight, Lamise."

I let out a small sigh of relief. Offering a friendly and appreciative smile in return, I whispered my response. "Goodnight, Banks."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, Banks turned and walked back to his room. The moment he disappeared behind the door, I entered the guest bedroom, took a look around, and pulled off my wet, coffee-stained shirt. Then I slipped Banks's shirt over my head, climbed into bed, and shut out the light.

I was exhausted from all that had happened from the minute I woke up, so it was no surprise I fell asleep quickly. Though, it could have also been because I had the scent of Banks wrapped around me, pulling me under.

SIXTEEN



Banks

I wasn't prepared for it.

I'd woken up earlier than usual on Saturday morning, and within minutes, I found myself descending the stairs.

There was something moving through my body, refusing to be ignored. It felt like excitement and anticipation. Though there wasn't one specific event I was particularly enthusiastic about, I was well aware the feelings were the result of her being here.

Lamise.

Nothing about her had been anything like I'd expected, and with every moment I spent with her, I was growing more and more fond of her.

Fond wasn't even the correct word for it. I knew it. It was just that I couldn't seem to bring myself to say the right word—*attracted*.

I was attracted to Lamise in a way that went much deeper than surface-level, physical attraction. I liked that she could understand where my head and heart were at in a situation like this. I liked her energy and attitude. I enjoyed her conversation. And I loved the way she loved my son.

I wanted to tell her the truth. I thought she deserved to know how I felt when I was around her.

Unfortunately, doing anything about it felt impossible, because there was still guilt lingering there for me, something

I believed might always be there.

So, feeling eager to see her again, I woke earlier than usual. Wanting to do something to make her feel welcome and appreciated, even more than dinner tonight was supposed to, I decided to make her breakfast.

I put on some coffee before I went about pulling out the ingredients for breakfast—bacon, eggs, and toast.

Simple and classic.

Everything had been going according to plan, and I was looking forward to what the morning with Lamise would bring. I didn't think anything could change my mood or bring me down.

That's when it happened.

And what struck me the most about it was that no matter how good I thought my instincts were or how prepared I was for just about any intense situation at work, there was no amount of training to prepare me for it.

I'd just served the last of our breakfast onto the plates when Lamise entered the kitchen. Two things halted me in my movements.

First, it was seeing Lamise standing there, wearing my T-shirt I'd given her last night. At the time, I hadn't given it much thought beyond recognizing she'd spilled coffee on hers and needed something dry and clean to wear to bed. Seeing her now, I had to admit I hadn't expected it to affect me the way it was.

Because I liked it.

I liked the way it felt to see her standing there wearing my tee. Granted, she still had on a pair of leggings, too, but that didn't mean I wasn't interested in seeing her wearing nothing but my shirt.

If all I had to deal with that morning was what she was wearing, I might have been able to react, to do something about how it was making me feel to see her like that.

But there was something else happening, something that kept me frozen to the spot and feeling a mix of helpless and horrified. Because while seeing Lamise in my T-shirt had caused an unexpected feeling inside me, seeing her wearing the shirt hadn't been a surprise. I knew that was going to happen, even if it had caught me off guard.

What I hadn't been expecting, and what I didn't know how to respond to, were the tears that had welled in her eyes within seconds of her entering the kitchen.

Had something happened to her? Was she hurt? Did she hate eggs?

We'd been standing there like that, staring at one another for far too long. And considering she was in no state to do something about it, I knew it had to be me. Wanting to tread cautiously, I carefully placed the pan back down on the stove and moved toward her.

When I was standing in front of her, I allowed my eyes to roam over her face. Seeing the tears in her eyes made something squeeze in my chest. I hated how much it upset me to see her so sad.

Or maybe it wasn't that I hated how much it upset me so much as it was that I just hated to see her sad at all. Either way, it wasn't good.

"What happened?" I asked, unable to keep the concern out of my voice.

Lamise remained silent for a long time before she answered, "You made breakfast."

I turned slightly to glance at the plates of food and wondered if I'd been right. Focusing my attention on her again, I queried, "Do you not like eggs?"

"I like eggs," she rasped.

My brows shot up, silently questioning her.

Lamise did not answer that question. Instead, her emotions got the best of her, tears now spilling down her cheeks. Each one I saw felt like a punch to the gut.

Unable to resist the urge to comfort her, I reached one hand out and curled it around her elbow. After giving her a gentle squeeze, I begged, “Lamise, please talk to me. What’s going on?”

It took her a moment to pull herself together. “Graham used to make me breakfast every morning.”

Suddenly, it all started to make sense. I understood precisely what this was all about. Knowing she wasn’t finished speaking, I waited for her to share.

Sure enough, a few seconds later, she continued, “That was his thing. No matter what was going on, whether it was a workday, a holiday, or the weekend, Graham always made breakfast. Ever since he died, I haven’t had that.”

Before I could stop myself, I said, “You have it now, if you want it. Would you like to join me for breakfast this morning?”

She pressed her lips together and slowly nodded. “Yeah.”

Removing my hand from her elbow, I reached up and swiped at the tears on her cheeks. As I swiped at the last one, my hand instinctively swept back into her hair and settled at the base of her skull. Keeping my hold firm, yet gentle, I said, “I’m sorry if I upset you this morning. That wasn’t my intention at all.”

“I know,” she assured me. “For the record, I’m not upset with you. I’m just...”

“I know,” I returned, understanding her loss for words. Sometimes, I knew what I was feeling, but I didn’t know how to communicate it. Seeing Lamise’s reaction, understanding where it was coming from, I recognized what she couldn’t put into words. “You realize that you just got back something you thought you’d never experience again.”

Surprise washed over her. “That’s exactly it. How did you know what I was thinking?”

I jerked my head in the opposite direction and urged, “How about we sit down and eat before it gets cold? I’ll explain it then.”

Lamise nodded her agreement.

For the first few minutes, neither of us said anything as we dove into our breakfast. I wanted to give Lamise some time to immerse herself in the experience again before I interrupted whatever thoughts she might have been having about it.

Once I'd given her what I believed was sufficient time to do that, I explained, "The day I came home late, the same day you had given me the Valentine's Day project you worked on with Rhys, you told me you'd made dinner. There had been several occasions, particularly in the beginning, when my mom had meals made for me. I felt like I was barely surviving just getting through the day or looking after Rhys. I didn't take care of myself properly, so my mom stepped up. But as time went on, that changed, and one of the things I did was start making my own food. When I came home on Thursday night and didn't need to do it, because you already had, I got back something that Violet always used to do for me."

Understanding washed over Lamise's expression. "I hadn't realized I'd done that. I hope it didn't upset you."

I shook my head. "No, you didn't. Or, at least, not the way you might think. Because I guess there's a part of me that's upset about knowing I'll never experience that with Violet again. It sucks. I don't expect there will ever be a time when it doesn't hurt to recognize that's the way it's always going to be. But you should know that I'm glad it was you who gave it back to me in your own special way. It was nice."

A smile formed on her face. "Yeah. Yeah, I think that's the way I feel, too. I'll never have another breakfast with Graham that he woke up early to make special for us. It's the worst feeling to know that's gone forever. But I can't tell you how happy it makes me to know I haven't lost the experience for good. Thank you for giving it to me, Banks."

Understanding.

God, I loved that we had this mutual appreciation for where our minds and our hearts were. While I didn't think I could have gotten to this point with anyone else besides her, I didn't doubt if it had happened with someone else, that woman

might not have the same level of compassion and understanding.

Things were changing between us. I'd been feeling it for a while now. It was nice to know that regardless of where things went between us, I'd never have to hide what Violet meant to me.

"You're welcome. And I guess I should say thanks to you, too. The dinner you cooked was even better than this breakfast, and I was grateful to be able to come home from work and have a meal waiting," I shared.

"I can do that for you throughout the week," she piped up.

"What?"

She shrugged as she finished chewing a bite of her eggs and explained, "When I'm here with Rhys and he goes down for his afternoon nap, I can get dinner prepped for you."

God, I'd love nothing more.

"Lamise, I'm not going to ask you to do that. Hiring you was about having someone here to look after Rhys. You already do the laundry and clean up things around the house, which is more than I expected. I'm not going to add making dinner to the list," I noted.

In a move I don't think she realized had the effect it did on me, Lamise reached her hand out and placed it on top of my forearm. "It's really not a problem for me, Banks. Sometimes, I actually get bored when Rhys is napping, so it'll give me something to do."

Since I'd met her, Lamise and I hadn't really had much physical contact. The little that we'd had was generally about me attempting to comfort her. Even in the instances where it wasn't about that, the contact we had was brief and always initiated by me.

This was the first time I could recall her touching me first. What was even more surprising was that it didn't do what I had expected it would if a woman other than Violet ever touched me like this.

I thought I'd pull away and reject the gesture. Maybe that would have been the case if anyone else had tried.

But that wasn't how it was with Lamise. Not only did I like feeling her soft touch, but I found myself craving more of it.

"If you really want to do it, I'm not going to stop you. But I want you to know that I don't expect you to be slaving over a hot stove for me," I remarked.

"I'm here, and I'm working, Banks. I don't think it's fair for me to just be sitting around doing nothing, and I enjoy cooking, so it'll be good for everyone. As long as you like my cooking, of course."

I laughed. "I'll like it. I loved what you made the other day."

She removed her hand from my arm, something I mourned the loss of, and lifted a piece of bacon to her mouth. Just before she popped it into her mouth, she noted, "Well, you should know, I think this breakfast was absolutely delicious."

I laughed again, trying not to focus my attention on her mouth as she chewed. "Well, I've gotten a lot of practice on scrambled eggs with Rhys. He loves them."

"Yeah, but Rhys seems to love everything you feed him," she teased. "He's just a growing boy with a huge appetite."

For the third time in a matter of minutes, I found myself laughing. It felt so good, not just having the lighthearted conversation after how this morning had started, but also to know that I could feel genuine happiness again. "Fair point."

"I'm just joking with you. I'm sure Rhys would turn down anything that wasn't good. He's a smart kid."

"Well, I have yet to see that, but I'm sure it's still a possibility," I told her. "So, how was everything last night? Did you sleep okay?"

Lamise picked up a piece of toast and replied, "It was wonderful. Thank you again for allowing me to stay here last

night. I'm not convinced I would have made it home safely with the way it looked outside yesterday."

"I'm glad you didn't fight me on it," I noted, recalling the thought I had when I was driving myself home last night. All I could do was think about how I wished I'd left work earlier in the day, so she could have made it home before the roads got so bad. I didn't want Lamise taking any chances and attempting to drive in the unfavorable weather conditions.

"I heard the plows going through the neighborhood earlier this morning, and when I woke up, I looked outside. It seems like the roads are clear now, so I'll be able to get home this morning and give you time alone with Rhys before tonight," she noted.

As much as I wanted her to stay, I also knew she needed to go home. We had dinner planned for tonight, and I still needed to run an errand before she got back here.

"After we finish breakfast, I'll go get your car shoveled out," I told her.

"Oh, Banks, that's not necessary."

My brows shot up. "Do you think I'm just going to hand you a shovel and sit in here to watch you while you do it yourself?"

"You have Rhys," she reasoned.

I grinned. "Yep. And I bet he'll be thrilled to see you here first thing this morning. I'm sorry, Lamise, but this is non-negotiable. As it is, it already messes with my head that I won't be picking you up for dinner here tonight."

Something washed over her expression. She swallowed hard, sat back, and acquiesced, "Okay. Thank you for being willing to shovel my car out for me."

I was quickly learning that wasn't the only thing I was willing to do for this woman; more thoughts and emotions I was battling with.

Lamise and I took the next few minutes to finish our food and coffee. No sooner had we taken those final sips when

Rhys started to stir.

“Like clockwork,” I announced proudly.

“Hey, you had me all to yourself this morning. At least he’s trying to work on sharing,” Lamise noted.

Maybe she was merely trying to tease me after what I’d said to Rhys last night during dinner, but I wasn’t sure if she realized the effect she was having on me. The more I was around her, the more I was learning just how much I liked it, how much I wished I really had been able to have her all to myself this morning.

Ignoring the innuendo in her words and how hard it was becoming to resist Lamise, I suggested, “Why don’t we head up, so I can say good morning to him before I head out to shovel some snow?”

Practically jumping out of her seat, she bubbled, “I can’t wait to squeeze him.”

Wanting her to have what she wanted, I swept my palm out in front of me and urged, “Lead the way.”

At that, we made our way to Rhys’s room. By the time we got there, he was wide awake and very happy to see the both of us. And I had to admit, there was a small part of me that wondered if this was something I’d be able to give him permanently at some point down the road.

SEVENTEEN



Lamise

The smile on my face might not have indicated what was happening on the inside. I was a mix of emotions, both nervous and excited.

I had just arrived back at Banks's house for our planned dinner tonight.

There were parts of me that had been wrestling with this whole thing. Was I betraying Graham?

Even if there was a small voice in the back of my head that answered yes to that question, I still wasn't able to say no to having a nice dinner with Banks and Rhys. They'd brought so much into my life, and the idea of turning down the opportunity to spend more time with them was simply ludicrous. I was sick of being alone all the time, and they filled that void in ways I didn't know if they could begin to understand, in ways not even my mom, sister, or best friend could.

As I approached the front door, the nerves took over me. I hadn't wanted to give myself any false hope, but some of what I'd experienced with Banks this morning had made it impossible to avoid.

If I gave myself the time to think about it, I swore I could still feel the touch of his fingers on my cheeks and in my hair when he'd wiped away my tears before breakfast. It had been so sweet and tender. It also felt wrong to want more of it.

But how could I not?

I hadn't had any intimacy since before Graham died. And though I hadn't really had much of a desire in the months that had followed his death, I couldn't say things weren't just a bit different now. Especially not when I was emotional about something Banks had done that reminded me of Graham, and Banks was nothing but understanding and gentle in how he handled it with me.

Having expected my arrival, Banks didn't make me wait long before he answered the front door to allow me to come inside.

"You made it," he greeted me when our eyes locked.

Smiling brightly as I stepped inside, I declared, "I did."

Since Banks was holding Rhys in his arms, I slipped off my jacket, opened the coat closet, and hung it up. When I spun around to face the both of them again, Banks had quickly lifted his gaze to meet mine. It was clear his eyes had been on my ass.

Recognizing that, I had to admit, it made me feel sexy for the first time in a very long time. Of course, I could have been mistaken. What I was seeing could have just been Banks noticing the effort I'd put into my outfit tonight. I hadn't wanted to go over the top and put on a dress, since we were having dinner at his place, but I still wanted to look nice. So, I ditched the leggings for a nice pair of jeans and a cute top. It was entirely possible Banks was just shocked to see me wearing something different than usual.

Wanting to avoid an uncomfortable situation, I ignored the possibility that Banks was checking me out and held my hand out to him. "This is your shirt. I washed it after I got home. Thank you for letting me borrow it last night."

Something that looked a little like disappointment washed over his expression. "You're welcome, but you didn't have to go to the trouble of washing and returning it today."

"It wasn't a big deal. Plus, if I didn't take care of it right away, I might have forgotten that I had it and never given it back to you," I lied.

Yes. I lied to Banks.

Because I couldn't dream of telling him that if I hadn't taken care of bringing his shirt back to him right away, there wasn't a chance I'd forget that I had it, and I'd be far too tempted to wear only his shirt to bed every night.

When he said nothing in response, simply taking the shirt from me, I shifted my attention to the side and took in the sight of my favorite little boy. "Hi, Rhys. Did you miss me?"

"We did," Banks confirmed without hesitation.

I couldn't miss that one little word—we. Had Banks actually missed me, too? He must have noticed the questions lingering in my eyes, because he quickly redirected us. "Come on. Dinner is ready, and you know how Rhys gets when he's hungry."

I smiled and confirmed, "I do."

Banks urged me to walk toward the dining area ahead of him, and once we were there, I spun around and asked, "What can I do?"

He turned Rhys in his arms and said, "I've got the food covered, but if you want, you can get him settled in his highchair."

"I would love nothing more," I replied, reaching my hands out for Rhys, who happily left his father's arms for the comfort of mine.

As Banks walked off toward the kitchen to handle the food, I spent some time cuddling and loving on Rhys. Though I knew he was probably hungry and ready to eat, he was being such a delight, happy as ever. Eventually, though, I did as Banks asked and put Rhys in his seat.

No sooner had I done that, Banks returned with two plates of food. After setting them down on the table, he said, "I just need to get Rhys's tray. I'll be right back. Grab a seat."

By the time I was seated, Banks was entering the room again, carrying not only Rhys's tray but also a vase with flowers. Somehow, he got Rhys's tray secured with one hand

and rounded the table to the opposite side of where I was seated. “These are for you,” he declared as he set the flowers down in the center of the table, slightly off to the side, so they wouldn’t block our view of one another.

“They’re gorgeous,” I said, marveling at them. The last time I’d been given flowers was shortly after Graham’s death. Sympathy flowers. I could recall thinking it was the last time I’d ever get a bouquet. Banks had just changed that for me. “You really didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to. It was Valentine’s Day, and you were stuck here. You deserve some flowers, Lamise,” he returned.

My belly dipped, and I was tempted to tell him that there wasn’t any other place I would have rather been on Valentine’s Day, but I held myself back. “It’s very sweet of you.”

“I’m glad you’re okay with it, because I wasn’t the only one who wanted to do something nice for you,” he revealed.

My brows pulled together. “What?”

He jerked his head slightly to the side, where Rhys was sitting. That’s when I saw it. Sitting along the top edge of Rhys’s tray, too far away for him to reach, was a small, giftwrapped box.

“What is that?” I questioned him, feeling like a swarm of butterflies had taken flight in my belly.

“It was all Rhys’s idea. We discussed it yesterday morning, and he told me what he wanted to do.”

I cocked a brow, a small smile playing at my lips. “You’re blaming this on him?”

“It’s the truth. He picked it out.” I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. “Open it,” Banks urged me.

Taking the box from the tray, I pinned my eyes on Rhys. “This is a bit much, little guy. Don’t you think?”

Rhys was busy shoving food into his mouth using his whole hand. I took that to mean he wasn’t interested in discussing anything I had on my mind.

I unwrapped the box, pulled off the lid, and pushed the tissue paper aside. What I saw inside melted my heart. My free hand flew to the center of my chest, and my head tipped to the side as I struggled not to break down in tears.

Glancing across the table at Banks, it was clear he was proud of himself.

“This is... this is beautiful,” I told him.

“You like it?” he asked.

I looked back down at the contents of the box. Inside, was a keychain that held three round charms on it, all of varying sizes. The first and smallest was simply a picture of a tree. The second charm, which was the largest, said, “Thank you for helping me grow.” And the third charm said, “Love, Rhys.”

My heart.

My heart couldn't handle how sweet this was.

If it hadn't been for the table separating us, I was convinced I wouldn't have been able to stop myself from launching my body into Banks's arms.

Returning my attention to Banks, I felt the tears well in my eyes. “I love it.”

“Rhys insisted you'd like it, and truthfully, we both believed you deserved more, but we didn't want to overwhelm you, either.”

I set the box down on the table and reached out for Rhys's arm. “I love this little guy so much, Banks. There's no greater gift in the world than being able to spend every day with him.”

A comfortable silence fell over the room, the only sound being Rhys's little fingers scraping against the tray to pick up another bite of food. It was at that point when Banks and I dove into our meals. He'd made steak, baked potatoes, and asparagus. Not only was it delicious, but it felt romantic, too.

After we'd both taken a few bites and I'd complimented Banks on how wonderful the food tasted, I asked, “So, how long do you think it'll be before Rhys is able to defend himself?”

Banks laughed. “Defend himself from what?”

“You placing all the blame for something like this gift on him,” I replied.

Banks shook his head, his lips twitching and indicating he was amused by the conversation. “I don’t know, but I’m going to use it for as long as I can.”

I wanted to tell him he didn’t need to with me, but once again, I was too much of a chicken to put it out there. So, I noted, “He’s more than halfway through his first year of life. Do you have any plans for his first birthday party?”

“It’s like five months away,” Banks countered.

“And? Now’s the time to start thinking about it.”

A look of worry washed over him. “You really think so?”

I licked my lips, took a sip of my drink, and said, “Well, I mean, I don’t know. I’m guessing I’d start the planning this early, but it probably depends on what you’re looking to do for him.”

Banks was silent for a beat while he considered my words. “I honestly have no idea what to do. I really don’t know the first thing about planning it.”

Before I had the chance to stop myself, I offered, “I’m happy to help you, if you want. I don’t want to overstep, but if you’re feeling a bit overwhelmed by it, nothing would make me happier than to play a role in the planning.”

“Really? You wouldn’t mind?”

I shook my head. “Of course not. We just have to figure out what Rhys would like.”

For a large portion of our time during dinner, Banks and I discussed all of the possibilities and options for a first birthday party for Rhys. It was wonderful, because we were both engaged in the conversation, and it helped to ease a lot of the nerves I felt coming into this.

Following dinner, Banks shared, “I have dessert for us, but I figured it might be better to wait on that until after Rhys goes

down for the night.”

Nodding my agreement, I returned, “Yeah, I could use some time to make some room for dessert anyway, so that sounds perfect.”

Rhys would be going up for his bath within the next half hour, so it wasn't like I'd have to wait long. And considering how much I enjoyed spending time with him, particularly after he ate and was happy, I knew the time would pass quickly.

Banks and I did just that, too. We spent our time with Rhys, allowing his silliness to ease any lingering tension either of us felt about what was ahead for the night.

I couldn't explain it, but I had the feeling Banks was experiencing just a bit of worry about how the remainder of our night would go. It was likely we were both concerned about the other's expectations, and that helped to ease my mind a bit, too.

While I believed we were both dealing with some emotions about tonight, I wondered if we were ultimately feeling similarly.

If flowers had been something I hadn't expected I'd ever get again, finding someone I enjoyed spending my time with was even more of a foreign concept. I didn't think I'd ever want to do things with another man that I'd believed less than a year ago I would have only done with Graham for the rest of my life.

Now, I found myself anticipating what it might be like to have the chance for intimacy again. What would it be like to kiss Banks? Would he want to kiss me? Would we enjoy it?

“I'm going to take him up and give him a quick bath before putting him down for the night,” Banks began. “I don't want you cleaning up our dishes from dinner while I'm gone.”

“I really don't mind helping,” I told him.

“I know you don't, but I invited you here, and I'd like you to not have to work at all.”

Fair enough.

“Can I at least make Rhys’s bottle when you get him out of the tub?” I asked.

Laughing and shaking his head, Banks acquiesced, “Fine. But not another thing.”

“Okay.”

Banks took off with Rhys, and I tried to find ways to distract myself from all the questions and *what ifs* about tonight. One of the ways I did that was by pulling my keys out of my purse and attaching the keychain from Rhys to them. It was such a sweet gift, and as unnecessary as it was, I absolutely adored it.

Before I knew it, I’d taken Rhys’s bottle upstairs, said goodnight to him, and returned to the couch in the living room. Banks joined me shortly afterward, and when he did, he brought out some chocolate-covered strawberries.

“Oh, these are my favorite,” I told him.

“Yeah?”

I nodded.

Sitting down beside me, Banks held the plate out to me. “Take your pick.”

I plucked a strawberry off the plate, waited for Banks to do the same, and felt my heart start beating a little faster when he said, “Happy Valentine’s Day, Lamise.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Banks.”

After eating a couple of strawberries and loving every bite, I finally declared, “I can’t eat anymore. I love them, but if you don’t take them away from me, I’ll devour all of them.”

Banks was clearly amused by me, his face lighting up and his eyes shining. God, he looked handsome. “Well, they’re all going to go home with you, so you can enjoy them later or tomorrow.”

“I can promise they won’t go to waste.”

As we both sat back and got a bit more comfortable on the couch, Banks said, “So, I just want to apologize to you.”

“For what?”

He hesitated briefly. “This. I mean, first of all, I hate that I didn’t even realize it was Valentine’s Day two days ago, but it’s more than that. I understand that this wasn’t exactly a traditional Valentine’s Day date, considering there was a baby in tow.”

Horried to think he believed I was upset about any of what had happened tonight, I instinctively reached my hand out to his arm and squeezed. “I loved this. I loved everything about this tonight. Rhys is honestly one of my favorite humans, and I’m more than thrilled by all that you both did for me tonight. It’s been lovely.”

His eyes roamed over my face. “I love the way you care about my son, Lamise.”

There was something in his voice that was different than any other time he’d spoken to me. I didn’t think it was bad at all, especially considering his words, but it certainly caught me off guard.

“I adore him. It’d be difficult not to fall in love with him,” I said softly.

“You should also know that I really like the way you make me feel.”

“What?”

Something changed in his expression, and I sensed he was nervous about what he’d already said to me. Adding anything to it was causing him a bit of stress. Despite those nerves, his voice was a deep rasp when he revealed, “I like you, Lamise. And I like how I feel when you’re around.”

I could finally let out a sigh of relief. My feelings for Banks had been growing stronger, and I hadn’t had a clue how he’d felt. It was nice to finally hear the feeling was mutual, and warmth moved through me at his admission.

I couldn’t miss the look in his eyes, the one that was silently pleading with me, hoping I felt even just a smidgen of what he did. “I love the way I feel when I’m around you, Banks. It’s been so long since I’ve felt this good.”

Banks covered my hand that was still resting on his arm with his opposite hand. His eyes dropped to where he was touching me, and his fingertips began stroking gently over the back of my hand.

Shivers ran down my spine at the intimate touch, as I eagerly anticipated his next move. His fingers lingered a long time on my hand before they began traveling up my arm.

My heart was pounding wildly in my chest, my lungs barely functioning.

“You have to keep breathing, Lamise,” he whispered, just as his eyes locked on mine again. He hadn’t moved his body much closer, but with the way he was looking at me, it felt like we were suddenly closer than before.

The air rushed out, but my belly began trembling. The higher his fingers climbed, the more intense every reaction I was having to his touch became. And when they hit the bare skin on my collarbone, my eyes locked on his.

“Banks.” My voice was barely a whisper as I leaned forward into his touch.

Our faces were mere inches apart when he said, “I think I’d like to kiss you.”

“I think I’d like you to kiss me.”

There was no hesitation.

In an instant, Banks had his lips on mine while his hand drove back into my hair, and his other arm slid around my waist.

God, it felt good.

So good.

The scent of Banks surrounded me, holding me captive, the same as his arm around my waist was. Only, this wasn’t a situation from which I felt the need to escape.

It was wonderful.

His mouth on mine, our bodies close.

Nothing could compare.

Or, so I thought.

When Banks's tongue slid along the seam of my lips, I parted them. That's when I realized that having his tongue exploring my mouth was even better. He tasted magnificent, and he kissed like he was being paid to do it.

Perfection.

Pure perfection.

All of the emotions I felt—the safety, comfort, and attraction—pulled me in. I was lost to them, loving all of it.

Until it happened.

The moment I moaned, a sign I was eager for more, torment and guilt speared through me. I loved what I was experiencing with Banks. Loved it.

But was it real?

Did I really stand a chance at being happy again?

As wonderful as his kiss was, it was too much. I pulled back, chest heaving, and stared at Banks for a long time.

I wanted more.

I didn't want to stop.

But I had to, because I didn't know how this was going to work.

Finally, I declared, "I think we need to talk."

Nodding, Banks didn't disagree with me.

EIGHTEEN



Banks

There wasn't any emotion I didn't feel at this moment.

Highs and lows—excited, frustrated, captivated, guilty, caught up, happy, and sad, to name a few.

Of all that I felt, I was mostly consumed by gratitude.

Because I liked what had been happening between Lamise and me a little too much, and I didn't believe I would have had the power to stop us.

I was glad Lamise did.

The truth was, she hadn't been wrong. We needed to talk.

After everything we had both been through, it was almost crucial for us to talk before things went somewhere we'd either regret or never be able to come back from. More than anything else, we needed to clear the air, talk about where we were, and share where we wanted to be.

"I'm so sorry, Banks," Lamise apologized. "I'm sorry for stopping us."

I shook my head and insisted, "Don't be. I'm glad you stopped us, because I think it's a wise idea for us to talk."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She gave me a nod in return, indicating she believed what I was saying to her.

Needing to offer her some additional reassurance, I was compelled to reach a hand out to her arm and give her a squeeze. “Are you okay?” I asked, thinking it would be a smart idea to confirm that she wasn’t feeling uncomfortable or genuinely upset about what had just happened between us, what I’d just initiated between us.

God, it had been wonderful.

I’d gone for so long without any intimacy, and while there was a bit to unpack there about how I’d managed to kiss Lamise with some of the thoughts that had been plaguing my mind for weeks, I felt not only relieved to experience it again but also extraordinarily fortunate to have it with a woman like Lamise. I’d grown fond of her, and my feelings for her had gone well past appreciation for the way she looked after my son.

“I don’t want you to think I regret what just happened between us, because I am genuinely happy about having that with you,” she started. “The thing is, I’d be lying if I said I don’t feel other things at the same time.”

I could only assume she had so many of the same feelings I did. It was a relief to know I wasn’t alone in any of it. “Do you want to talk about those other things?”

She swallowed hard. “Guilt. God, Banks, there’s so much guilt I feel about moving on. It’s like, one minute I had my whole life figured out—engaged to a man I loved—and I was happy. In the next instant, as quickly as I could snap my fingers, it all changed, and Graham was gone. I was devastated, and I had to resolve myself to the new life I believed I was meant to have. But now? Now, after what we just shared, and truthfully, everything else I’ve been getting since I started working here as Rhys’s nanny, I’ve got something I didn’t think I’d ever have again. If I’m completely honest, I wasn’t sure I even wanted it again.”

As heavy as the conversation was between us, I only felt relief as I listened to Lamise speak. She was validating so many of the same concerns and worries I had about all of this.

“I understand exactly what you’re feeling, Lamise,” I assured her. “The guilt has been there for a long time. I mean, I feel it even in other areas of my life. When Rhys does something that makes me laugh or if he hits another milestone, I think about how I get to experience it, and Violet doesn’t. That’s hard enough. But this is something else, and I don’t think it’s easy at all to navigate.”

In an instant, I watched as some of the tension eased out of Lamise’s shoulders. “It’s such a relief to hear you say that. I love that you can understand exactly what I’m feeling and why.”

Reaching out, I curled my fingers around her hand and gave it a squeeze. “Whatever you decide you want to do here, I’m okay with it. If this is too much right now, I’ll be disappointed, but I promise I won’t push you for more than you can handle. And I will not allow things to get awkward, because I still believe you are the best person to be here with Rhys.”

Though I meant every word I said, I could admit none of them were easy to say.

Because I didn’t want this to end. I wanted the chance to explore it. Yes, I felt the guilt and terror and sadness, but I also felt a renewed sense of hope and security and happiness. And it was much easier to lean into the positive feelings.

“What we had tonight—the dinner, conversation, and the kissing—was something I thought my future held,” she rasped. “Being here tonight with you and Rhys is a lot like how I’d imagined my life would be. That was the plan Graham and I had. I’d left my job not long before he died, because we’d decided I was going to be a homemaker. I was going to stay home and take care of the family we wanted to raise while Graham went to work and provided for us.”

I couldn’t stop a small laugh from escaping. Offering a sympathetic look, I revealed, “That is precisely the way it was going to be for us, too. Violet was going to be home with Rhys and any other kids we had while I went to work every day.”

“And now it’s all different,” Lamise murmured.

“And now it’s all different,” I repeated.

For a long time, the two of us sat there in silence, letting the weight of our conversation and the reality of our situations to settle heavy on our shoulders. As good as it was to get it out in the open, as much relief as it offered, the conversation and our reality still held an edge of despair.

Lamise was the one to break the silence. “I don’t want to spend the rest of my life alone.”

“Neither do I,” I revealed.

“I thought I did, then I met you and Rhys. I don’t want to be alone any longer, Banks.”

Seeing her emotions starting to get the best of her, I opened my arms and held them out to her. “Come here.”

Without hesitation, she curled her body into mine, and I wrapped my arms firmly around her. “It’s not wrong, is it? It’s okay to want this, right?”

“I think so,” I answered honestly.

Her cheek still pressed firmly against my chest, Lamise asked, “Do you worry?”

“About what, specifically?”

Tipping her head back, so she could look up at me, Lamise clarified, “That we’re just latching on because we’re lonely and can understand what each other’s been through. Do you worry that it’s not the real deal?”

My eyes roamed over her beautiful face. I believed I already knew the answer to that question, but I wanted to take a moment to consider it. Eventually, I said, “I believe we are latching on to one another because we’re lonely and have an appreciation and understanding for what each other has been through. But I don’t worry that it’s not the real deal because of that. If anything, I think it makes what we’re feeling for each other even more honest and sincere.”

Lamise dropped her chin down, burrowing herself closer to me and draping her arm across my abdomen. The silence stretched between us once again, and I was happy to sit with

her in it. It was nice, comfortable. And it felt good to hold her in my arms, regardless of where this went from here.

“Graham would want me to be happy,” she finally shared.

My arms tightened around her, hope surging through me that she was drawing the conclusion I’d been hoping she would. At the same time, her words gave me reason for pause.

“I’m not sure I can say the same,” I confessed.

Her body tensed. “What?”

“I don’t know. I think I want to believe Violet would want me to be happy, too, but I had been happy with her. Graham died from a snake bite. He had no say in the matter. It was different with Violet. Sometimes, I still struggle, wondering how she could have left Rhys and me. At the same time, I know it’s not as simple as that. What she was going through... it kills me to think she suffered alone. Deep down, the woman she was, I want to believe she’d want the best for me. She’d want me happy. There are just times when I ask myself if she knew that I was deliriously happy with her.”

The tension ebbed out of Lamise’s body, and for a long time, she didn’t respond. I started to think I’d shared too much and was about to apologize when Lamise, without an ounce of malice, said, “I’m sure she knew how happy you were with her.”

I’d never know for sure, but I prayed Lamise was right.

Following another beat of silence, Lamise asked, “So, where do we go from here?”

“I think we both want more than what we’ve had these last few weeks, and I think we have valid concerns about being able to do it freely, without the guilt hanging over our heads. That said, I believe this could be something incredibly special between us, and I would love to see us give it a real shot. If you want to go slow, we can absolutely do that. I’m not going anywhere.”

Lamise pressed her palm to the center of my chest, so she could push back and look at my face. “I think I have something I need to do tomorrow, to give myself a bit of peace

about this. But I agree with you, Banks. I think what we've got here is incredibly special, and I'm just not willing to let you or Rhys go. I know I want the both of you in my life."

I brushed a lock of her hair back from her face and tucked it behind her ear. "Take all the time you need. We'll get there when the time is right."

She smiled at me. I smiled back.

"I think I'd be alright with it, if you'd like to kiss me again, though."

The smile on my face grew. "I'd be alright with that, too."

A moment later, my mouth was on hers. Lamise and I spent a long time together, kissing and cuddling. We didn't take things past that point, and I was completely okay with it.

And eventually, she went home.

After she left, I cleaned up our dishes from dinner, climbed the stairs, and got into my bed. No sooner had I done that, my phone chimed with a text from Lamise, letting me know she made it home and thanking me for a wonderful night.

I turned to my side, looked at the picture on my nightstand, and felt a wave of sadness move through me. "In a million years, I never would have looked at another woman if you were here with me. But you're not, and I can't change that no matter how many times I've wished I could." I slipped my wedding band off my finger. Setting it down on the nightstand in front of the frame, I continued, "I'll always love you, Violet. Always. I like her, and I think I could love her, too. She likes me, and I hope you can understand why I need to explore this. You'll always be in my heart."

Violet's picture didn't respond.

And in the morning, I knew I had to put the ring away somewhere safe and move the picture to another place in the house.



Lamise

“I took off your ring.”

The words I never thought I’d say spilled out of me as I stood, staring at Graham’s headstone.

I’d made up my mind last night—this was where I needed to be this morning. I needed to come here to talk to Graham, to tell him where my life had taken me, and to make sure he knew how I felt.

“I would have worn it forever, if you were still here,” I started. “Part of me feels bad I took it off, because I love you, Graham. I never wanted any of this.”

My emotions clogged my throat, and I had no choice but to pause and pull myself together.

This was hard, much harder than I had anticipated it being. And I woke up this morning thinking if I could get through what I believed would be the worst in all of this—finally taking off the engagement ring Graham had given me when he proposed—everything else would be a breeze.

God, it had nearly destroyed me to slip Graham’s ring off my finger. But as hard as it was, it was also necessary.

I needed it if I was going to ever find a way to move on with my life.

“Everything was already so messed up, then I saw your video,” I began again. “It breaks my heart that I still have no idea what happened to you. And though I know they are doing all they can, I realize it’s possible I may never know the truth about your death. I wish... I wish you would have talked to me, Graham. I wish you would have told me what was happening, so I could have helped. Or, I don’t know, at the very least, I wouldn’t be here wondering how it all went wrong.”

My mind wandered, no less than a half dozen questions filtering through my brain. Would I ever learn the truth?

Recognizing I was getting myself off track and understanding how important it was for me to say what I needed to say, I continued, "I met someone. I didn't plan for it, didn't even think I wanted it. So, I never expected it. But he understands me and what I'm going through in a way not many other people would ever be able to. He's nice, Graham. He's really nice. And he has a little boy who's stolen my heart. They've made me happy, and I'm excited about life again."

This was it.

This was my last chance to stop myself, to walk away and pretend last night with Banks never happened.

The thought made me sick. I couldn't pretend he didn't mean anything, because I'd have been lying to myself.

So, I ended, "You said you wanted me to be happy, to find happiness again. I'm going to do that. I'm sorry it's not with you, Graham. It devastates me. But I hope it allows you to rest easier knowing I've found someone who wants to try to find something special with me."

For a few minutes, I stayed rooted to the spot. I couldn't quite figure it out, but I couldn't seem to take those first steps away from him. Maybe it was because I knew that once I did, I would officially be letting Graham go. I'd always love him, and I'd come back to visit him, but my heart had to release its hold on him.

I inhaled deeply, and only after I turned to take the first step in the opposite direction did I start to exhale.

As I walked out of the cemetery and onto the sidewalk lined with piles of snow and cars parked along the road, I felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest.

But that feeling was brief.

Because barely a moment later, something caught my eye.

At the sight off to my right side, a cold feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. I knew. I knew with just one look that

what I was seeing was not a mistake or a figment of my imagination.

Desperate to confirm my suspicions, I did the stupidest thing I could have done.

“Henry!” I yelled.

The dog stopped moving, and his ears perked up.

It was my dog. It was Henry.

“Henry!” I called again.

He looked in my direction. The instant he saw me, it was clear he recognized me. His tail started wagging, and he jerked his body in my direction.

I started to move that way, and when I did, Henry was pulled farther away from me. That’s when my eyes traveled up the lead connected to Henry’s collar, and I saw the man holding it. I didn’t know him, didn’t recognize him from anywhere, but with one look at me, I believed the man knew exactly who I was.

He opened the door to the SUV immediately in front of him and threw Henry into the back of it. I started running, believing I’d be able to make it there on time, but the second I had that thought, I slipped on some ice and fell hard onto my hip.

The man had already made it to the driver’s side door, and when I looked up, I could see Henry going crazy in the back of the vehicle.

By the time I was on my feet again, the man had pulled away, taking my dog with him.

NINETEEN



Banks

Opening my front door not even twenty-four hours after Lamise left and seeing her standing there should have made me feel good. It should have overwhelmed me with positive thoughts that she enjoyed what we had so much, she couldn't stay away.

It should have felt great. It was anything but, because it was abundantly clear that something was wrong.

Lamise was in tears, devastated, and looking utterly defeated. The sight of her looking like that immediately set me on edge.

I reached out, curled my fingers around her arm, and tugged her forward, and into the house. Never was I more grateful for the fact Rhys was on a schedule and had just gone down for his afternoon nap.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her, the tension coursing through my body.

Her bottom lip trembled. “He’s alive.”

In my line of work, I could have come up with at least a dozen possible scenarios. I could have gotten creative in formulating a couple of conceivable explanations for why Lamise looked the way she did.

And yet, no matter how many reasons I could have come up with, there wasn't a question in my mind that I'd never

have the words that just came out of her mouth anywhere in the realm of possibilities.

He was alive.

My body tensed as I considered those words.

How was that even possible? How could a man who'd been bitten by a snake and pronounced dead suddenly be alive?

Had someone improperly identified him? Had he gone missing instead?

Worst of all, if what Lamise just shared was the truth, what would it mean for us?

I'd been falling for her for weeks now. I'd been allowing my heart to open up to the possibility of something serious with her. And mere hours after we'd both decided to take a chance on each other, her fiancé suddenly reappears, and isn't dead.

Despite the horror and devastation I felt, I couldn't ignore what was staring me in the face.

Lamise needed support. Or help. Or... I didn't quite know what she needed. Maybe she just wanted to tell me the truth before she returned home to him. Judging by how emotional she was, I could at least feel some relief to know she'd been even a little invested in this with me.

"Graham?" I asked, unsure why I was stating the obvious.

"Henry."

Momentarily stunned by her unexpected response, it took me a few beats to understand what she'd just revealed.

"Your dog?" I questioned her.

She nodded, bursting into tears.

Was it awful I was relieved this was about her dog?

I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her close. As I gave her the time she needed to pull herself together, I tried to

figure out what was happening. Her dog was alive. This should have been good news. Great news, in fact.

Unless... unless whoever had her dog refused to give him back.

But how would she know it was her dog?

I needed some answers.

Turning her slightly in my arms, I urged, "Let's go inside and sit down."

Lamise allowed me to guide her to the couch, and once we were seated, I handed her a box of tissues and asked, "Can you tell me what's going on?"

She wiped the tears from her face and murmured, "I went to the cemetery to see Graham."

It was already starting to come together. If Graham was buried in the same cemetery as Violet, it was right next to the dog park.

Instead of saying something and making her think I was rushing her, I patiently waited for her to share the rest of the story.

"I wanted to tell him about my ring. I wanted him to know I'd decided to take it off last night, because I'm ready to move on. I know he wouldn't be upset, because he wants me to be happy, but I still wanted to tell him," she revealed.

Fuck.

Fuck, we'd both removed our rings last night.

I no longer needed to question where she stood with me. Maybe we weren't both in the place we'd been with our former partners before they died, but we were at least in a place where we could feel the connection, chemistry, and possibility of a future together.

Moved by what she'd just shared, I reached my hand out to hers and gave her a gentle squeeze of encouragement.

"When I walked out of the cemetery and was standing on the sidewalk there, something caught my eye," she began

again. “It was him. It was Henry. Before I even called his name, I was sure of it. Henry has these rare markings on his coat, and I knew there was no way another dog like that existed here in Steel Ridge. So, I called his name and saw the immediate change in him. He recognized the name or my voice or something. So, I called his name again. Henry looked back, saw me, and his tail immediately started wagging. I didn’t even think twice about it; I took off running toward him.”

So far, nothing about this seemed like a justifiable reason for the reaction she’d had when she first came here. I had a feeling I was about to get that part of the story.

“What did he do?” I asked.

She shook her head. “He tried to come toward me, but the person holding his lead yanked on it and started pulling him away. I thought I was going to catch them, but I slipped and fell on some ice. By the time I took stock of my physical well-being, the man already had Henry in the car. And once I was on my feet again, they were pulling away. Henry was frantic in the back of the car.”

“Oh my God, Lamise. I am so sorry about this,” I told her. “While I understand everything you’ve told me, I don’t understand why someone would rush to get out of there, unless he knew he had your dog. Was Henry stolen?”

Lamise shrugged. “I’m thinking that’s the case now, and it terrifies me to think of what will happen to Henry now. He’s probably going to wind up like Graham.”

I gave her hand another squeeze and urged, “Don’t go assuming the worst. What happened to Graham is horrible, but I would imagine this person likes Henry enough to want to keep him. I know it doesn’t make this any easier to deal with, but it doesn’t make sense for him to hurt Henry.”

“It does now.”

“What? Why? Because you saw him? Lamise, he could easily explain this away, claiming he found Henry wandering around alone months ago and couldn’t locate an owner.”

Shaking her head, tears welling in her eyes again, she insisted, “No, Banks. You don’t understand. I think the man who has Henry is the same man who killed Graham.”

Lamise was two for two on imparting unforeseen information. Nothing, absolutely nothing, could have prepared me to hear what she’d just shared.

“I’m sorry. What did you just say?”

“I think Graham was murdered,” she rasped.

Tipping my head to the side, eyeing her curiously, I reminded her, “You told me he was bitten by a snake.”

Nodding, she confirmed, “That’s what I was told that Saturday morning it happened. He had the snake bite to prove it, so there was no reason for anyone to think any differently. And that’s exactly what I believed up until just a few days before I showed up at Harper Security Ops.”

“What could have possibly happened to make you think your fiancé went from being bitten by a snake to being murdered?” I asked, unable to wrap my head around this.

Lamise was silent for a long time, closing her eyes as she sighed. When she opened them again, tears spilling down her cheeks, she shared, “I found his phone.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

In the next instant, Lamise pulled her own phone out of her purse, tapped on the screen a few times, and held it out to me. That’s when I saw the face of the man I assumed had to be Graham. “This video was on his phone.”

I tapped on the play button, then watched as Graham attempted to warn Lamise about the danger swirling around him. I listened to the pure anguish in his voice as he revealed he’d done something he wasn’t proud of, but did it to protect her. And I observed the terror in his face when he looked off to the side and almost accepted the fate that awaited him before he told Lamise how much he loved her and wanted her to find happiness again.

No wonder she'd been so confident about how he'd feel about that.

When the video finished playing, I took a moment to process it all. I wasn't quite sure I'd accomplished that when I finally asked, "What did you do with his phone?"

"For a few days, I struggled with what to do, but I ultimately took it to the police," she answered. "I just talked to Detective Shaw not that long ago, and he indicated he'd spoken with the coroner. Between that discussion and the new evidence I'd given him, they believe there's a strong likelihood Graham was murdered."

"How does the snake bite fit in? What did the coroner say?"

Lamise licked her lips and tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. "Well, the initial thought was that he'd been bitten by the snake, became disoriented, and wound up falling before hitting his head on a rock. But there's no conclusive evidence that Graham didn't suffer the head trauma before the snake bite. Now, considering this new evidence, it's more likely that's the case."

For a long time, I sat there, staring at Lamise and allowing one question after another to filter through my brain. Ultimately, I settled on asking her one. "Why didn't you tell me this from the start?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I guess there was a part of me that didn't want to believe it was the case. And maybe there was another part of me that was afraid you'd judge me, wondering what kind of man I'd gotten involved with. I don't know what happened at that dog park or what Graham did that he wasn't proud of, but the way he was in that video wasn't the man I knew."

My mind was racing, an overwhelming need to figure this out for Lamise pulsing through me.

She might not have done it immediately, but Lamise eventually came to me for help. Or comfort. No matter what it was she needed, I vowed to give it to her.

Violet never made it clear to me that she'd been struggling. Maybe in her mind, she had. Perhaps I'd just been so caught up in how great life was that I was blind to her pain and failed her.

I couldn't allow that to happen again.

Lamise told me what I needed to know in a way that was unmistakable. I had the chance to fix it, to make it better for her. No matter what, I'd make sure she remained unharmed.

Because if one thing was for certain, it was that I had a chance at redemption, and I wasn't going to screw it up.

Not when the life of the woman I was falling for was at stake.

I had to take a minute to figure this out and come up with a plan. I knew what I wanted to have happen, but I'd need some time to figure out the logistics.

In an effort not to have her feeling the worst or regretting that she came here to begin with, I decided to let Lamise know what my intentions were.

"Lamise?" I called gently.

"Yeah?" she returned, lifting her gaze to mine again.

"I have a lot to say about what needs to happen here, and I just need you to give me a minute to get it all out before you respond or react. Okay?"

She nodded. "Okay."

"Okay. First, there's a justifiable reason to believe your suspicions about what happened to Graham are correct," I started. This was something she already knew, so I hadn't suspected she'd react negatively to it. When she remained silent, I continued, "Unfortunately, because of that, it's not unreasonable to assume you could be in very serious danger."

Lamise tensed, which I had suspected, but she surprised me when she didn't try to cut me off or ask questions. Believing she was still doing okay, save for a little bit of tension surrounding the situation, I went on. "How sure are

you about Henry? Do you have any doubt about the dog you saw today being him?"

"I'm positive it was him."

"So, this is what's going to happen," I began again. "I'm going to take care of everything. I know you've already gone to the police, but I'm going to put together a team at the office, and we're going to figure out what happened to Graham. You should know the truth, and I'm going to give that to you. If his death was intentional, I will find out, and I'll see to it that the person or people responsible are held accountable."

"I didn't mean to pull you into this mess," she murmured.

"I know you didn't, but I'm here, and I can't pretend nothing is happening," I explained. "Besides, you're not the only one who removed their ring last night."

Lamise's gaze snapped to my left hand, noting it was bare. Her hand immediately went to it, her soft touch forcing me to clench my jaw, so I wouldn't react the way I wanted to.

Needing to redirect my focus, I decided it was best to keep talking. "I'm not just going to handle the situation with Graham. I'm going to find Henry, too. I'm going to find your dog, Lamise, and I'm going to bring him back to you."

She tipped her chin up, her eyes welled with tears. "Do you really think you'll be able to do that?"

"I work in the kidnap and ransom unit at Harper Security Ops," I reminded her. "We don't typically get calls about kidnapped pets, but I think I'm just as qualified to rescue a dog as I am a human."

Lamise pressed her lips together and nodded slowly, as though she was afraid to get too excited. I could understand that. It had been months she'd been living without her dog. She might not have realized how good we were at what we did and believed getting her hopes up could possibly lead to disappointment. I didn't mind—soon enough, she'd see that I was going to come through on all fronts for her.

"The last thing I need you to know is that while I'm doing what I've got to do to find Henry and figure out what

happened to Graham, I'm also going to keep you safe. You've got to move in with me, at least temporarily, until I'm confident there's no longer a threat against you," I told her.

"Oh, Banks. I... I can't do that. I mean, I understand why you're worried. I kind of was, too, when I first watched Graham's video, but he'd recorded that video months prior, and nobody had ever attempted to harm me in all that time. Even over these last few weeks, ever since I saw the video, nothing has ever felt off whenever I was out in public. Honestly, I just think he was being overly concerned and protective."

This was precisely where I believed Lamise was going to give me a bit of a difficult time. "Do you know why he was afraid? Have you found anything else that indicates what he did, what the mix-up at the dog park was, or why he believed that video was his last chance to tell you he loved you?"

Shaking her head, Lamise replied, "No. I don't know any of that."

"Exactly. Maybe a week ago, nobody was giving you a second thought. Hell, they probably weren't even thinking about you as recently as yesterday. But I can promise you that if the man who has your dog is somehow involved with Graham's death, he's absolutely thinking about you now. We're not taking any chances."

My voice was firm and probably a bit harsher than necessary, but I needed her to understand just how serious I was about all of this.

When Lamise didn't respond and give me the agreement I needed, I had to give it one final push. Taking her hands in mine, I squeezed them and said, "I missed the chance to protect Violet from something months ago, and in the end, I lost her. Don't make me lose another person who matters to me, Lamise. I can't bear to go through it again. And knowing what it's like, you shouldn't want me to, either."

Maybe it was unfair of me to put it to her like that, but I was desperate. If I was going to be focused on doing what I

needed to do to find her dog and learn the truth about Graham, I needed to know she was safe.

“Please? Please, will you stay here with me?”

She hesitated for only a moment longer. “Okay, Banks. I’ll stay here with you.”

Relief swept through me. “Rhys is going to love this.”

For the first time since I’d opened the door to her today, Lamise smiled.

It felt like I’d won the lottery.

TWENTY



Lamise

I had expected the first time I rode in a car with Banks and Rhys, it would be a joyous occasion. I'd imagined we'd be heading somewhere for a day of fun together.

It turned out, I was wrong.

Because as Banks pulled his vehicle into the parking lot at Harper Security Ops, there was an overwhelming sense of foreboding lingering in the air.

In an attempt to settle myself, I'd tried to take a few deep breaths.

Everything from the moment I left the cemetery and saw Henry standing on the sidewalk just a couple hundred feet away felt like a whirlwind.

I'd gone to Banks, because I wanted to confide in him. I hadn't expected everything that came afterward, everything he'd committed himself to doing.

His determination to find out what happened to Graham and locate Henry for me warmed my heart. Without me even needing to ask, Banks was just going to do it for me. Just offering to help with those two things had been more than enough—certainly more than I'd expected—and yet, it wasn't enough for him.

Banks decided he needed to go above and beyond the call of duty by urging me to stay at his place. Admittedly, I'd struggled with it. I hadn't wanted Banks to view me as a

charity case or someone who needed looking after, but once I heard the desperation in his voice when he all but begged me to let him do what he needed to do in this situation, I couldn't turn him down.

And somehow, despite all that I'd been feeling, being with Banks and Rhys yesterday helped to turn my day around. After we'd discussed my situation, Banks insisted on making me some lunch, and the two of us ate together. Rhys woke up shortly afterward, and we wound up going to visit Robin. Not only was she thrilled to see her grandson, but she appeared to be just as excited to see me, too. Following our visit with Robin, Banks drove me back to my place, so I could pack up some things I'd need for the next couple of days. Once I'd gotten that accomplished—something that took me longer than necessary since I was still unsure how I felt about what was happening—he brought the three of us back to his place, and we all had a wonderful evening together. We played with Rhys and had dinner. And after Rhys had gone down for the night, Banks and I curled up on the couch and watched a movie. The two of us had shared a handful of kisses, but things never went beyond that. It seemed Banks was a bit preoccupied.

Now, it was first thing in the morning on Monday, and Banks had decided all three of us were heading into Harper Security Ops today. Apparently, it was the first part of his plan, something he needed to do in order to fulfill his promises to me.

I decided it was best to just go with the flow, since he was the one doing all of the tough work. But just because I wasn't putting up a fight didn't mean I wasn't feeling concerned about all that was happening.

I was worried—not just for me, but for Banks, too. And thoughts of Henry had been on my mind from the very moment I saw him outside the cemetery.

My dog was alive.

My last connection to Graham.

Even if he realized that was the case, Banks refused to be stopped. He intended to locate my dog and bring him back to

me. The thought of having Henry back thrilled me at the same time it made me realize just how much I loved the way Banks cared about me. It was so sweet.

As for Banks's actual plan, I had no clue what it was. The only thing I was aware of was that he wanted to get here first thing this morning, so we could get inside, talk to whichever members of his team he wanted to, and they could decide on where to go next before we had to get back to the house, so Rhys's nap schedule wouldn't be interrupted.

After he parked, Banks got out, lifted Rhys out of his seat, and turned to lead us toward the building. And just as he took his first step in that direction, Banks reached for my hand. It felt like such an intimate gesture—a big moment—and yet, Banks seemed to do it without giving it a second thought. I liked the way it made me feel, even if it made my belly tremble just a bit harder.

It was all so effortless for him—carrying Rhys in one arm while holding my hand using the other.

The moment we stepped inside, we were greeted by Avalon, who appeared overjoyed to see the three of us there together in the capacity that we were.

“Good morning,” she greeted us.

“Good morning, Avalon,” I replied.

“Morning. Are the guys here?” Banks asked, cutting to the chase and clearly not interested in anything much besides the task at hand.

Avalon nodded. “Yep. They're in the conference room.”

“Perfect.”

Without giving anyone else a chance to speak, Banks took me by the hand again, and he led me away from Avalon's desk. I turned back to look at her and offered an apologetic expression. She didn't seem the least bit upset. In fact, she was smiling back and waving her hand in a way that indicated she was urging me to move forward with Banks, wherever he planned to take me.

A moment later, Banks came to a stop, released my hand, and placed his palm flat against the small of my back. He guided me forward into the room, where two men were already waiting for us.

No sooner had he directed me to a seat, Banks declared, “Guys, this is Lamise. Lamise, this is Blaze and Paxton. Blaze is one of our private investigators here, and Pax works in the kidnap and ransom unit with me.”

They offered chin lifts in my direction as I said, “It’s nice to meet you.”

Banks and I both sat down, the guys making comments about Rhys, then it was time to get down to business.

“So, I gave you both a little bit of information about the situation yesterday, but I wanted to give you the full details this morning, so we could figure out together what the next best step is here,” Banks announced.

“Yeah, of course. You know we’ll do whatever we can,” Blaze returned.

“What’s going on?” Pax asked.

Silence fell over the room briefly while Banks looked in my direction. He searched my face, and when he found whatever it was he was looking for, he returned his attention to his coworkers and said, “Last summer, Lamise’s dog went missing after her fiancé, Graham, died while out on a hike. At the time, it was believed Graham had died from a snake bite, but as it turns out, there’s enough evidence to suggest foul play. The Steel Ridge PD has opened a case, because it looks like Graham might have been murdered.”

Curiosity and solemnity washed over both of their expressions, and it was Blaze who asked, “How could there be such a discrepancy about how he passed?”

Banks went on to share the news I’d given him last night, the same news Detective Shaw had given me. It was too tough to tell conclusively at this point what occurred first—the snake bite or the head trauma.

“What has led anyone to believe there’s been foul play, though?” Pax pressed.

“At first, there wasn’t anything. It seemed everything had lined up for this to be merely an unfortunate accident. It was only recently when Lamise discovered a video her fiancé recorded on his phone just hours before he died, and he made it clear he believed he was in danger. Lamise, too.”

Both men nodded their understanding as Banks turned in my direction again. “Would you mind showing them the video?”

I shook my head, pulled out my phone, and brought the video up on the display before I slid the phone across the table. Blaze tapped on the screen, and the video started to play.

Not wanting to break down as I listened to Graham’s tortured voice again, I focused on Rhys. Banks seemed to realize what I needed, because he quickly passed his son off to me. I occupied myself with Rhys, doing my best to block out the video.

Shortly after it finished, Blaze asked, “Do we have any idea what the mix-up at the dog park was?”

“No,” Banks answered.

“When you called me yesterday, you told me there was a rescue mission ahead of us,” Pax started. “I can only assume that was about the dog.”

Nodding, Banks explained, “Lamise was at the cemetery near the dog park yesterday morning, and when she left the cemetery, she saw Henry, her Boxer. He’s got some unique markings, so that’s why he stood out. She called out for him, and he reacted. When he saw her, it became obvious he knew who she was. Unfortunately, the man who had Henry took off before Lamise could get to them.”

“Do you have a picture of your dog, Lamise?” Blaze asked.

“Yes, I have a bunch of them on my phone,” I said.

Banks handed me the phone, and I pulled up a folder I'd created just for my dog. "This whole folder is of Henry."

Paxton took the phone, scrolled through some of the photos, and finally said, "I'll go there."

"What?" Blaze asked.

"I'll start taking my dogs to the park and see what I can come up with," he clarified.

Banks chimed in. "That's kind of what I'd been thinking we could do as a starting point in this. With pictures of Henry, you'll know what you're looking for. And since you've got a reason to be in a dog park given that you've got actual dogs, I'm guessing nobody will question your presence there. If the people who are connected to Graham are still visiting that spot, it's likely you're not going to stand out as odd or someone to be wary of."

This had already been an emotional twenty-four hours, but I'd have been lying if I said it didn't make me feel even more moved when Paxton offered to step up for me like he just had.

Or, I guess he was likely just doing it because it was his job and because Banks had asked him to, but ultimately, I was the one who'd benefit from his selflessness.

Deciding it would be best for me to redirect my focus to Rhys and stop paying attention to the men surrounding the table, I started whispering and playing with Rhys. He gobbled it up, and I loved the distraction it offered me.

Before I knew it, there was movement happening around me. That's when I realized the men were done talking and were standing from their seats. I did the same, holding Rhys firmly in my arms, and Banks was quick to pull my chair back to give me space to move.

Everyone moved to the exit, and once we were outside the room, Banks said, "I'm just going to run down to Blaze's office for a minute while we reach out to the Steel Ridge PD. You can join me or hang with Avalon."

I glanced over at the reception desk and saw Avalon was looking in our direction with a dreamy expression on her face.

I didn't quite know what was prompting it, but I figured I'd rather be with the woman who had hearts in her eyes instead of the guys who were being serious and foreboding. "Rhys and I will visit with Avalon while you handle whatever you need to handle."

He nodded and replied, "I won't be long."

"Okay."

In another move that seemed so effortless for him, Banks leaned down and gave me a kiss before planting one on Rhys's head. Then he took off, and I made my way toward Avalon's desk.

At some point when I'd been speaking with Banks, then getting kissed by him, another woman had walked up to Avalon's desk. I approached them slowly, not wanting to interrupt any conversation Avalon was having with a potential client. But when I was a matter of a few feet away, both women looked in my direction and smiled.

"Hey, Lamise, come on over," Avalon urged. "This is Liv. She works here, too."

Smiling at her, I said, "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise. Is this Rhys? Gosh, he's so adorable."

Avalon stood and said, "I know. Isn't he? Can I hold him for a minute?"

"Sure."

Once Avalon had Rhys in her arms, she asked, "So, how are you doing? I mean, Liv and I have a pretty good idea about how things are between you and Banks, based on what we just witnessed, but I was just referring to how you were doing in general terms."

Granted, I wasn't stupid. I figured she had to have seen Banks kiss me, but I wondered what thoughts it gave her. This was still so new for us, and with the baggage we both had, there was no telling how things would go for us.

"I'm okay. I'm better than I've been in a long time," I answered honestly.

She grinned.

“It looks like things are great,” Liv noted.

“And I’m so happy to know that Banks hasn’t closed himself off completely,” Avalon added. “You two look adorable together.”

Feeling slightly awkward, I noted, “It’s still early. Things are very new between us.”

Both women nodded, but it was Avalon who said, “But Banks brought you here and kissed you the way he did, knowing full well that I was sitting right here watching you. That indicates to me that he’s very serious about you.”

She thought him offering a simple peck on the lips indicated he was “very serious” about me?

“What makes you say that?”

Before Avalon could respond, Liv interjected, “It’s the fact that you’re here.”

“What?”

Both women leaned closer, an indication one of them was about to share some news they didn’t want anyone else hearing. “What do you know about Rhys’s mom?”

My body tensed, but I answered honestly. “I know what happened, if that’s what you’re asking me.”

Nodding, Liv shared, “You probably know more about her than we do. We never really had the opportunity to get to know her. In fact, nobody even knew she existed until Banks finally revealed he was married, and his wife had just had a baby.”

I was certain my eyes were going to fall out of my head. “What?”

“I’ve been working here a lot longer than Liv, and in all the time I’ve been here, I think Banks has been the toughest nut to crack. He’s just a very private person. Or, he used to be. It seems that has changed with you,” Avalon declared.

As soon as she got the words out, I realized she'd gotten it all wrong. "Oh, well, I mean, I don't know if you know, but the reason I'm here right now is only because I have a bit of a situation. I don't think Banks would have brought me in, otherwise."

Avalon shook her head. "I'm aware you've got a situation, even if I don't know all the details. But I'm telling you that ever since the day you came in to apply for a job and hand in your resume, Banks has been more talkative than usual. He's happier than he's been in months, and even though I didn't realize the extent of what was going on between the two of you until just now, I was hoping something would happen. Because he'd come in and tell me about something related to Rhys, and he'd always find a way to mention your name."

My lips parted.

I knew there was an attraction there, and obviously there was something else budding between us now, but I didn't know what to do with this information.

"This is a good thing, Lamise," Liv assured me.

"It sounds that way, but—"

"But nothing," Avalon declared, cutting me off. "Whatever is happening between the two of you has been good for Banks. It's been nice to see the change in him, to see him smiling again."

Figuring it was best to accept what they were saying, I nodded. "Okay."

Before anyone could get another word out, Banks reappeared and said, "Alright, we're all set for now. Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah," I answered.

His eyes moved away from mine and to the two other women there, narrowing on them. "What's going on here?"

Liv shook her head as Avalon replied, "Nothing. Nothing at all. But I will say that this hasn't been nearly enough time to hang with Rhys. You and Lamise need to figure out a time you

want to go out and do something fun, so I can drag Damon over to your place and watch this little guy.”

“Oh, yeah. Me too. Brix and I would definitely like to watch him for you. We get to watch him the next time,” Liv added.

Banks shook his head, his lips twitching, as he moved to lift Rhys out of Avalon’s arms. “Lamise and I will figure that out, and I’ll let you know when.”

Avalon perked up in her seat. “Really?”

“Were you not serious?”

“Oh. Oh, yeah. No. I was totally serious.”

“Me, too!”

Banks cocked an eyebrow, assessing Avalon and Liv again. Following a beat of silence, he took my hand in his and said, “I’m taking these two home. I’ll be back shortly.”

“Okay. See you soon.”

“It was great meeting you, Lamise,” Liv said.

“Yeah. You, too.”

Banks didn’t wait around. As Avalon and Liv called out varying versions of goodbye to our departing backs, Banks led me out of the office.

And the whole way back to his house, I couldn’t stop wondering what was so different about me that Banks seemed to have done a complete turnaround from the way he’d been with Violet.

TWENTY-ONE



Lamise

What a day.

I was sitting on the couch in the living room at Banks's house, feeling grateful I'd managed to get through the day.

Not long after Banks brought Rhys and me back to his place after our morning at Harper Security Ops, he took off again to head back to work. Rhys and I quickly fell into our usual routine, Rhys heading down for a nap almost immediately after we'd returned.

I'd taken some time to clean up around the house, doing it while I allowed the thoughts about everything that had been happening around me to swirl around in my mind. There wasn't anything I didn't think about—Graham's murder, Henry being alive and dognapped, that I was staying with Banks in his house, and everything Avalon and Liv had shared with me while we had a few minutes to talk at the Harper Security Ops office that morning.

Rhys provided the best distraction from all of that when he was awake, so I was bummed each time I had to put him down for a nap.

Because most of the thoughts I'd had about everything had been almost too much for me to handle. I just couldn't manage to sort it all out, and I'd seriously considered giving my sister or Tabitha a call to get their opinions.

But I ultimately decided against it.

After everything I'd been through the last couple of months, after all they'd seen me through, the last thing I wanted to do was call them with more bad news. Granted, learning that Henry was alive was good news, but that I was likely now in danger because I'd realized that was the very opposite of good news. For months, my mom, Jolene, and Tabitha had done nothing but worry about me. They didn't need to worry more.

Until I had good news to give them, something I knew they'd be happy about, I decided to hold off on sharing anything negative. I didn't intend to hide it from them, but I just needed to make sure there was something positive to sprinkle in with it.

Even if I wasn't quite sure how it would go, I had a feeling if I really wanted to clear my head, then the best thing I could do was talk to Banks about it.

So, when he descended the stairs after having given Rhys his bath, putting him down for bed, and taking a shower of his own, I did my best to try to appear relaxed.

"Do you want anything from the kitchen before I sit down?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No, thank you. I'm good."

Evidently, Banks was only trying to be a gentleman, because once he knew I didn't want anything, he came into the living room and sat down beside me on the couch. He hadn't intended to go out to the kitchen, unless I had wanted something. It was just one more sweet gesture in a long line of them which had me struggling not to soften toward him more than I already had.

"Did you have something special you wanted to watch tonight?" he asked me.

Shaking my head again, I answered, "Actually, I was kind of hoping we could talk for a little bit."

"Sure. What did you have on your mind?"

I sent a smile his way, hoping he wouldn't feel any sort of worry about what I wanted to discuss. Figuring it was best to

start with something simple, I said, “Well, first, I just wanted to say how great I think it is that you have the team you do at work. It was really nice of both Blaze and Paxton to be willing to work on this situation with you, and I was surprised how quickly Pax said he’d go to the dog park to see if he could figure anything out.”

Banks returned the smile. “Yeah, well, aside from being Steel Ridge’s resident nice guy, Pax has a soft spot for animals. He’s constantly rescuing them, so it doesn’t surprise me that he stepped up to the plate. In fact, he probably is going to love that his work is taking him to the park.”

I felt my body starting to relax a bit more. “That’s good to know. I can’t help feeling like this is a lot for anyone to have to deal with, so if he’s going to enjoy that part of it, it makes me feel a little better. I hope there won’t be anything to worry about from a safety standpoint.”

Lifting his arm up over my head, Banks draped it around my shoulders and curled me in toward his body. “I understand all of this probably makes you nervous, but we’re all trained and very good at the job that we do. Please don’t worry about someone getting hurt. Yes, it’s a possibility, but it’s a risk we assume when we take this job. And while there has been the occasional injury, we’ve only had very few serious ones. That said, everybody is fine now, so don’t worry about that.”

Nodding, I said, “Okay. I’ll try not to worry too much.”

When I made no move to add anything additional, Banks asked, “Is there something else?”

“What?”

Banks’s free hand reached over and wrapped around the front of my waist. In a move he executed with far too much ease, he shifted us on the couch. He’d fallen to his back, and half of my body was partially covering his. It was, by far, the most intimate position we’d been in. Even with the kissing we’d done to this point, Banks and I hadn’t found ourselves pressed together, front to front, while not standing up.

Once we were settled comfortably together, Banks replied, “When you started talking before, you said the first thing you wanted to talk about was my team and how nice they were. I guess I’m just wondering what else you wanted to discuss.”

Apparently, it didn’t matter that Blaze was the private investigator, and Banks worked in the kidnap and ransom unit. He was just as observant as anyone else in that role. “There is something else,” I confirmed.

“Okay. What’s going on?” he pressed.

He didn’t seem to have a single worry. While I thought that was a good thing, it was the complete opposite of how I felt.

“It’s about the discussion I had with Avalon and Liv while you were in Blaze’s office,” I revealed.

His brows pulled together. “Is everything okay? I can’t imagine those women would have done anything to upset you.”

I shook my head. “No. No, it’s nothing like that. I just... well, they shared something with me that caught me a bit off guard. I’ve been thinking about it ever since, and I wanted to ask you about it. The thing is, I’m not sure how you’re going to feel about it, and I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Just ask me whatever you want to ask me,” Banks urged me. “If something is bothering you, I want to know what it is. It doesn’t matter what it is—good or bad—I want to know what’s on your mind, because if I don’t know, I can’t do anything to fix it or set your mind at ease.”

There wasn’t an ounce of anger or frustration in Banks’s tone. He was genuinely concerned, and it helped to ease some of the nerves I was feeling.

So, I inhaled deeply, bracing myself for what his initial reaction might be, and exhaled slowly before I asked, “Did you hide Violet from your coworkers?”

“They said that I hid her?” he countered.

“I don’t think they used those words, but it was clear to me that they didn’t know her well at all,” I clarified.

Now, it was Banks's turn to breathe deeply. "I've always been a private guy. I just never felt it was necessary to share every detail of what's happening in my life with everyone around me."

"So, it was true? Violet didn't know your coworkers?"

He shook his head. "Some of them met her, but it was after we'd gotten married and after Rhys was already born. She died when he was three months old, so there really wasn't a lot of time for anyone to get to know her after they learned that she existed."

I wasn't sure what to say. Banks had given me an honest answer, which is what I had hoped for. But now that I had it, I didn't know what to do with it.

Understanding I was struggling to figure out what to say, Banks spoke. "Sometimes, I think about it, and if I could go back and do it over again, I would have probably introduced her to everyone sooner. I don't know if that would have changed anything, but maybe someone else would have seen what I didn't. She was estranged from her family, so it's not like they were around to see the change in her and what I missed."

My heart broke for him.

"The things we wish we could go back and do over again," I murmured. "I've gone over everything in my head about what happened to Graham so many times, and I try to wrack my brain for answers. What did I miss? What was right in front of my face that I overlooked? There are never any answers."

The silence stretched between us for a while, the two of us lost in the heaviness of it all.

But after some time passed, Banks said, "Lamise, I want you to know that I'm grateful."

"Grateful?" I repeated.

"For you. For a second chance. Obviously, we don't know where this is going to go, but there's something that tells me if you weren't going to be someone special in my life, I wouldn't

be here feeling the way that I do. I guess I just want you to know, especially if you're wondering why I'm not hiding you from anyone, it's because I want to seize the opportunity to do it right this time, to do it better. I believe this has the potential to go the distance."

"Do you really mean that?" I asked, feeling a mix of hope and worry.

He hesitated briefly before he said, "You'll never be to me what Violet was to me." My body went rock solid, and Banks attempted to offer a reassuring squeeze. "That's not a bad thing, Lamise. I would never want to be to you what Graham was to you. I'm always going to love Violet the same way I know you'll always love Graham. But that doesn't mean I don't want to be someone important in your life. It doesn't mean I think we can't have a future. In fact, I think it's the reason we have a fighting chance at a future. It'll just be different. I want something different with you than I had with Violet. I want the chance to love you differently than I loved her."

None of the words he said helped to ease the rigidity in my body. But it wasn't because I was upset or offended by what he said. I was shocked. Surprised. Relieved.

Banks had just said he wanted the chance to love me differently, and it was the most beautiful thing anyone had ever said to me.

I was so moved by his words, I couldn't speak. But I knew I had to do something to show him how much it meant to hear him say what he did.

So, I found a way to move.

I brought my hand up to his jaw, and my fingers stroked gently along the stubbled skin there. For a while, my eyes remained focused on the movement of my fingers and shifted to my thumb when I dragged it across his bottom lip.

The moment my thumb stopped on the opposite side of his lip, I lifted my gaze to his and saw the fire burning in his eyes.

“Do you really want to try to love me differently?” I whispered my question.

“I don’t think I need to try, Lamise. I think I already do,” he revealed.

If I allowed this wonderful man to continue to speak, I wasn’t going to make it another five minutes without breaking down into tears.

So, I found a way to silence him. With my hand still cupping the side of his face, I shifted my body slightly, so I could touch my mouth to his.

Closing my eyes, I allowed my lips to graze his. Banks’s fingertips pressed in on my body, and it was all the encouragement I needed to go for more. It was no longer about a gentle brush of my lips or a sweet and tender touch.

It was about drinking him in, taking all I could get, everything he wanted to give me. And when he realized what I was doing, Banks didn’t hesitate to give. As though he hadn’t given me enough with the words he’d just shared, Banks poured whatever he had left into our kiss.

There had been plenty of kisses before this one, yet none of them compared. This one wasn’t filled with nerves about it being so new or worries about betrayals.

It was just us—Banks and Lamise.

We deserved this moment.

It was just as Banks had said. We were allowed to have something more than what we’d given ourselves, and it didn’t have to be anything like what we had before with someone else.

It could be different, and it could be beautiful.

Begrudgingly, I tore my mouth from his. “Will you show me?”

“Show you what?”

“How you intend to love me.”

His eyes searched my face. “Are you sure you’re ready for it?”

Weeks ago, I felt unsure about a lot of things happening in my life. There was still plenty I’d likely feel hesitant about as the days passed. But there was one thing that no longer had me feeling any caution.

Banks Huntington.

If it hadn’t been for the way I’d seen him interact with his son for weeks now, or the way he cared about his family, the simple fact he asked if I was sure was enough for me to know the kind of man he was.

“Positive,” I whispered.

Without any hesitation, Banks stood and lifted me in his arms. Then he carried me up the stairs and to the guest bedroom, where I’d spent the night last night.

After he placed me down on the bed, he stopped and froze.

“What’s wrong?”

He sighed. “Before this goes too far, you need to tell me where you stand on protection.”

“What?”

He shook his head. “Lamise, I was married. I don’t have condoms here. I haven’t been with anyone else since Violet.”

“I haven’t been with anyone since Graham,” I confessed, hating that he seemed to be feeling so stressed about this.

He swallowed hard, and I could have sworn he was waging a war inside his mind. “What about pregnancy?”

“I’m covered.”

Relief swept through him, but he still hesitated to move.

“Banks,” I called softly.

He lifted his gaze to mine. “What?”

I wasn’t quite sure where my courage was coming from, but I reached my hand out to him. Banks linked his fingers

through mine and climbed into the bed, his body hovering protectively over mine.

Our clasped hands were over our heads as Banks touched his mouth to mine once more and kissed me. While our tongues tasted one another, Banks's free hand roamed up and down the side of my body.

God, it felt nice.

So nice.

Feeling that connection to someone again, having his hands and mouth on me. It was already better than I could have ever imagined, and we'd barely scratched the surface.

But perhaps that was just it.

There was no way this could be anything but wonderful, considering the connection we had with one another. We had a bond between us that nobody else could ever begin to understand. And while what we'd have with one another would be our own, it was what we'd experienced in our lives that gave us a deeper appreciation for what we had now.

As I hooked one leg around Banks's waist, his hand at my side traveled up to my breast. He placed his palm over it, squeezing and massaging the flesh.

I rolled my hips against him, feeling him hard between us, as I moaned into his mouth.

Banks tore his mouth from mine, looked down at me with something intense in his eyes, and I couldn't stop myself from begging. "Please."

In the next instant, my shirt was gone.

The look in Banks's eyes heated, and he didn't hesitate to pull my pants down my legs. By the time he had me there in nothing but a bra and panties while looking at me the way that he was, I was certain I'd combust.

On the bright side, it seemed Banks was feeling at least some of the same, because he lifted his hand behind his neck, gripped the fabric of his shirt in his fingers, and pulled it over his head.

I licked my lips at the sight of him half naked.

While I knew Banks had a great body—nobody filled out a shirt the way he did—I was still caught off guard by how incredible he looked. Strong, solid muscle. Built shoulders and sinewy arms. Defined abs. He was a walking advertisement for health and fitness.

When he dropped his pants and stood there in nothing but his underwear, I got an even better view.

“Wow,” I marveled, my eyes roaming over every inch of him.

“Took the word right out of my mouth,” he replied, bending at the waist and dropping his mouth to my outer thigh.

His hands were on either side of my body, but his touch was gentle. I was surprised by how much I enjoyed it, considering it had been so long since any man besides Graham had touched me.

And while I thought I’d find myself focusing on his hands and where they were going, I wasn’t.

Well, technically, I was. But I was more focused on his mouth.

Despite the heat and intensity I’d seen in Banks’s eyes when he had been looking at me nearly naked on the bed, he didn’t seem to be in a rush. His lips were soft as they trailed across my skin, moving along my thighs and up toward my hips.

When he made it there, his fingertips curled around the waistband of my underwear, but he hesitated to pull them down my legs. Instead, his lips blazed a path across my abdomen, stopping to kiss me just beneath my navel before he inhaled deeply.

He released his hold on the material at my hips, splayed both hands around my sides, and continued his journey up my body.

And he took his time doing it.

I had no idea how he demonstrated such restraint. Here I was, ready for him to take me how he wanted me, and Banks was content to simply wander and explore using both his hands and mouth.

There was nothing I could do other than feel. Close my eyes and feel what he was doing. The more I allowed myself to let go of any expectations I had about our night and where things were going—or how quickly we’d get there—the more I enjoyed what was happening. In fact, it was then I decided I wanted some of the same.

So, I allowed my hands to roam. I kissed when I could. It was a wonderfully slow buildup, something I was grateful Banks had decided to give to the both of us.

In the midst of it all, we lost the remainder of our clothes, and the touching became more purposeful. Banks’s hands went to my breasts, his mouth on my nipples. He effortlessly teased me, having me desperate and on the verge of begging once again.

When one of his hands slipped down between my legs and touched me there, the whimper that escaped from me told him exactly how I was feeling. His fingers rubbed and circled my clit. His lips found mine again, and as his tongue dipped inside my mouth, Banks’s fingertips applied just the right amount of pressure to keep me squirming.

I couldn’t take it any longer.

When he pulled his mouth from mine, I begged, “Banks, please.”

That was all it took.

Banks settled himself between my parted thighs, positioned himself using one hand, and kept his eyes locked on mine.

Then he pushed forward. And as every inch of him entered my body, my lips parted, and my nails dug into the skin at his shoulders.

He groaned, the sound deep and feral. I’d convinced myself he’d passed the point of taking things slow, but I was

wrong.

Just because we'd reached this point, it didn't mean anything when it came to Banks's pace. He kept things slow and lazy, like he believed if he moved too fast, he might miss something.

When I drew that conclusion, I realized I needed to stop worrying about how fast or slow he was going and just enjoy what he was giving.

Because it was wonderful.

So, I focused on the power of his strokes, the feel of each inch of him as he thrust slowly inside me, and the way his eyes moved over my face and skin when his mouth was connected to me.

And his hands hadn't stopped. They touched my body or interlaced with my fingers.

Banks was completely involved in what was happening between us. He was consumed by it, and seeing that, I became lost.

In him.

In us.

In the feel of our bodies.

In the kisses we shared.

There wasn't anything I didn't love.

It could go on forever and ever, and I'd never complain. Banks was a magnificent lover, making me all too eager to keep my limbs tangled up with his.

Time passed, and we didn't stop. We let it build up, knowing there was no chance of it not being extraordinary.

"Lamise."

Hearing him say my name in that tone, I couldn't hold myself back. Banks was coming undone, and I was right there with him.

"Banks," I whispered, my eyes pinned on his.

That's when it happened. We came apart together, a long, soft moan escaping from the back of my throat. It took everything in me not to close my eyes with how good it felt as wave after wave of pleasure washed over me, but I refused to miss Banks's reaction to what we'd just had.

When we made it through to the other side, Banks rolled, so he was on his back, and I was on top of him. He held me like that, his fingers on one hand gently caressing the heated skin on my back while the other hand squeezed my ass and thighs possessively.

We both fought to regain control of our breathing.

He'd gotten there first, but I was the one who took the opportunity to speak. "That was beautiful."

Another squeeze on my ass. "Yeah. You are incredible."

I lifted my head from his chest to look at him. "Me? You led that whole thing."

"And you followed beautifully," he noted, a smile on his face.

He wasn't wrong.

I had followed beautifully.

I'd have been a fool not to.

I returned the smile, rested my cheek back on his chest again, and relished the feel of having this kind of connection with someone again. I hadn't expected I'd ever have it again, and now that I did, I knew I wouldn't ever be able to let him go.

"Thank you," I said softly, following a bout of silence.

"For what, darling?"

Warmth moved through me. "For making this everything that it was tonight. For being you. For taking your time. For giving me something so wonderful and making it unforgettable."

Banks brought both arms around me and squeezed me. "You're welcome."

We stayed like that a little while longer before we decided to get up and get ourselves cleaned up. And when Banks slipped back into the bed with me, curling his body around the back of mine, I fell asleep with a smile on my face, feeling the happiest I had in a very long time.

TWENTY-TWO



Banks

I thought I knew what it would be like.

I was wrong.

I didn't have the slightest clue what I'd been thinking.

Being in bed, having Lamise's soft, naked body pressed close to me, I realized just how mistaken I'd been.

For far too long, I'd been consumed by grief, never thinking I'd want any part of this ever again. How could I?

Then, meeting Lamise, having her around all the time, and seeing the way she cared for my son made it impossible to resist her, to not want her in all the ways I could have her.

As the days went on, as we spent more time together, I found the pull to her grew stronger and stronger. But with the broken hearts we'd both been carrying around for so many months, I just wasn't sure how quickly things would progress between us, if at all.

One thing was for certain, and it was that I knew I wanted what we had last night. I just hadn't expected things would go where they did between us. Either way, I wasn't complaining.

Because it had been extraordinary.

Lamise had been spectacular. Perfect for me. It was almost crazy to think it had only been a matter of months ago when I resolved myself to the fact I'd never experience intimacy with another woman again, because I didn't want it.

If it hadn't been for Lamise, I was not convinced I'd have ever changed my mind about that. She'd given this back to me, and as I held her close now, I couldn't have been more grateful for her.

Because it was nice. It felt good. And thinking I didn't deserve to have it had been ridiculous.

I wanted to believe she felt the same about me. I hoped she loved what we had last night as much as I did, because it had been a long time for me, and now that I'd gotten a taste of her, I didn't think I could hold myself back from wanting to consume her.

Feeling the overwhelming desire to have Lamise again, I needed to rouse her. So, I began tracing random patterns along the skin at her hip.

Soft.

Fuck, it was so soft. And warm.

The mere thought of having her again mixed with simply touching her hip had me growing harder by the second.

Though, if I'd been having any trouble getting to that point, I was convinced it would have been remedied the moment Lamise let out a soft moan as she allowed her body to have its first morning stretch while plastered against me.

After, she tipped her head back, and I watched as her gorgeous blue eyes fluttered open. A knowing and seductive smile formed on her face. "You're up early."

I returned the smile. "I'm usually up early, but today I've got reasons for being up."

Lamise's palm, which had been resting lightly on my abdomen, began traveling down my body. She made it to the prize and curled her fingers around my cock. That's when her expression turned mischievous. Perhaps I wasn't the only one who was eager for more.

"I think I've figured out at least one of your reasons," she said softly.

"One of? Darling, that's the only reason."

“Mmm. I like that.”

“Like what?”

She stroked me. “Hearing you call me that.”

I hadn't even thought twice about it. The word just came out, but there was no question it was perfect for her. “I'll be sure to keep that in mind.”

Lamise stroked again, something lighting up in her eyes. She was enjoying herself, so the last thing I wanted to do was stop her. But since I was just as desperate to touch her, I dropped my hand back from her hip and around to her ass. I squeezed her there. “Scoot up here and kiss me.”

She scooted and kissed me without losing her hold on me.

And my fingers found their way down over the curve of her ass and between her legs. The second I touched her, Lamise's grip on me tightened. My fingers touched and teased and circled, slowly building her up, until I eventually slipped one inside of her.

That was all it took for her to roll her body on top of mine. Keeping her hand wrapped firmly around me as she continued to stroke, Lamise's legs parted and fell onto either side of my thigh.

As I continued to finger fuck her from behind, she started moving her hips against my thigh, seeking that friction.

I hadn't necessarily been expecting it so quickly, but I couldn't say I was disappointed to hear the change in her breathing, an indication she was close. I kept the pace of my fingers slow and steady, allowing Lamise to take what she needed in whatever stride she wanted.

Lamise edged closer and closer, her moans turning to whimpers and her hips moving faster. Even with her increased pace, everything still felt slow. And I liked it.

In fact, it was precisely how I intended to have her this morning. I was sure the time would come when I wanted nothing more than to take her with a bit of force, but today wasn't that day. I was still far too interested in learning how

each and every little thing I could do to her would make her react. We'd work our way up to rougher sex.

"Banks," Lamise panted. "I'm so close."

"Climb on top, darling. Put me inside you, and let me make you come with my cock."

Lamise closed her eyes a moment, grinded her pussy against my thigh for a few more seconds, but ultimately lifted her body, swung her thigh over me, and positioned my cock between her legs before sinking down on me.

She was eager, desperate, so I gave her what she needed and watched as she came apart on top of me. I worked Lamise through her orgasm, eventually coming to a stop to give her a moment to catch her breath.

I don't think she'd fully managed that task when she locked her eyes on mine and sent a lazy, sated smile my way.

Gorgeous.

Perfect, too.

Because I had intended to keep things lazy this morning, and with one slow thrust into her, I communicated my intentions to Lamise.

I'd only managed a couple of thrusts before Lamise pressed her palms into my chest, lifted her torso, and took over for a bit.

Fortunately, she seemed to be on the same wavelength as I was, because although she rode me with determination and skill, she took her time doing it.

Slow.

Steady.

Like everything else could wait.

Like the only thing that mattered was the two of us connecting with one another, sharing our bodies.

My eyes roamed over her beautiful naked form. Gorgeous curves, soft skin. Everything had me captivated, and it wasn't

just my eyes that were enjoying all that made up Lamise.

My hands joined in. At first, I'd had my arms wrapped around her, but when she sat up, my hands fell to her thighs. My fingertips had pressed in before sliding up toward her hips, where they grabbed handfuls of flesh on each side.

No matter where I squeezed her, it seemed Lamise enjoyed it. Her eyes would darken, and her lips would part. And once I captured her breasts, squeezed them, and rubbed my fingers over her nipples, Lamise let out a moan.

From the moment I'd started imagining what it'd be like to have her like this—and I'd done a fair amount of imagining—I hadn't ever anticipated I'd want her like this.

Unhurried.

Tender.

Sweet.

So unbelievably sweet.

“Kiss me,” I urged gently.

Lamise lowered her mouth to mine, my eyes closing the second our lips touched.

Fuck, she was unbelievable. She made me feel everything I didn't think I'd ever want to feel again. And I loved it.

I loved her.

Mouths still connected, I rolled us. With Lamise on her back and her legs wrapped around me, I kept the same steady pace, feeling it build between us.

The higher we climbed, the stronger her hold on me.

And it was mere seconds before I knew we were both going to come apart when I tore my mouth from hers and watched her.

Only after we'd made it through to the other side and took some time to regain control of our breathing did either of us speak.

“Good morning, Banks.”

I smiled at her. “Good morning, Lamise.”

“Things have taken an unexpected but pleasant turn,” she said.

Laughter spilled out of me. “You could say that again.”

Lamise’s fingers were in my hair at the back of my head, her eyes roaming over my face, questions lingering in them.

Not wanting to ignore something that might be bothering her, I cut to the chase. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You look like you’ve got something on your mind,” I noted.

Moving her head slowly from side to side, she explained, “I just think I’m still trying to come to grips with all of this. I didn’t expect I’d ever find you. You’re the best surprise.”

I understood exactly what she was saying. There was this edge of disbelief that I’d been feeling recently when it came to her, and it felt good to know I wasn’t the only one who couldn’t seem to grasp how I’d gotten so lucky.

“The feeling is mutual, darling.”

She melted beneath me. “Mmm. Don’t ever stop saying that word.”

“What if I have to stop, so I can go downstairs to make you breakfast?” I asked.

“Then make sure you use that word when you let me know it’s ready,” she answered.

“I can do that,” I promised. “Speaking of which, I should probably get myself down there, if we’re going to manage to eat before Rhys is up.”

“Okay.”

I gave Lamise another kiss before I pulled out, and the two of us got ourselves out of bed. Before she took off to the bathroom to get herself cleaned up, I reached for her wrist and stopped her.

“What’s going on?”

I hesitated, hoping she wouldn’t be upset. “I want you in my bedroom, but I’m going to get us a new bed first. We’ll stay here until then. Is that okay with you?”

Something washed over her face as she took in my words and put them together. Following a beat of silence, she replied, “Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay with that.”

I smiled at her. “Good.” After giving her another kiss, I said, “I’ll meet you downstairs, darling.”

She giggled as she walked away, and I loved that I could make her so happy with just a single word.

The languid pace we’d experienced in bed continued throughout the morning. Maybe it was the change in things between us, but I wasn’t in a rush to make it out the door to work. I knew I had to go—especially now that I had to work on this case for Lamise—but I’d have been lying if I said I wasn’t moving slowly on purpose.

We had breakfast together, Rhys woke up, and the three of us spent some time with one another before I finally got myself ready to leave.

Just as I was about to walk out the door, my phone rang. Pulling it out of my pocket, I was surprised to see Pax’s name on the display. “Hey, man. What’s going on?” I greeted him.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“I’m just leaving the house now,” I told him. “Everything okay?”

“Stay there. I’ve got something I need to show you, and Lamise should probably check this out, too,” he returned.

“You’ve got something already?” I asked.

“I was at the dog park this morning.”

Deciding it was best to wait until he arrived, I said, “We’ll be here.”

Ten minutes later, Pax arrived.

Lamise was a bit worked up, so the minute he was inside, she asked, “Did you see Henry there this morning?”

Pax shook his head. “No. But there were a couple of shady characters there. I watched one guy sit down on an empty bench for a few minutes, and when he got up, he left a plastic bag behind. From the distance, I couldn’t make out exactly what it was, but then another guy walked up barely thirty seconds later, sat for no more than five minutes, and took the plastic bag with him when he walked away.”

“Drugs?” I questioned him.

He nodded. “That’s what I’m thinking. It could be nothing, but I figured it was worth having Lamise check them out, in case either of them happened to be the guy she saw with Henry. I managed to take a couple pictures without anyone noticing, since it probably looked like I was just taking photos of my dogs.”

My eyes went to Lamise. “Do you think you’d remember him if you saw him?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

A moment later, Pax pulled up the photos on his phone. Lamise looked at them, zoomed in on a few, and finally shook her head. “They don’t look familiar,” she murmured as she moved to hand the phone back.

But just as Pax reached for the phone, Lamise yanked it back. “That’s the same bag.”

“What?”

“The backpack that guy is carrying is the same one Graham always had. In fact, I remember about two months before he died, there was a whole situation. He told me he’d forgotten the backpack at the dog park, and it had his wallet in it. He had to replace his license and credit cards. It was a nightmare.”

My eyes shot to Pax’s. “I was going to say this might not be worth sticking our noses into, since they didn’t look familiar, but I’m thinking we might want to keep our eye on these guys.”

“Oh, my God. Do you think these are the men who killed him?” Lamise started to panic.

I moved closer to her, wrapped one arm around her, and said, “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. One thing at a time. Pax and I will do some work on this today, and if there’s anything that requires additional investigative work, we’ll bring Blaze in on it.”

She dropped her gaze to the ground and began shifting back and forth on her feet. “Drugs. I can’t believe he was doing something related to drugs.”

“Lamise?” I called.

She froze, the tension evident in her shoulders. Eventually, she brought her eyes to mine. “Yeah?”

“Don’t do this to yourself,” I advised. “There’s no indication there’s any link between these guys and Graham. I understand the backpack leads you to believe that’s the case, but until we have concrete proof, don’t assume the worst.”

Her bottom lip trembled, the sight of it breaking my heart. “But what if the worst ends up being the case?”

“Then we’ll deal with it together,” I promised her.

She nodded her understanding, redirecting her attention elsewhere, but offered no verbal response.

I shifted my focus to Pax. “Was there anything else?”

Offering a sympathetic look, he answered, “That was all. I’m going to head back into the office now.”

“Alright. I’ll be there shortly.”

“See you later. Sorry to have upset you this morning, Lamise. It wasn’t my intention.”

She shook her head. “You don’t have anything to be sorry for, Pax. Thank you for the work you’re doing to attempt to locate Henry and figure out what happened to Graham.”

He offered a nod in return. “You’re welcome.”

Once Paxton left, I returned to the living room, where I found Lamise on the floor, her focus on my son. Rhys was oblivious to everything that had happened this morning, and if there was one thing I could be happy about, it was that.

I crossed the room and sat down on the floor with them. Rhys began crawling toward me, something he was getting better and better at every day.

“Are you okay?” I asked Lamise just as Rhys’s hand landed on my leg.

She nodded. “It’s hard. I don’t know. As much as I want to know what happened to him, I guess I wasn’t prepared for the possibility of bad news. Or, more bad news than I’ve already gotten regarding the whole situation.”

“I understand, and I imagine it’s not going to be easy until you know the truth and have some time to deal with it all. But until then, try to help yourself stay calm and relaxed over the situation,” I urged her.

“That’s a little easier said than done,” she shared.

I’d held my hand out in mid-air toward Rhys, and he’d grabbed ahold of one of my fingers. With a determination I’d seen with him from the very beginning, Rhys steadied himself before attempting to stand up. I watched, feeling utterly amazed at how much he’d grown and changed in a matter of a few short months.

When he was standing, his body wobbling as he continued to hold on, he looked up at me like he was attempting to communicate something.

I smiled at him and asked, “You’re going to do it, aren’t you?”

He smiled back at me.

“Dad’s got to go to work, little man. Something tells me you’re going to make sure Lamise stays calm, relaxed, and happy until I get back, won’t you?”

Whether it was instinct or the slight movement at our side, Rhys and I both looked over at Lamise. She was looking at the

both of us like she believed we had superhuman powers.

With my free hand, I reached out to Lamise. She scooted closer, and in the next instant, I scooped her and Rhys up in each of my arms, as I fell to my back. For a few minutes, I stayed like that—holding the both of them and loving everything about it.

But since I loved it so much, I had to do whatever I could to make sure I didn't lose any part of it.

So, I had no choice but to kiss the both of them, say goodbye, and get back to work.

TWENTY-THREE



Banks

Three days.

Three whole days of absolutely nothing.

Not a drug dealer, not a dog, and not a single backpack.

We had zilch.

After Pax had showed up at my place earlier in the week with photos of the men who'd been involved in some sort of drug deal at the dog park while one of them had a backpack Lamise recognized as the same Graham used to carry before it went missing, I had to admit I started feeling rather confident.

I'd convinced myself that we'd need a day, two tops, to figure this out, locate Henry, understand what really happened to Graham, and finally be able to put this case to bed for Lamise.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

One day.

Who had I been kidding?

Pax and I had both made trips back to the dog park every day since the day he saw those men. We'd been splitting our time, rarely overlapping, and we'd come up with nothing.

Henry hadn't been seen, and neither had those two guys. Hell, we hadn't seen another drug deal with anyone else, either. And we knew what we were looking for, so if it had been happening, we would have noticed.

It was now late morning, and I'd been at the dog park for several hours today. Just like the last couple of days, it felt like it had been a waste, because nothing had happened. There wasn't a single piece of news to report.

And I was beyond frustrated.

I wanted nothing more than to be able to figure this out and bring it to an end.

She hadn't said so, but I knew it was weighing heavily on Lamise's mind. She was doing her best to appear unaffected, and if I wasn't who I was with the skills I had, I might not have noticed.

But I had noticed.

Seeing Lamise unable to just be happy about where she was in her life, particularly being with me, left me feeling nothing less than frustrated. She deserved to be happy, and I intended to give it to her.

Unfortunately, I didn't think I was going to find what I needed, sitting here at the dog park, waiting around for someone who may or may not be involved to show up.

Hating the feeling of defeat that washed over me, I got up and made my way to my vehicle. I needed to find a new angle for this, so I was going to head back to the office and review the case files Blaze had received from the Steel Ridge PD.

I was so caught up in my thoughts and frustration I was feeling over the whole case, I forgot what I was doing. Normally, the only reason I wound up in this part of town was if I came out to the cemetery with Rhys to visit Violet's grave. I'd usually head home afterward, not the office.

So, instead of leaving and going in the direction I should have to head to Harper Security, I wound up taking the faster route through a neighborhood I normally drove through in order to take myself back to my house.

Perhaps being slightly distracted was the best thing that could have happened to me, though. Because it was as I was driving through that neighborhood when it happened. A woman was walking along the sidewalk, and she had a dog

with her. The dog looked exactly like the dog in the pictures of Henry Lamise had sent to my phone.

Not wanting to be suspicious or draw any attention to myself, but also knowing I needed to see where this woman wound up, I decided to pull over. If anyone saw me or started looking at me like they suspected anything, I'd get out and pop my hood. I could easily pretend to be inspecting something in the engine bay.

I just hoped the woman would finish her walk soon, so I could be out before anyone noticed I was there at all.

In the first bout of luck I'd had since this whole mess began, the woman moved past two more houses before turning and walking up to the door of the third house, Henry having no choice but to follow along beside her. It was then I noticed the open garage door, one that contained an SUV that matched the description of the one Lamise had seen on Sunday.

I quickly noted the address, turned around, and took off back toward the office. And on my way there, I had to admit I didn't like the feeling that washed over me.

To say I was unsettled would have been an understatement. I'd just watched as a woman walked through a nice neighborhood with Lamise's dog. The markings on the dog were identical to Henry, which was the only thing I was clinging to. Well, that and the SUV in the garage. Otherwise, I wouldn't have believed this was possible.

Could this woman and her spouse or boyfriend be responsible for the dognapping? Was it possible they were somehow connected to what happened to Graham? Or, did someone else find Henry and pass the dog off to these people?

"I think we should do a stakeout."

Those were the words I'd said to both Blaze and Paxton.

It was an hour after I'd gotten back to the office. I'd filled the guys in on what I'd stumbled upon. They were both excited about finally having a break in the case, and Blaze was quick to pull up the county records to see who owned the property. Much to our initial dismay, the property was owned

by an LLC. While it wasn't unheard of for people to form an entity to purchase property for privacy and other reasons, it didn't exactly give me warm and fuzzy feelings in this case.

Blaze intended to do a bit more research into the company to see what he could come up with, while Pax asked how I intended or wanted to proceed with this case.

"A stakeout?" Pax repeated.

Nodding, I explained, "We don't have a whole lot to work with at this point, and this is something. I can handle watching the house, if you want to stay on at the park."

"Yeah, it's probably best we keep our eyes open there, just until we're sure there's nothing useful to the case," he agreed.

"You might want to bring in a couple more guys," Blaze suggested.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Blaze's eyes were slightly narrowed, his mind clearly working. Following a beat of silence, he replied, "Obviously, the best-case scenario would be that Pax witnessed a random drug deal, and the people you saw with Henry happened to rescue him. But I'm just not getting the sense we're in a best-case scenario type of situation. I get the feeling there's something more going on here, and I think it'd be better to have a few more sets of eyes on this."

It wasn't a bad idea. "Alright. I'll talk to Jax and Forrest to see if they can help out."

"Forrest is on vacation right now," Pax chimed in.

"Really? Where'd he go?" I asked.

"He went and got a cabin at the ski resort like he does every year. He didn't want to go far, but he needed some time away."

That made sense. I couldn't say I blamed him. I'd only recently gotten back to work, and though the situation was different, I couldn't say the time away didn't help. It had. Tremendously.

“Alright, so then I’ll talk to Ty,” I decided. “What about you, Blaze? Can you try to see what you can find out about the owners of that LLC?”

“Already planned on it,” he assured me.

The moment I shifted my attention to Pax, he shared, “I’m heading out now. I’m going to run home, grab the dogs, and make my way over to the park. I’ll let you know what I find, if anything.”

“Sounds good, man. Thanks a lot for doing this.”

Pax shook his head. “There’s a dog that’s gone missing. If I can do something to help bring him back to his rightful owner, you know I’m going to do it. Plus, if we can get some answers for Lamise, that’ll be a bonus.”

I offered a nod of thanks in return. Pax walked out, Blaze got to work, and I went in search of Jax and Ty. We hadn’t quite solved this case yet, but we were much closer than we had been when I woke up this morning.



Lamise

“Wait, so you’re living with him now?”

My lips twitched slightly at Tabitha’s question. It was the end of the week, later in the day, and Rhys was down for his final nap before his dad would be home.

Having taken some time to adjust to how things were right now, I decided I was ready to share some life updates with the important people in my life. When Rhys napped earlier in the day, I’d called my sister. Jolene had been devastated but hopeful when she learned about Henry. After I told her where things had gone between Banks and me, she surprised me.

I didn’t know exactly what I expected, but I guess there was a part of me that was worried she might think I’d moved on too fast from Graham. Jolene didn’t pass any judgment on

me. In fact, she seemed to be a bit thrilled to learn I'd found someone who made me happy.

With the success of that phone call, I was eager to keep the good vibes going. That was why I called Tabitha after Rhys had gone down for his current nap. I'd gotten her filled in on the news of my new relationship, and it had been clear she was just as excited for me as Jolene had been.

But it seemed sharing the truth about my current living arrangements had caught her off guard. I needed to clarify, so she understood. "Yes, I moved in with him, but it's only temporary."

"I don't understand. You work for him and just started dating him. I realize it probably makes things easier when it comes to getting to work on time, but it seems hasty," she noted.

"It is. Banks and I definitely wouldn't be in this place right now if things were different, but there's something else I have to tell you."

"Oh, no. What happened?"

"I saw Henry."

"Henry? What do you mean?" she questioned me, shock evident in her tone.

I went on to tell Tabitha about the visit to the cemetery to talk to Graham about moving on and taking off my ring before I walked out and saw Henry there with a man. Of course, I shared how I called out to him, he saw me, and I chased after him only to fall and wind up watching as the man drove off with Henry freaking out in the back of the SUV.

Tabitha was silent for a long time after I finished. And when she finally did speak, her voice was just a touch over a whisper. "I can't even imagine how you must be feeling. Are you sure it was Henry?"

"Positive. There isn't a doubt in my mind."

There was another pause before my best friend said, "Wait a minute. I don't understand. Does seeing Henry have

something to do with why you're staying with Banks?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "I came to him the day it happened, and when he tried to figure out why the man would take off with Henry if it was clear I'd been running in that direction, I explained that I believed the man could have been the man who murdered Graham. Of course, I had to then go through all of that, because while Banks knew about Graham passing, he didn't know that there was a possibility he'd been murdered."

Tabitha didn't hesitate to respond. "So, he thinks you might be a target now?"

"Exactly. I tried my best to reassure him, noting how nobody had attempted to contact me or make me feel unsafe ever since Graham died, but Banks thought it was wise to take extra precautions now that someone saw me and knew I'd recognized Henry. I guess, in his mind, if I wasn't on anyone's radar before, especially if that guy had something to do with what happened to Graham, I might be on that radar now."

"Are you just going to stay with him now until the police figure this out? I mean, it's been months. Do you think they're really going to be able to uncover the truth about Graham? Look, I understand how important it is for you to know, and I can't imagine what I'd do in your position. But are you worried they won't figure it out?"

I couldn't say those thoughts hadn't passed through my mind several times, particularly since I'd moved in with Banks. "I don't know if the police will figure it out. I don't know if anyone will, but now that Banks has put together a team to investigate all of this, I guess I have a bit more reason to hope."

"Banks put together a team?"

"He did. And I've got to tell you, Tab, I believed every word he said when he promised me he'd figure this out."

Rocky started barking in the background. "Oh, this dog. He drives me crazy, sometimes. I swear, he always waits until I sit down to tell me he needs to go out."

I smiled, my heart squeezing. It had been a while since I last saw Tabitha's dog. I really needed to find the time to visit with them soon. "That's how it is. I'll let you go, so you can take care of him, but I want to come for a visit soon, so I can get some head scratches in with Rocky."

Tabitha laughed. "You know he's always up for that. And this conversation isn't done yet. Promise me you'll call if and when you have any more news about Henry or Graham."

"I promise."

Tabitha and I said goodbye and disconnected our call. Ten minutes later, Rhys woke up from his nap. And just over an hour later, Banks got home from work.

We had our normal evening routine together. Banks came in, spent a few minutes catching up with Rhys and me while asking about our day, and we all had dinner together.

Following dinner, I gave Banks and Rhys some time alone together while I went upstairs to take a shower. I'd gone into the master bathroom, since Banks and I were finally spending our nights together in his room. He'd ordered a new mattress for the room, and it had arrived two days ago.

While it wasn't something I had expected him to do, I could understand why he felt the need to change it, and I appreciated it.

Banks was fulfilling his promise to love me differently. I knew that without even needing to know how things were between him and Violet.

Once I'd finished in the shower, I found Banks in the other bathroom, giving Rhys his bath.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey."

"I just finished up, so I was going to head downstairs to grab him a bottle."

"Okay. He's just about done in here, and he seems exhausted, so he should be ready by the time you get back up

here. I already locked up the house, so feel free to shut the lights off when you come up.”

“You don’t want to watch anything tonight?” I asked, curious about the sudden change in our routine.

He shrugged. “Well, we can always watch in the bedroom, but I actually wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh. Is everything okay?”

Banks nodded. “Yeah.”

I eyed him curiously, realized he wasn’t prepared to talk about it while he still had Rhys in the bath, and offered a nod of understanding. “Okay. I’ll be back up in a minute.”

I couldn’t seem to make Rhys’s bottle fast enough. Normally, it never felt like this, but knowing Banks had something to share made every second that passed feel like hours.

After returning upstairs with the bottle and giving Rhys a goodnight kiss and hug, I made my way to the master bedroom to wait for Banks. It didn’t take long for him to get Rhys down for the night, but that didn’t mean it didn’t feel like an eternity.

He hopped in the shower afterward, which meant I had to exercise even more patience.

“What’s going on?” I asked once he finally climbed into bed.

“First, I want you to know that I saw Henry today, and he looks like he’s okay.”

“You saw him?” I rasped.

Banks nodded. “I did. I know you were worried that the man who had him would hurt him after they saw you, but from what I could tell, Henry looked unharmed.”

I closed my eyes and let out a sigh of relief. I had been terrified something bad was going to happen to him.

“I’m assuming you were unable to rescue him.”

“Technically, I could have gotten him back for you, but the guys and I have decided to do just a bit more digging. I want to get Henry back for you, but I also want to see if the people who have him now are involved with what happened to Graham. I know this isn’t easy, but I think it’ll payoff to be patient.”

Banks was the professional. I’d seen Henry, made a spectacle of myself, and started running after him. It didn’t get me anywhere good, so I was more than prepared to accept Banks’s plan as the way to go.

But it didn’t lessen just how much I missed my dog. “Was he at the dog park again?”

“No. No, I was there for a few hours this morning, decided to leave when there hadn’t been any activity, and I found him as I drove through a neighborhood. He was being walked by a woman who ultimately turned into a driveway and went into one of the houses. The garage door on that house was open, and the SUV you had described to us was inside.”

My eyes widened in shock. “Who has him? Where was it?”

Shaking his head, Banks said, “I don’t know who has him just yet. We’re digging to get those answers, so we can try to start putting some of this together. I’ll be doing some stakeouts, Pax is going to be keeping his eyes on the dog park, and Blaze is trying to see what information he can come up with on these people. I don’t want you to be tempted to go after Henry, so I’m not going to tell you the address. I’m just going to ask you to trust me to do my job properly.”

I hated that Banks wouldn’t tell me where Henry was. He was my dog. I had a right to know. But before I got myself too worked up, I had to take a step back and consider his reasoning. I would absolutely find it difficult to refrain from going to get my dog if I knew where he was.

Trust.

I had to trust Banks.

“Okay. Okay, I trust you.”

He smiled at me, wrapped an arm around me, and tugged me toward him, so he could press a kiss to my lips. “We’re getting closer, Lamise. I hope it won’t be more than a day or two before we can get this all figured out, but it’s really going to depend on what we find.”

“Thank you for doing this for me, Banks. It means everything to me.”

Banks gave me a squeeze. “I know it does.”

I cuddled closer to him.

“Do you want to watch a movie before bed?” he asked.

Shaking my head, I answered, “Not unless you want to. I’d rather just turn off the lights, talk, and feel you close to me.”

“There’s nothing that could come on that television that would ever make me turn you down.”

So, that’s what we did.

Banks and I turned out the lights, talked, and held on to each other. After a while, we turned to kissing and touching. And that led to a round of lovemaking.

I loved that despite the things that surrounded us, threatening to tear away the happiness I’d found, Banks and I still had an appreciation for having one another that we refused to waste a single moment we had together.

TWENTY-FOUR



Banks

It was time.

Finally.

After a week of knowing where Lamise's dog was and not being able to just walk up, get him, and bring him back to her, I was finally going to be able to do it.

Truth be told, it hadn't happened without a lot of pressure on my part. If I hadn't been so insistent on having a deadline for it, I wasn't sure we'd be at this point yet.

Bringing a couple of guys in on the case with us had paid off tremendously. We'd worked together over the last week, brought the local police department in on it when we believed we had enough evidence to execute a rescue, and came up with a plan.

Admittedly, there was a part of me that was still concerned we weren't going to get all of the answers we needed, but I was done waiting around. Lamise deserved to have her dog back, and while I believed she'd want answers about what happened to Graham—something we didn't have any concrete proof of yet—I believed it'd ease her mind to have Henry with her.

And we'd waited long enough, much longer than we would have waited if it had been a human who'd been kidnapped.

So, it was happening today.

As I walked up to the front door of the house I'd been surveilling for the last week with some of my coworkers, walking with a hand in the pocket of my jacket as I gripped the material I'd brought with me tightly in my hand, I felt confident in the plan and relieved we were finally taking some action.

I just hoped I was right about how everything would go down. It would all hinge on one specific hunch I had.

Seconds after I rang the doorbell, I heard him. Henry was inside the house, barking.

So far, so good.

A moment later, the door opened, and the woman I'd seen walking Henry every morning was standing there. "Can I help you?" she asked.

I had about a moment to register the puzzled look on her face before Henry came charging forward, just like I expected he would.

Immediately, I noticed he was enthusiastic and happy. His tail was wagging, and he was delighted to have company. It was the same thing I'd watched him do over the course of the last week whenever anyone walked up to the house, even the people Pax had managed to get pictures of in the dog park.

Yep.

Everything was going just as I'd hoped it would.

I crouched down and started showing Henry some attention, using my free hand. "Hey, buddy."

Henry was beyond excited, so I started to wonder if what I had planned was even going to happen. Pulling my other hand out of my pocket, I revealed the top from Lamise's pajamas to him. The moment the shirt was in front of him, he froze and started to sniff it.

Within seconds, he was even more rambunctious than when he'd first greeted me. It was all I needed to know this was Lamise's dog.

Of course, that was only solidified when the woman at the door said, “Henry, please leave the man alone.”

At least they’d continued to call him by the same name.

Refusing to let him out of my sight, I decided to continue scratching his head as I spoke to the woman. “Oh, it’s okay. I don’t mind.”

She offered a slight nod and asked, “Was there something I could help you with?”

“Actually, yes. I apologize. I came to the neighborhood about a week ago, and I saw you out walking him. I wanted to introduce myself to you,” I answered.

Her head tipped to the side, curiosity washing over her. “Oh. I didn’t realize any of the houses in the neighborhood were up for sale. Which house did you buy?”

I shook my head, a smile still plastered on my face. The last thing I wanted was for this woman to think I was a threat. As I stood, a signal to those who were ready to head in, I kept my body bent slightly, so I could continue to give the impression I was still offering head scratches to Henry when the truth was that I needed to be able to keep a firm hold on him.

“I didn’t buy a house here,” I informed her.

“But you said you just came to the neighborhood about a week ago,” she reminded me.

Grinning, knowing the Steel Ridge PD would be arriving at any moment, I explained, “Yes, I did. I didn’t say I bought a house, though. I simply happened to come into the neighborhood last week. And I was stunned to see you walking with my girlfriend’s dog.”

The smile was gone from my face, and it was all I could do to keep Henry from knocking me over. He couldn’t stop sniffing the shirt in my hand.

“Who are you?” she asked as she stepped forward. “Give me my dog back.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I told her.

It was in that moment, the woman's eyes left mine and shifted to the side. She saw the police making their approach. Fear washed over her, and she tried to step back into the house, calling out to someone as she did.

Before she could close the door, Steel Ridge police officers stepped forward, presenting her with a search warrant as I moved back from the house with Henry. With Lamise's shirt in my hand, he willingly came. I moved him farther and farther away from the house, giving the officers the space they needed to do their job while keeping both myself and Henry safe from whatever might go down inside the house.

Ultimately, I led him toward my vehicle, where I allowed him to wait in the warmth. Henry seemed content to be there, especially since I put Lamise's pajama top in there with him.

Finally, after what felt like hours, I'd managed to speak with Detective Shaw. He'd brought me up to speed on where things stood, and I informed him that I'd be heading out to bring Henry home. He knew to call me if and when he had more information, since this case wasn't quite over just yet.

It was quite the exercise in patience as I waited for the officers to get done what they needed to do. All I wanted was to take Henry and get out of there, so I could get back to my house and give Lamise something to smile about.

It wasn't everything she deserved to have, but it was a start. And for now, that was going to have to be enough.



Lamise

I'd just put in a load of laundry when it happened.

My body tensed, and I immediately started moving toward the stairs when I heard the door opening.

It was in the middle of the day, Rhys had gone down for his afternoon nap, and Banks was at work.

I never wanted to assume the worst would happen or that someone who was connected to Graham's death would actually find me here at Banks's house, but with the noise I heard outside the front door, I had no other option.

It was clear someone was attempting to break into the house. My only thought, my only concern, was getting upstairs to grab Rhys and my phone to call for help.

But I never made it up more than four or five stairs when the front door swung open, and my eyes were pulled in that direction.

That's when I stopped dead in my tracks.

Henry.

Henry came barreling into the house with Banks holding the door wide open for him.

I blinked my eyes several times as I stared at Henry, unable to believe what I was seeing.

He was here.

My dog was here.

And he hadn't yet noticed me.

I flew down the stairs, stopped, and called, "Henry."

He turned his body around, saw me, and came running. I was all but tackled to the ground as he showed his love, jumping up and down with his body shaking and tail wagging as he attempted to lick my face.

I burst into tears. "Henry. I missed you so much, boy. Where have you been all this time?"

Henry, obviously, did not respond to me. And it was only after he'd started to calm down that I was able to lift my gaze to Banks and seek out some answers. I was sitting on my ass on the floor at the bottom of the stairs and made no attempt to stand when I asked, "What happened?"

"I got him back for you today, darling."

My heart.

My heart felt like it was so full to bursting with the love I felt for this man.

“How?”

Banks reached his hand inside the pocket of his jacket and pulled something out. It took me a second, but I finally recognized what he had in his hand.

“That’s the shirt I wore to bed.”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

I studied him. “So, you knew when you left the house this morning that you were going to be rescuing Henry?”

“I did.”

“And the people who had him just let you take him?” I pressed.

Banks moved toward me, shaking his head. When he sat down on the floor beside me, he replied, “Not exactly. I’d been watching the house he was at for the last week. Like clockwork, Henry was taken for a walk in the morning. And throughout the day, he’d be let out, so he could relieve himself. But it was what happened in the evenings that gave me the idea to do what I did.”

“What happened in the evenings?”

“There were frequent visitors to the home where Henry was, and every time someone showed up, he’d always run outside and greet that individual. Granted, it might have been because he recognized the person, but I knew I had to take my chances that he was just the kind of dog who ran out and investigated every person. Now that I think about it, I wonder if he was running out and hoping he’d find you there for him.”

Even though I hated that Henry had been missing for so long, I was relieved to know that the people who had him had been good to him. “At least they took good care of him,” I murmured before peppering kisses to the top of his head.

“Yeah. It’s really a miracle when you think about the other things they were doing,” he noted.

Some of the tension I'd been feeling when I thought someone was breaking into the house made its presence known again. I swallowed hard. "Did you learn anything about Graham?"

Banks shook his head. "Not so much, at this point. There's no telling that he was connected to these people in any way, but the fact they had Henry leads me to believe they know something about him. The problem is, they could have just been the people who wound up getting Henry out of the whole mess. There are so many people involved."

I didn't want to ask the question, but I knew I wouldn't be able to pretend as though it didn't matter to me. Because it did.

"Was it drugs?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

I moved my head from side to side. "I don't understand why Graham would have gotten himself involved in anything like that. It makes no sense to me."

Banks tipped his head to the side, his eyes roaming over my face. "I promised you I'd figure out what happened to him. I'm going to do that. The men in the pictures Pax brought over here a little over a week ago were seen at the house where Henry was. For a while, nothing else had happened at the dog park, but in the week since I'd located Henry, there had been quite a few. We added a few more guys to the case to help out, so we had more hours of coverage, and that led to us seeing more than we would have otherwise."

"Something happened at the dog park?"

"More drug deals. So, while I can't say it with absolute certainty, all of the evidence points to Graham being involved in some way. A couple of arrests were being made today, and there is hope of getting a few more. With that many players, depending on the severity of the charges they are going to face based on what's found, we're hoping someone is willing to talk in exchange for reduced sentencing. Detective Shaw gave me his word that his department was going to do everything they could to get you some answers."

Every time Banks spoke, he was always so forthcoming. He didn't hold back anything, and the best part of it all was that he found a way to tell me things, even bad news, in a way that never felt devastating.

In this case, I should have been feeling horrified by the possibility of Graham having been involved in something so terrible, and to some extent, I did. But for some reason, I didn't feel the overwhelming despair I thought I would have over the situation.

Was that related to where my life was now?

I could only assume so.

There was no question in my mind that I loved Graham and everything he'd been to and for me while he was alive. I had his video, something many others might not have in a similar situation, and it gave me some peace over the situation. Whatever had happened, whatever he'd gotten himself involved in, he regretted it.

"Thank you for working so hard on this and getting Henry back for me," I said, following a beat of silence.

"I'd do anything for you, Lamise. Anything at all."

"I love you, Banks. I hope you know that."

He smiled, wrapping his arm around my back, and curling me in toward his chest. I willingly went, and after he pressed a kiss to the top of my head, he replied, "I love you, too, darling."

My heart melted. God, I was beyond grateful for him and everything he'd done for me.

Henry's head remained heavy on my leg. It was clear he was worn out from all of the excitement of his day. I stared down at him, feeling something warm move through me.

"Oh, no!" I gasped.

"What? What's wrong?" Banks asked.

I was so tense, even Henry lifted his head from my lap. My eyes shifted back and forth between Banks and Henry, my

heart pounding wildly in my chest as my stomach felt sick.

“Lamise, what’s wrong?”

I shook my head. “I can’t. I can’t take Henry home to my apartment with me. It’s in my lease that no pets are allowed.”

Banks didn’t hesitate. “But you’re staying here, so why does that matter?”

“I was staying here while you believed there was a possibility I was a target. You said people were arrested. Isn’t everything okay now for me to go home?”

“People were arrested,” he confirmed. “But I wouldn’t say I’m comfortable with you leaving just yet. Let’s give it some time to make sure there’s nobody around who can retaliate, especially if they believe you had anything to do with this.”

I nodded my agreement. “Okay. I guess I can try to look for a new place in the meantime.”

“Lamise?”

“What?”

Banks studied me for a long time before he declared, “I don’t think you should look for a new place.”

“I have no choice. Henry can’t go to my new apartment.”

“But he’s welcome to be here,” Banks offered.

“I’ve been away from him for a long time, Banks. I really appreciate your offer, but I think I’d like to live with him again,” I reasoned.

“Who said you wouldn’t be?” he countered.

“What?”

Banks shrugged. “Look, I know this is the utter definition of fast, but it works. I love having you here, and Rhys adores you. Why wouldn’t we want you to be here with us? Our lives have been so much better ever since we met you, and I dread the thought of you leaving. You and I are happy together, and I know there’s not going to be another woman out there for me. Why don’t you just move in with us?”

I blinked my eyes rapidly, either trying to cope with the shock or being unsure if any of this was really happening. “You want me to move in with you permanently?”

Banks didn’t waver. “I do.”

Studying him, it felt like a million thoughts ran through my mind. Was this too fast? Would I be making a mistake? What if things didn’t work out?

“What’s going through your mind?” he asked me.

“I... I don’t know,” I confessed. “I just don’t want to do the wrong thing. I love you. I love Rhys. There’s nothing I’d want more than for us to be together like that, but I’m scared.”

“Me, too.”

“You are?”

“Darling, I’m scared shitless, but I’m mostly terrified of not having you in my life in the ways that I want you. The last thing I’d ever want to do is waste time, because I know just how precious it is.”

It felt good to know he was experiencing some of the same fears I was. For that reason alone, it eased some of my concerns. But mostly, it was the words he’d said that hit me the hardest.

Time was precious. There wasn’t nearly enough of it, especially not with the people we loved. Nothing had made me as happy in months as Banks and Rhys had. If I could gobble up more time with the both of them, especially after all that I’d been through, I should take it.

And Banks deserved to have the same.

So, I smiled at him, nodded, and said, “Okay, Banks. I’ll move in with you.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s crazy, but I think we’re worth it.”

He let out a laugh, pulled me in close for another hug, and promised, “We are.”

Following a few moments of silence, I said, “I don’t have any food for Henry. Or a bed.”

“After Rhys wakes up, we’ll go out and get whatever Henry needs.”

That’s when it hit me. “What do you think Rhys is going to do when he sees Henry?”

“Considering Henry’s now part of the family, let’s hope Rhys likes him.”

Family.

Banks believed Henry and I were part of his family.

It was at those words, I burst into tears.

TWENTY-FIVE



Lamise

“Dad, Dad, Dad.”

I glanced up in the rearview mirror, saw Rhys’s adorable face in the mirror attached to the headrest facing him in his car seat, and smiled. The little boy was such a breath of fresh air, and he’d changed my whole life.

“Dad’s going to be so excited if you keep that up, Rhys,” I told him, focusing my attention on the road again.

“Dad... Dad,” he repeated his new favorite word.

Rhys and I were on our way back from the park, where Henry had joined us. The mere thought of how I’d spent my day filled me with such warmth and happiness.

It had been three months since Banks located Henry and rescued him.

Three months since he’d asked me to move in with him.

Three months I’d been living my life feeling the happiest I could ever remember being.

Sometimes, when that thought passed through my mind, there was a twinge of guilt. But it never lasted more than a few seconds, because I’d quickly remind myself what Graham had said to me. He wanted me to move on and find happiness, and I had to believe if he could, he’d tell me he was relieved I’d successfully done that.

Of course, things had been a little crazy over the last three months. Not only had I officially moved in with Banks and Rhys, but I also had to cope with learning the truth about what happened to my former fiancé.

In the first few weeks that followed the takedown at the house where Henry had been living, presumably since Graham died, there'd been an unmistakable edge of determination in Banks. It was clear he wanted me to have the answers I deserved, the truth about what happened to Graham, but he needed to respect the process of making that happen. Banks had to exercise his control and restraint in the situation to give the authorities the time they needed to complete their investigation.

Fortunately, they'd managed to do that, convincing one man of many who'd been arrested in the whole operation to share the truth in exchange for reduced charges and sentencing.

While it was a relief to know they'd gotten to the bottom of it, I wasn't sure it gave me the feeling of peace I'd been hoping it would.

Because it hadn't been good, even if it was all just as Graham had said it was in the video he'd left for me.

There'd been a mix-up at the dog park. As it turned out, the backpack Graham lost roughly two months before he died hadn't actually been lost. It was simply that two of them existed—one was Graham's, and one belonged to one of the men in the drug running operation.

At the end of a trip to the dog park where Graham had set his backpack down, he must have picked up the wrong one. I could only assume Graham hadn't realized his mistake until sometime well after he'd left the park, either later that same night, or possibly even the next day.

Unfortunately, the man who wound up with Graham's backpack had no problem locating the house we'd lived in, since he had Graham's wallet. Another assumption I'd made was that when the man came to the house, I must not have been there. Either that, or this man stayed outside our house

until Graham left, followed him somewhere, and talked to him afterward.

My gut was leaning toward the man having arrived at our home, because I'd been threatened. Apparently, the backpack Graham had picked up contained cash. Lots of it, too. While there was no concrete proof of just how much was there, it was believed to be no less than a hundred thousand dollars based on the amount of drugs and cash that had been seized following Banks's investigation.

Detective Shaw shared that the man he had in custody who was talking revealed that those in charge weren't willing to allow Graham to do a simple exchange of the backpacks and belongings. Wanting to make sure he wouldn't go running to the police, Graham had a choice. Either he'd have to make a drug run, one where they'd have their own pictures and evidence against him, or they'd come after me.

It broke my heart. That was the thing Graham had done that he wasn't proud of. He'd gone and done what they'd asked him to do, clearly under duress, simply to protect me.

And he'd done it believing it was a one-time thing. Evidently, that wasn't the case, and it was ultimately what led to him being killed.

Following that first drug delivery, Graham had been told he was part of their operation now. They wanted him working regularly with them, and he refused. Instead of coming to me, so we could go to the police, Graham kept quiet. He never even altered so much as his routine, likely an attempt on his part to pretend everything would be okay and to prevent me from ever thinking something was wrong.

A liability for these drug dealers, Graham was murdered. The snake bite was purposeful, having been executed as a means to make his death look like an unfortunate accident.

It had been harder than I expected to hear the truth. Though I knew in my heart before I'd ever been given the details that it wasn't going to be good, it still hurt worse than I'd imagined it would. The only positive thing I could take from it was knowing how much Graham loved me, how far he

was willing to go to protect me and keep me safe. But even that conclusion wasn't easy to draw, as I questioned how he could keep something so important from me.

Banks had been wonderful. He was understanding and compassionate about everything, and he had no problem discussing the whole situation with me. I'd wondered if there'd be jealousy or frustration, but it was never there.

He understood Graham had been an important part of my life, just as Violet had been monumental in his. Graham and Violet would always be there in our hearts. Banks and I talked at length about that, knowing we both had reasons to feel frustrated with them for the way things turned out, but also knowing it was important to remember the best about both of them. In the end, Banks and I had each other, and we could only hope, wherever they were, Violet and Graham were happy for the both of us.

Because we were deliriously happy.

I knew I was.

And as I pulled up outside the house, Rhys and Henry in the backseat, I continued to lean into the good I had in my life now.

It was too short to spend my days wallowing in sorrow and despair. Sure, I could have a bad day every now and then, but more often than not, I chose to be happy.

Rhys made it easy.

Henry made it fun.

Banks made it worth it.

I parked, got out, and moved to get Rhys. Henry waited patiently while I lifted Rhys out of his car seat, and only after he was safe in my arms did my dog hop out. The weather had turned and was gorgeous enough to be outside, so we'd spent some time today at the park.

While Rhys was on the slides and swings, Henry kept a watchful eye over him.

Nothing had made me happier than seeing the way they got along. Rhys thought Henry was the best thing in the world, and Henry was as protective as ever over Rhys. It warmed my heart to see it.

“Come on, boy,” I urged Henry after closing Rhys’s door. We made it inside, and as I set Rhys down, so he could play while I popped dinner in the oven, I said, “Daddy’s going to be home soon.”

“Dad!” Rhys shouted back.

All I could do was laugh.

Once Rhys was occupied with his toys, I moved to the kitchen to get the oven turned on. When Rhys was down for his nap earlier today, I’d prepared everything for dinner, so now it was simply a matter of getting the oven up to temp and assembling the ingredients. Fortunately, I could multi-task, because there was a clear view of Rhys from the kitchen. If there hadn’t been, I’d never have left him alone.

As it was, Rhys was crawling all over the place, and he frequently found ways to get himself into things he shouldn’t. We’d reached that stage where keeping him contained was mostly an impossibility.

Once I’d closed the door on the oven and set a timer, I made my way back into the living room with Rhys. We played for a while, Henry taking the time to rest and relax after an exciting day out.

Ultimately, we got around to working on Rhys’s new favorite thing—standing. He’d been pulling himself up a lot and getting to his feet, but it didn’t last long, and he often would fall to his bottom.

Just as we heard the door open, an indication Banks had returned home from work, I spun Rhys around in my arms. He was standing up in front of me, my hands under his arms as he tried to steady himself.

The moment Banks came into view, he saw us on the floor, crouched down, and asked his son, “What are you doing?”

Rhys decided it was time. He lifted one foot up and stepped forward. I loosened my hold, but kept both hands underneath his outstretched arms. He lifted his other foot, Banks's eyes widening at what was turning out to be an unexpected, exciting, and monumental milestone.

As Rhys took another step, moving farther out of my reach, I bit my lip and tensed my body. Rhys continued forward, his upper body making him sway a bit and propelling him forward faster than it seemed his legs could carry him. He seemed to understand what he needed to do to make it to his dad, but he just wasn't fast enough. Rhys took about two and a half more steps before Banks had to reach out and catch him.

Scooping his son up in his protective arms, Banks stood and tossed Rhys slightly in the air before catching him and pulling him close to kiss him. "Walking, little man? Are you kidding me? You just took your first real steps."

Rhys's squeals of laughter filled the air as Banks focused his attention on me, smiling like I'd never seen before.

"He did it," I bubbled.

Banks shifted Rhys into one arm, held his other out to me, and said, "Come here."

I went, immediately tucking my body close to his, as he leaned down to press a sweet kiss to my lips.

"Two of the best things to come home to," he murmured. "Rhys's first steps and kisses from you. I think I've got it made."

I grinned at him and added, "And dinner should be done any minute now, so don't forget that."

As soon as I got the words out, the timer started going off.

Banks smiled back at me. "Three of the best things to come home to."

"Yeah, well, it was the least I could do, considering how wonderful my morning was, thanks to you."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Two orgasms and breakfast. I'd say you made out alright."

Henry's head butted into our legs. Apparently, he'd rested enough to get up and greet Banks. Releasing his hold on me, Banks bent down and gave Henry a few scratches on the head.

"I'm going to get dinner out of the oven."

While Banks showered both boys with attention, I worked quickly to get dinner on the table. Five minutes later, the three of us were sitting down to eat while Henry had his dinner, too.

"How was work?" I asked.

"Good, I guess. Things are a little hectic for Blaze, so I'm doing what I can to help him out. How was the park?"

My eyes slid to Rhys. "He's loving the slide right now, and it terrifies me."

"I suspect these things aren't going to get easier the older he gets."

No. No, they weren't. But that didn't mean I wasn't looking forward to every ounce of stress I knew I'd be feeling as Rhys continued to grow and try new things. The breath holding and clenched jaw I'd had in the living room only minutes earlier was just the beginning. Of that, I was certain.

"Speaking of him getting older," I started. "I wanted to let you know that I've come up with a couple of ideas for favors."

"Favors?"

"For Rhys's first birthday party, Banks. What else would I be talking about?"

He shook his head, his lips twitching. "Doesn't it seem excessive?"

I didn't want Banks thinking I was trying to make him do things that were unnecessary. "It's customary to do, but if you'd rather not, I can just cross them off the list. He's your son, Banks, so whatever you decide you want is what we'll do. I'm just trying my best to help make sure you don't feel overwhelmed with everything by waiting until the last minute. I want Rhys to have a nice party, however you want that to happen."

Banks tipped his head to the side, quietly assessing me.

“What’s that look for?” I asked.

He shook his head, dismissing whatever thoughts he had running through his mind. “Nothing. What did you have in mind for the favors?”

I didn’t like that he wasn’t sharing whatever he’d been thinking. Even still, I decided not to press him on it. “It’s okay if you don’t want them. Really. Besides, most of the people that are being invited are adults anyway.”

“I want the favors,” he insisted.

After taking a moment to study him, to discern if he was being honest, I went on to tell him about the favors. Of course, it led to an entire discussion about the party, more than one dinner conversation could handle. But in the end, we got enough worked out that I’d have plenty to keep me busy for the next couple of days.

Following some play time together after dinner, Banks continued with the tradition of handling Rhys’s bath time. I used that time to clean up from dinner and take some time to myself to shower and get ready for a quiet night with my man.

Though I loved having some time to myself, the truth was that I found I didn’t need much of it. Maybe it was because I’d experienced being alone for so many months with the dreadful thought in my mind that it would always be that way.

I didn’t know.

What I did know was I adored my time throughout the day with Rhys, and I cherished the time the three of us, along with Henry, had when Banks got home from work. But nothing compared to how much I loved my time alone with Banks after the rest of the house was quiet and had gone to sleep.

Tonight was no different.

Banks had walked into the bedroom after putting Rhys down not that long ago, and he immediately went into the bathroom to grab a shower. When he walked out in nothing but a towel, a smile played at my lips.

“A little presumptuous this evening, wouldn’t you say?”

He cocked a brow. “Am I, though?”

Banks clearly knew me too well already. Then again, this had sort of become our norm. We’d curl up in bed together and spend some time talking to one another before we wound up doing a fair bit of touching and kissing that ultimately led to lovemaking.

I pressed my lips together and shook my head.

His eyes danced with delight before he moved about the room, taking care of a few things. He made one final trip into the bathroom, lost the towel, and finally joined me in the bed.

After we were tucked close to one another and had shared a few kisses, I said, “Today was a great day.”

“Agreed. There’s only one thing that would have made it better.”

“What’s that?”

“If I had been home with you, Rhys, and Henry all day.”

I smiled. “Fair argument. I can’t believe he’s taking steps on his own now. Before you know it, he’s going to be running all over the place.”

Banks groaned. “How can something that makes me so happy to see make me feel so sad at the same time?”

“Because he’s your baby, and you don’t want him to grow up,” I reasoned. “Time’s a thief. It’s going by so fast.”

“It feels like he was just a newborn, and now he’s getting ready to walk.”

There was a bit of sorrow in Banks’s tone. The last thing I wanted to do was add to it, but there was something that had been on my mind for quite some time, particularly after things got serious, and I moved in with him. I started thinking more and more about my future, and if I put off talking to him about this any longer, I might have been setting myself up for disaster.

“Do you want more?”

“What?”

“Children. Do you think you want more children one day?” I asked.

Banks went silent. If I was honest, it terrified me. I could imagine the thoughts he had going through his mind, and while I could understand the fear he might have had, I also knew this was a conversation we needed to have.

“I always wanted more than one,” he admitted. “But things took a turn I never expected. I won’t lie and say I don’t want Rhys to have a sibling, but I need to be honest and tell you that the thought of it terrifies me.”

I closed my eyes and nodded slowly.

“Do you want children?” he asked me.

I didn’t hesitate to open my eyes and respond. “I do.”

Banks allowed his eyes to roam over my face for a long time. I could see everything in his expression, a mix of emotions he wasn’t even remotely close to getting a handle on sorting through.

Not wanting him to feel any worse or create more turmoil for him, I spoke. “I understand where your mind is, Banks. I’d never expect you to endure something you can’t handle in your heart. But I have to be honest with you, too. I want to be a mom. It’s one of the things I’ve always wanted. And that doesn’t mean I don’t love Rhys. God, I don’t think I could love him more if he was mine. I want that experience, though.”

Banks continued to stare at me, a battle being waged inside him.

I couldn’t handle it, so I went on. “Maybe we should have talked to each other about this sooner than now. Feelings have gotten involved, and it would be terribly difficult to walk away from you, but you need to know how I feel.”

“Darling, I can’t lose you,” he rasped.

I lifted my hand to the side of his face and cupped his cheek. This was it. This was what I knew he was worried

about. He was terrified that I'd suffer the same way Violet did.

"I understand. I should have said something sooner." It felt like the weight of the world had settled on my shoulders.

"What would that have changed?" he asked.

Shaking my head slightly against the pillow, I replied, "It might not have made things any easier for us, but at least we wouldn't have gotten to this point. I certainly wouldn't have moved in with you."

"I don't think you understand, Lamise."

"I do. I get it."

"No, you don't. Because if you understood what I meant when I said I can't lose you, you'd know that I meant I can't lose you at all. I told you I was going to love you differently. I can't change the things I didn't recognize in the past, but I can be sure they don't happen in the future. Does it terrify me? Of course, it does. But I want you, and I want you to be happy. If you want babies, darling, I'll give them to you."

The ache that had formed in my chest and the pain in my throat were gone, replaced by warmth and an overwhelming sense of hope. "Really?"

"I think I'd like to wait a little bit before we make that happen, but yes, really."

Unable to stop myself, I buried my face in his chest, held on to him, and took several slow, deep breaths. I didn't want to cry.

This man was everything I didn't know I needed in my life.

Banks gave me some time to pull myself together. A minute or two later, he decided to lighten the mood. "You know, just because I'm not ready to make a baby right now doesn't mean I'm not interested in practicing."

I smiled against his chest, pulled my head back to look up at him, and searched his handsome face. "I love you, Banks."

"I love you, too."

“Kiss me and show me.”

So, that’s what he did.

Banks kissed me and showed me just how much he loved me. And though we weren’t ready for it to happen just yet, Banks proved he really didn’t need the baby making practice, because everything he did was already perfect.

EPILOGUE



Banks

Six weeks later

“This is spectacular.”

At my mom’s words, I couldn’t stop the smile from forming on my face. Then again, it hadn’t exactly been missing throughout the day today anyway.

While there was cause for some emotionally heavy moments, it had been a mostly happy occasion.

Today was Rhys’s first birthday, and we were celebrating with a party. Though I didn’t doubt my mom would have stepped up to the plate in a big way if I had needed her to, the only reason Rhys’s party was everything that it was, was all thanks to Lamise.

Without giving it a second thought, she dove into the planning and preparation, but her motives were always clear. She wasn’t doing it to try to take over and insert her wishes into anything. Lamise had done it all to take the load off of me. She’d researched or brainstormed, then came to me to ask what I had wanted.

I’d appreciated it, even if I hated that she didn’t seem to believe she was allowed to simply make the decision on her own. It became clear to me weeks ago when she’d wanted to discuss favors for the party with me and indicated Rhys was my son, so it was my decision.

Granted, that was the truth, but it bothered me to think that she believed she wasn't anything more to him than just a nanny at this point.

Obviously, nobody could be who Violet was to Rhys. Violet had cared and nurtured him while he was growing in her belly. She brought him into this world, giving him life.

Though I intended to make sure he always knew who his mother was, the sad truth was that Rhys would never remember her.

He'd remember Lamise.

It was only a matter of time before he said that three-letter word to her, giving her the title I don't think she was prepared to hear. Whether she believed it or not, Lamise would be the woman Rhys would call "Mom" one day soon.

Looking around at all that she'd done to make this party a success, it was a title I believed she deserved.

Apparently, my mom felt the same way.

"It is spectacular," I confirmed. "Lamise really went above and beyond to make this happen."

"She said this was all your ideas."

I let out a laugh. "Yeah, right. They were only my ideas in the sense that she gave me options and I chose what I liked best. This was all Lamise."

My mom and I looked away from one another and out at the party. While my mom was probably looking at everything Lamise had done—the decorations, the food, and the desserts, to name a few—my eyes went to the woman who'd stolen my heart. She was standing there, talking animatedly with her mom, sister, and best friend. When she finished whatever it was she was sharing with them, her sister said something in response, and Lamise threw her head back, laughing.

Something swelled in my chest at the sight. There was something about her that was simply beautiful, inside and out.

"I'm so glad she's in your life."

Reluctantly, I tore my attention away from Lamise and returned it to my mom. Smiling, I nodded. “Yeah, me too.”

“I love seeing you smiling again.”

“It’s all because of her. I never thought it was possible, but I can actually see a future for myself again.”

My mom’s head tipped to the side. “What does that future look like?”

I swallowed hard, wondering if it was smart to admit this out loud. Then I realized, this was my mom. As a parent, there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t want Rhys to come and talk to me about, good or bad.

“I want to marry her. I want to make her my wife. And I intend to do it soon.”

“I’m so happy for you, Banks. You deserve this. After all that you struggled through, I’m so glad you allowed Lamise into your heart.”

An overwhelming sense of peace moved through me, something I’d been feeling a lot lately. “I am, too. Because she’s changed my life. She’s made it better. And when I see all that she’s done for not just me but for Rhys as well, it’s hard not to love her.”

My mom placed her hand on my arm and squeezed. “What about Violet?”

There was nothing sinister in my mom’s tone. Her question was asked with genuine concern and curiosity.

“I’ll always love her, and I believe she knows that. I also think she’d want this. There’s no way she wouldn’t want Rhys and me to be happy and have someone in our lives who could give us this, to give us what I know she wished she could have.”

“You’re so lucky, Banks. I hope you know just how lucky you are to have the privilege of loving two incredible women.”

Just like a mother. It didn’t matter how old I got, my mom was always going to be there, not just to support and love me,

but she was going to make sure she imparted lessons and wisdom on me, too.

I couldn't say I didn't get it.

I'd do the same thing for my son.

It was at that moment, Lamise glanced in my direction. She had a gorgeous smile on her face as she lifted a hand and waved at me.

All I wanted to do was kiss her.

So, without taking my eyes off of Lamise, I said, "I've got to go over there to be with her."

"Go. And feel free to pick up your son on the way. Your dad looks a bit worn out from chasing him all over."

I laughed. "Will do."

A moment later, I was making my way through the crowd. Keeping my eyes focused on Lamise, I scooped my son into my arms and continued my journey to her. When I made it there, I curled one arm around her back, my hand landing on her opposite shoulder. I leaned my head down and touched my mouth to hers.

And though I'd believed this was going to be a special moment for the two of us, it seemed the birthday boy had other plans.

"Mom!"

My body froze.

Lamise's body tensed.

Rhys repeated himself and launched himself out of my arms and toward Lamise. "Mom."

Lamise happily took him from me, cuddling him close, as her lips parted and tears filled her eyes.

She was clearly in shock, her stunned expression telling me only a fraction of what was going through her mind.

"Are you okay?"

“Are you?” she countered, her voice a deep rasp. “Banks, I... I don’t want you to think—”

“Stop, Lamise. I know what you’re thinking, and it’s ludicrous. He loves you, and he knows you love him. You’ve been in his life for months, spending whole days with him. You’re the closest thing he’s got to a mom. I think, if you want it, that title is yours.”

Lamise attempted to blink back the tears and choke back the sob, but it was useless. There were too many emotions, so she held on to Rhys and buried her face in my chest.

I wrapped my arms around both of them.

And two months later, just before the start of our first holiday season together, I proposed to Lamise.

PREVIEW OF CAUTION

Prologue

Daisy

“Truth or dare?”

One half of my mouth quirked up in a smile.

It was the easiest question anyone could ever ask me, because the answer would always be the same. As I twisted my neck to the side to glance at the man who’d sat on the stool beside me, I answered. “Dare.”

His reaction was just as I expected—surprised.

“Most girls pick truth.”

Yep.

And that was probably because they didn’t have anything they refused to admit. I wasn’t so lucky. Of course, I wasn’t going to share that with a random stranger in a pub. Smiling, I countered, “I’m not like most girls then.”

It was the truth, but it didn’t have anything to do with the girls specifically. I found it was rare for me to have much in common with anyone, male or female.

Despite that, I still had dreams for my future. Or maybe just one dream—to be loved. Genuinely. I didn’t need any more fake friendships or false declarations of love. I wanted the real deal.

And while I might have had every reason to believe it didn’t exist for me, I refused to accept that. One day, I’d find it.

It was entirely possible the guy who just sat down beside me could be the one to give it to me. So, I didn't mind entertaining him with a fun game of Truth or Dare. Maybe he'd like my bold nature and fun-loving self. It was entirely possible he was the one. I couldn't risk rejecting him off the bat.

He smiled at me, a mischievous look in his eyes. "Alright, then. How about you go put a song on the jukebox and sing along for anyone to hear? I'll even give you the quarter."

The man reached into his pocket, pulled out a quarter, and held it out to me.

"Seriously?"

He shrugged, sending a look my way that indicated he didn't think I'd do it.

I pressed my lips together, fighting the urge to smile, and took the quarter from him. After I stood from my stool, I downed the last of my drink.

I might have been a bit adventurous, but I liked to think I wasn't a complete fool. I didn't know this guy, and the last thing I was going to do was leave my drink unattended with him.

Sucking back the rest of my drink was all about keeping myself safe and had nothing to do with needing liquid courage to carry out the dare.

What I was about to do didn't bother me. I was the kind of girl who'd try anything once. And while I'd certainly done my fair share of loud singing in my car or the shower, I didn't exactly make a habit of doing it in the middle of a crowded pub.

Who knew?

Maybe I'd start a trend, and the next time I came into this pub, they'd have regular karaoke nights.

I scanned the list of songs, smiled when I found one I liked, and dropped the quarter into the machine. After making

my selection, I spun around to face the guy who'd given me the quarter and let out a laugh when the instrumentals started.

Though I wasn't a singer, I knew what it meant to put on a performance. They always said the most believable performances were the ones where it was clear the performer was connecting to the material. In this case, a song. The first two phrases of the song I'd chosen described me perfectly, and many of the lines in the song, in general, fit the bill for my life. So, there was no reason I wouldn't knock this out of the park.

The words started before I made it back to my stool, but that didn't stop me. I sang. I mean, who could blame me? Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" was playing. As I belted out the lyrics, though not as on pitch as Steve Perry, I watched my opponent in our game laugh, clearly finding me entertaining.

Closing the distance between us did little to help diminish my need to do this in a way that indicated I believed I was giving the performance of a lifetime. And the truth was, wasn't that how it should always be? Why do anything if there was no passion behind it?

I didn't care that people around the pub were watching me. It didn't matter what they thought. I was having a blast, and the guy who'd dared me to do this was enjoying himself. That was all that mattered to me.

By the time the song ended, a handful of patrons clapped. I offered a bow in response before climbing onto my stool again.

"I'm impressed."

Refusing to let him out of his turn, I didn't comment on my performance. Instead, I asked, "Truth or dare?"

He chuckled and sighed. "I can't have you showing me up, so I guess it's going to have to be a dare."

I gave the guy a once-over. He was tall, clean cut, and in shape. Though I didn't think he'd be entering any powerlifting contests any time soon, it seemed like he lived an active lifestyle. He reminded me of the kind of guy who played

sports in high school—baseball, maybe—and he wouldn't like a blow to his ego.

So, I used that to my advantage and said, “Order and finish a girly drink.”

It was far easier than the dare I'd been asked to execute, but there was no question he was starting to squirm. Following a beat of awkward silence, he asked, “Should I get a cosmopolitan, or a frozen strawberry daiquiri?”

Narrowing my eyes, I considered his question. “Oh, that's a tough one. Let's go with the cosmo.”

Without any additional hesitation, even if it seemed like it pained him to do it, he ordered the drink. Once it was in front of him, he lifted it to his lips, and with his eyes on me, he drank it. I struggled to contain my laughter throughout.

It was only after we'd completed the first round of the game that things got a bit more comfortable.

“What's your name?” he asked.

Tipping my head to the side, I countered, “Is this part of the game? Because if it is, I don't recall you asking if I was willing to share a truth.”

He shook his head, a smile playing at his lips. “No. This is just a guy seeing a gorgeous girl, without any inhibitions, he wants to get to know better.”

Good answer.

Great answer.

Smiling, I revealed, “I'm Daisy.”

He returned the smile. “Daisy. I'm Jeremy.”

“It's nice to meet you.”

Shaking his head, Jeremy insisted, “No, Daisy. The pleasure is all mine.” The bartender walked past, and Jeremy stopped him. “Can we get some peanuts, please?”

“Sure.”

Jeremy returned his attention to me. “You aren’t allergic, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Good. Okay. Truth or dare?”

I hadn’t realized we were going to continue the game, but I was up for it. “Dare.”

“Still no truth, huh?”

“It’s going to take a lot more effort for me to give you that response.”

“Challenge accepted. Alright, so, I dare you to tie the stem of a cherry into a knot using only your mouth.”

Though it wasn’t something I’d attempted before, I knew exactly what this trick was all about. I rolled my eyes at him.

Jeremy laughed and held his hands up in surrender. “Hey, can you blame me?”

Shaking my head, I lifted my hand up to catch the bartender’s attention. “Fresh cherry margarita.”

“You’ve got it.”

While we waited for my drink, Jeremy and I popped handfuls of peanuts into our mouths. There was a strong flirtatious vibe between us, and those few moments were filled with gorgeous winks and playful smiles.

Once I had my drink in hand, I plucked the cherry out, ate the fruit, and held on to the stem. A few seconds later, I’d slid the stem past my parted lips and got to work. Jeremy’s eyes were focused on my mouth as I worked the stem using my teeth and tongue. It took a bit longer than I would have liked, but I eventually pulled the stem out of my mouth and displayed the result—a perfectly tied knot.

“Truth or dare?” I asked, unable to fight the smile.

His eyes remained fixed on the stem for a bit before he lifted his gaze to mine. “You’re something else. I’m going to go with truth this time.”

Nodding, I asked, “Is this how you approach all women in the pub? With a game of Truth or Dare?”

Something changed in his expression. “I’d like to think I was that smooth, but I’m not. Honestly, I saw you and didn’t know how else I could possibly get you to talk to me. I figured being friendly and doing something non-threatening was the way to go. Plus, you didn’t have a lot of people around you, which is a complete mystery, even if it made me more willing to approach you.”

“Why is that a mystery?”

Jeremy shrugged. “I took one look at you and thought you’d already be spoken for. And if not, I imagined you’d have a bunch of your girlfriends here, enjoying a night out with you.”

Interesting.

Also, it was a shame he hadn’t been wrong about me being alone.

I chose not to comment, and instead, I popped more peanuts in my mouth.

“Am I wrong to assume there’s no boyfriend?” he pressed as I chewed.

After I swallowed and took a sip of my drink, I returned, “I didn’t agree to a truth.”

There was no boyfriend, but I wasn’t going to come out and share that. It would only make me look more pitiful. Or, perhaps I wouldn’t necessarily look more pitiful, but I’d certainly feel that way.

Jeremy’s lips twitched. “Truth or dare, Daisy?”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Dare.”

It was becoming obvious to Jeremy by the second that I wasn’t going to be an easy nut to crack. But he truly seemed up to the challenge. We went back and forth for quite a few rounds of the game, Jeremy being far more forthcoming with information while I sought the adventure.

It was fun. I had a great time, and I enjoyed Jeremy's persistence.

But just as I told myself I was going to do one more dare before answering a truth, it happened.

"Dare."

"I'm going to regret this, but I have to tell you a truth in order to give you the dare," he revealed.

I was beyond curious. "What is it?"

There was a moment of hesitation before he shared, "I initially approached you because I wanted to do something nice for my buddy."

"What?"

"Without making it obvious, he's the guy at the end of the bar, wearing the dark blue tee."

I nodded, lifted my drink to my lips, and looked down in that direction to see the guy he'd been referring to. Fortunately, Jeremy's buddy wasn't looking in our direction.

When I returned my attention to Jeremy, I started eating a couple more peanuts as he revealed, "His girlfriend just broke up with him, and he's been really bummed out. This was the first time I managed to convince him to come out in three weeks. I was kind of hoping I could get you to make him want to drink a little less and see that there are still good women out there."

I cocked a brow. "What exactly would you like me to do?"

He shrugged. "That's entirely up to you, but I think a bit of attention and maybe a kiss from a beautiful woman like yourself would go a long way in cheering a man up."

I felt for Jeremy's friend. Breakups were tough. But while I thought I'd been forming a connection with Jeremy, he really wasn't interested in me. It sucked, but at least I knew the truth now.

Never one to shy away from a challenge, recognizing that it was harmless and would help the guy feel better, I said,

“What’s his name?”

“Mike.”

I took one last sip of my drink, noting I wouldn’t be drinking any more of it, and grabbed the second cherry out of it. Then I made my way over to Mike.

“Hey,” I said when I made it over to where he was.

Mike smiled. “Hi.”

“Have you ever seen a girl tie a cherry stem using only her mouth?” I asked.

His face lit up, even if the scent of alcohol was overpowering him. He really was drowning his sorrows. “Even if I have, I’ve never seen you do it, so it would be like the first time, wouldn’t it?”

“Fair point.”

I closed my mouth around the cherry, ate the fruit, and disposed of the pit. Then, I worked my magic with the stem. When I pulled it out of my mouth and showed off the knot, it was clear Mike had enjoyed the show. “Impressive.”

I took a step closer, placed my hand on his chest, and leaned into him. “That’s not all I can do.”

“Is that so?”

With a smile on my face, I nodded.

He lowered his mouth to mine. “What’s your name?”

“Daisy,” I whispered, closing the remaining distance and kissing him.

It wasn’t bad. I mean, it wasn’t anything I’d remember in the morning, but if it helped to lift the guy’s spirits, I was okay with it. But kissing was as far as it was going to go.

Mike and I were in the middle of the kiss when I suddenly felt an excruciating pain at the back of my head as my hair was yanked and a woman shouted, “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Stacy,” Mike said, horrified.

Oh, no.

Oh, God.

The ex-girlfriend was here.

“I asked you a question, bitch!”

Blinking my eyes, my hands in my hair as I attempted to alleviate the pain from the hold she had on me, I couldn't formulate a response.

“You think you can just walk up to someone else's man and start kissing him?” she shouted, yanking harder.

“No. I... I didn't know he had a girlfriend,” I rasped. “I thought you broke up with him.”

We were stumbling back and forth. I was desperately hoping Jeremy was going to come over and clear up the confusion.

“Broke up? Bitch, we're engaged.”

My body tensed even more than it already was, but instead of being able to react to the news Stacy had just delivered, we fell into a table, knocking it over.

That's when chaos ensued.

I was on the floor attempting to get free of this woman as drinks on a tray from a waitress passing by flew everywhere. I couldn't pay attention to what was going on around me, but lots of shouting and sounds of the wooden furniture hitting the ground were unmistakable.

“Help me,” I shouted, hoping someone would do something.

Nobody came.

I had no choice but to save myself from this. Stacy was pulling my hair and slapping me, her body on top of mine.

I used all the strength I could muster up in my lower body to try to get her off. I didn't get her completely off, but I did manage to leave her unbalanced. It was enough to give me the time I needed to strike her back, which ultimately forced her off of me.

Then, I scrambled to my feet and started moving in the opposite direction. The entire pub was a mess of people either jumping into the mix and fighting with one another or standing back, steering clear, and trying to clean up the mess of alcoholic drinks everywhere.

My eyes went to the stools where Jeremy and I had been sitting. He wasn't there.

A moment later, I saw him at the exit. I was struggling through the sea of people, attempting to avoid getting hit, when he looked back, saw me, and sent a sinister smile my way.

What was that all about?

I got to the exit as fast as I could, hoping to catch him, but it was chaotic in the pub. By the time I managed to get outside and scan the parking lot, I didn't see Jeremy anywhere.

Confused by all that had happened but not so far gone that I was willing to wait around for Stacy to find me and start another fight, I decided it was best to get out of there.

I walked away from the pub and toward my car. I'd had one drink and a few sips of the cherry margarita. I wasn't drunk by any means. That said, if I had been, I was sure my fight would have cleared things up rather quickly for me.

Twenty minutes later, I was grateful to be home.

But my relief was short-lived. Because not even twenty-four hours later, the police showed up at my front door, and I learned that Jeremy was nowhere close to being the guy of my dreams.

Instead, he was a nightmare.

Get Caution here.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.K. Evans is a contemporary romance author of over fifty published novels. While she enjoys writing a good romantic suspense novel, Andrea's favorite books to write have been her extreme sports romances. That might have something to do with the fact that she, along with her husband and two sons, can't get enough of extreme sports.

Before becoming a writer, Andrea did a brief stint in the insurance and financial services industry and managed her husband's performance automotive business. That love of extreme sports? She used to drive race cars!

When Andrea isn't writing, she can be found homeschooling her two sons, doing yoga, snowboarding, reading, or traveling with her family. She and her husband are currently taking road trips throughout the country to visit all 50 states with their boys.

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