



Up IN
FLAMES

BATON ROUGE BACHELORS DUET
A BAD BOY ROMANCE

USA Today Bestselling Author

KE OSBORN

The title 'Up IN FLAMES' is rendered in a stylized, metallic font. 'Up' is in a cursive script, 'IN' is in a small, spaced-out sans-serif font, and 'FLAMES' is in a large, bold, sans-serif font. A horizontal line runs beneath the word 'FLAMES'. To the left of the title is a vertical, textured black stroke resembling a paintbrush or charcoal mark.

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BATON ROUGE BACHELORS DUET BOOK ONE

K E Osborn

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Up in Flames
Baton Rouge Bachelors Duet Book One

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An inferno.

That's what my life became the second I laid eyes on her. I'm ruthless, calculating, cold-blooded. Second-in-charge of an underworld establishment that men fear and the elite strive for membership—there's no room in my world for an innocent like her.

The Baton Rouge Bachelors run this town. Politicians, celebrities, and high society are known to use our services. But make no mistake, the Bachelors are cruel, brutal, and malicious.

You need something done, we will do it—*for a price, of course.*

But the women who stand beside us need to be hard. Cunning. And just as heartless as we are. So when I meet Makaylie, and she is anything but, I know I must protect her from my vile world at all costs. Even if it means I have to watch everything I have worked for, everything I have built, go up in flames.

*From K E Osborn, USA Today bestselling author comes...
The Baton Rouge Bachelors Duet.*

An opposites attract spin-off from the NOLA Defiance MC Series, but you don't need to read NOLA Defiance to enjoy this duet. The alpha hero has touch-her-and-I-will-unalive-you vibes, with a great supporting cast that will keep you on the edge of your seat.



DEDICATION

For all those good girls who like a bad, bad boy.



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CHAPTER ONE

MAKAYLIE

Thursday – Thanksgiving

Rain pummels my windshield, making it hard to see as I travel toward the Horace Wilkinson Bridge more commonly known as the New Bridge, heading back to my apartment.

Josephine, or Joey as I call my best friend, and I live in the River House Apartments in Baton Rouge, which is perfect for us. Our apartment is small, with two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a living area the size of a teapot, but it doesn't matter because we both love it. Our place isn't the tiniest in the world, but for me, it's quite different, considering I grew up in a spacious manor in Lafayette with my parents, Deanna and Spencer. Spending Thanksgiving at home always gives me a sense of warmth and belonging, but I've made my home in Baton Rouge.

It's where I belong now.

I'm almost at my apartment as I head across the New Bridge in Gertrude, my bright red 1960s Ford Thunderbird convertible, while the rain clouds continue their assault and pour their misery onto the world below. Unfortunately, the top of my convertible is closed because of this relentless rain, but normally in summer, I'd have it open, feeling the sun on my face and the wind blowing my hair. This car is my father's pride and joy. He's a mechanic and loves working on older-style vintage muscle cars. I can't say I blame him—they are amazing to look at and drive, but I dislike the attention I receive when I drive her around.

As I make a left on Terrace Avenue, Gertrude jolts under me and starts to cough and splutter.

"No, no, *no*... not again, Gertie," I call out, pulling over to the side of the road and banging my hands on the oversized white steering wheel. "You vintage piece of crap," I murmur under my breath while shaking my head.

My eyes shift to the rain still drowning the pavement, and I tense at the thought of getting soaking wet. I've never been a fan of water, not even rain. I nearly drowned when I was ten, so anything larger than a shower or a glass of water freaks me the hell out. I even detest baths. So standing out in the

rain, on a busy road at night, trying to push my stupid, gorgeous, pathetic car to safety, that shit terrifies me.

Exhaling, I moan as I unclip my seat belt and open my door, stepping out. The water slaps me in the face, instantly unsettling me, as I move into position to try and push Gertie off the road. I'm a small, not overly muscular woman, so this is tough, and I can't help the sense of panic creeping in, considering this is a gargantuan muscle car.

Cars fly past me in a mad dash to get home from their Thanksgiving Day out.

The night sky is dark due to the clouds hanging low in the sky, and the street lamps filter through in a glittery effect between the splattering of the rain. It's difficult to see anything as the water continues to fall, constant and unforgiving.

"Argh, give me a break, Mother Nature," I call out, trying to push harder, but Gertie won't budge as I make some sort of effort to get her off the road. Another car flies past me, causing a cascade of muddy water to splash over my legs. I halt my movement and groan out loud in annoyance as the liquid soaks through my jeans and ballet flats.

"You've gotta be kidding me!" I groan in annoyance. I turn to push Gertie again, but another car rushes by before I start, pelting me with another wave of water. But this time, it shoots into my face and over my entire body, drenching my short blonde bobbed haircut.

I let out a gasp as my arms fall to my sides, and I shake uncontrollably, not only from the cold but from the fright as I try to wipe the water away from my face. "You fucking asshole," I call out, starting to feel emotional.

Nope!

I won't cry.

There's no need for tears.

I am stronger than that.

I am an independent woman who can handle a car breakdown during a torrential downpour.

You can do this, Makaylie.

The problem is I know nothing about mechanics.

I turn back, moving into position to try and steer the car off the road again, but I'm not having any luck. It's too heavy and waterlogged. I'm starting to wonder if I should get back in the car and wait until I can call someone to rescue me.

That's when I hear a car pull up behind me.

I turn to a man sliding out of his car and tense. I'm very aware of stranger danger. Even at twenty-six, a woman stranded in the middle of the night is like a direct line for weirdos.

"Can I help you?" the guy calls out, pulling his leather jacket off. I can't quite make him out in the dark as his broad frame bolts toward me, but when he reaches me, his face comes into view, and my mouth drops open.

He's tall and has a flawlessly maintained stomach by the looks of his now-drenched black tee. My eyes wander back up to his extremely attractive face. This man is ruggedly handsome, and my chest squeezes when he looks at me and smiles.

Teeth—perfect.

Jaw—chiseled.

Eyes—from what I can see in the moonlight and twinkling hue from the streetlights, they're brilliant blue.

"Are you okay?" he asks as he reaches out, placing his leather jacket around my shoulders.

Oh my God! It smells incredible, and I am instantly intoxicated.

In a moment of awe that shocks me, I look up at him in a daze. Feeling completely numb, whether by his presence or from the wind's chill, I'm uncertain, but I am awestruck by his appearance and good nature.

"I, um... Gertie sputtered to a stop and won't start," I mumble as the rain trickles down my cheeks, pooling at my chin. It does the same to him, and I want to reach up and lick it off his face. *Shit! Where did that come from?*

"Gertie?" he questions, and I shake my head, seeming to come out of my trance long enough to point to my car.

He chuckles and walks up to her, bending inside and flicking something. "Does she do this often?" he asks as he approaches the car's front, lifting the hood.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I follow him to the front and nod, realizing I am freezing cold and trembling. My teeth chatter as I watch some random, incredibly hot guy having a look under my hood. You'd think that with my father being a mechanic, I would have learned a thing or two. But no matter how much he tried, I could never understand how the carburetor works, or for that matter, how brakes function, let alone what a thermostat does.

I have no fricking idea!

His head pops up from under the hood, and our eyes connect. A sudden zap of something surges through me, turning my frozen, wet body into a quivering, overheated, lust-filled mess. As he smiles at me, I swallow hard and casually return the gesture, trying not to give away the fact that, secretly, I'm having impure thoughts about us doing nasty things in the back of my Thunderbird.

"I can... ah, I see your problem," the man says as he walks toward me, looking me up and down.

I raise my brow while waiting for him to continue.

"Your hose is leaking. It's unclamped itself and is in need of a good screw," he says, then smirks overly wide.

My eyes bulge at the innuendo, but I also can't help giggling quietly. Once I control myself, I mumble, "Don't we all."

"Don't we all?" he queries.

"Need a good screw," I answer before thinking.

His eyes open wide, and I cringe, realizing I actually said that aloud.

"Oh my God, I didn't mean that how it sounded. I, um..."

He bursts out laughing as I put my head in my hands while he walks back to his car.

Good one, Makaylie!

I have no idea what he's doing as I wallow in my self-pity party for one.

The hottie strolls back, grinning wide as he walks past me with a bottle of water and a screwdriver. I continue to watch him while trying to move past my embarrassment, and I think he looks a little familiar. Like, maybe I recognize him from somewhere, but I can't quite place where. It slips my mind the minute he drops the screwdriver and bends over, giving me a view of his perfectly toned ass through his soaked jeans. My breath catches when he turns his head, spotting me eyeing his assets, and I quickly look away.

He chuckles and stands, then closes the hood. "All fixed," he states while walking over to me and shoving his hand out for me to shake. I can't help but notice the gold ring on his left-hand pointer finger. It's square, with the letter 'B' branded on the metal. "Cain Barrington, nice to meet you," he offers.

Ahh... 'B' must be for Barrington—fair enough.

I hold out my hand, and he takes it firmly and shakes it once. All I can hear is a hum, almost like an electrical surge crackling through the storm above us, but I can't see any lightning. There's energy or a pulse coursing between us, making all the hairs on my arms stand up. I look into his striking

blue eyes, and something flickers in his as he stares right back into mine. Cain's intense, and while the rain continues to fall, it feels like he's as taken by me as I am by him. His lips turn up in the corners like he's amused as I realize we are still shaking hands, and I haven't said a damn word.

"Oh, crap, sorry. I'm Makaylie. Makaylie Rayne, as in R.A.Y.N.E., not as in it's raining, which it is, and I am very, very wet." He smirks, and I close my eyes and reopen them slowly at how that came out. "Oh fuck! There I go again... I swear I don't have a filter. I didn't mean that how it sounded." I let out a heavy sigh.

He chuckles and leans down, looking me in the eyes again. My breathing hitches as he bores deep into my eyes with his, then tucks a strand of dripping wet hair behind my ear. The gesture soothes me as my shoulders relax at his touch.

"Do you live close by? You should probably take it slow in case the clamp doesn't hold on the radiator hose. I only had a small bottle of water to put into the radiator, so she might overheat again. I can follow you to ensure you get home safely if you like?" he suggests.

I look at him, stunned.

Does this man think I'm the type of woman who would take him home with me after a few minutes of harmless flirting, undeniable chemistry, and him fixing my hose?

No, thank you!

Instantly, I turn to shrug off his jacket and hand it back to him as my teeth continue to chatter.

"Keep it. Honestly, you look like you need it," Cain says, placing it back over my shoulders.

Nodding, I link my arms through. "Thanks for your help, but I would like to get out of the rain now and go home to a warm bed. Happy Thanksgiving, Mr. Barrington." I place my hand out for him to shake again.

He holds it gently and smiles. "Nice to officially meet you. I hope to see more of you." Cain's eyes run up and down my body.

I let out a small huff at his blatant meaning—*he wants to see me naked!*

I grunt, turning around and slipping into Gertie, slamming my door shut and pulling on the seat belt with an exaggerated tug. Turning her over, she starts beautifully, so I slam her into gear and take off, not looking back, even though I *really* want to.

The River House Apartments are not far from here. Damn Gertie for

breaking down so close to home. At least now, she is semi-fixed, but I will need to get her checked out tomorrow.

Randomly, I look in my rearview mirror and notice Cain is in his car behind me.

Is he following me?

I make my way to the parking garage for our apartments.

He follows.

My brow crunches as my stomach churns, not in a good way. Sure, he's hot as sin, but being mauled in my apartment parking garage isn't something I feel comfortable with happening today.

While parking my car, I watch as he pulls his into a reserved parking area.

What a jackass!

Following me and then parking in someone else's parking space. Wow! He must have balls the size of *Godzilla* to think I am going to take him up to my apartment, where he can have his way with me.

Stepping out of my car, my body is rigid and in fight mode. I'm ready to tell Cain to stay the fuck away from me when he simply locks his car, smirks at me, then turns with a small wave and heads toward the elevators. Outraged, I fold my arms over my chest and watch him with a puzzled stare as he presses the button and stands there waiting.

Scoffing at his brazen attitude, I state, "I'm not coming with you, just so you know."

He nods, wrinkling his nose like he finds my little outburst cute. "I know, and I wouldn't expect you to, Makaylie." Honestly, could he say my name any more seductively? My insides melt, making my knees wobble ever so slightly.

Clenching my jaw as I try to gather some semblance of composure, I storm over to him with a fierce glare. "Why are you waiting for the elevator? I'm not going up to my apartment until you leave!"

He lets out a bemused laugh and nods matter-of-factly. "That's fine by me."

Dumbfounded by his apparent lack of care, I stand here wide-eyed, waiting for him to turn around and leave, but he doesn't. Instead, Cain checks his watch and crosses his arms, looking up at the light showing what floor the elevator is currently on.

I let out a small laugh at his absurdity. "Then why the fuck are you still here?" I ask with a little more malice than intended.

He looks at me with one eyebrow raised and smirks.

Damn him and his gorgeous smirking!

“I’m going upstairs,” he replies carefree like it’s the most normal thing he could have said as he turns back to face the elevator. My eyes bug out of my head, and I scoff, probably a little too loudly, as my muscles clench and my hands ball into fists, my nails digging into my palms with the annoyance and persistence of this guy.

“No... you are *not* going upstairs. I thought I made myself perfectly clear?”

“You made yourself crystal clear, Makaylie.”

“Then *why* are you insisting on coming upstairs with me?” I yell.

“You’re a feisty one, aren’t you?” Cain starts chuckling as he steps closer. I inadvertently take a step back, but my ass hits a concrete pillar and halts my escape as he steps toward me again. My breath hitches as his hand reaches out, touching my face in a tender gesture. He looks into my eyes, and the same electrical buzz I felt before runs through my body, only this time, it can’t be the storm. The intensity surges between us. His hand moves from by my ear to cup my cheek, and without thinking, my head moves into his hand.

Cain smiles and caresses my cheek gently as his eyes lock onto mine, burning with such intensity it’s like nothing I’ve ever witnessed before. His tongue darts out and licks his bottom lip, then he drags his teeth over it. The sight makes me shiver with want, and my chest heaves at the heaviness of the situation. While swallowing heavily, the elevator suddenly chimes, and the doors slide open, distracting me from his incessant gaze.

Instantly, I realize what’s happening and shake my head, which forces his hand to fall away from my face. I take a sidestep, breaking the moment. “Why are you still here?” I ask quietly, secretly not wanting him to leave. I know nothing about Cain besides his name and the fact that he’s mesmerizingly gorgeous and overly flirty.

But somehow, I’m drawn to him.

His lips wind up into a small smile as he looks at me with soft eyes. “I live here, Makaylie. What are *you* doing here?” he asks, even though he clearly knows the answer.

My mouth drops open in shock and a whole heap of embarrassment.

Shit! I knew I recognized him.

Suddenly, it dawns on me how completely self-absorbed I must look, thinking he’s trying to seduce me and wanting to come up to my apartment.

Oh my God, could I be any more embarrassed?

“I... ah... sorry,” I murmur as he steps into the elevator.

“You coming?” Cain places his hand out, holding the door for me. Gulping down my shame and guilt for judging him, I nod as I step inside. The doors close, and I fold my arms over my chest as I shrink into myself, but the room is filled with that same buzz, and for some reason, I can’t help but take a step closer to him. Our hands touch slightly, and the warmth of his hand startles me, causing me to gasp.

“Are you okay?” Cain turns to face me, bringing his hand up to rest on my cheek again, the same way he did in the parking garage. The instant his hand is on my cheek, warmth floods through me. Tingles shoot through my skin, leaving prickles of goose bumps everywhere. I slowly move my hand up to cover his, resting on my cheek while biting my bottom lip. Without a thought, I take another step closer so our bodies are touching.

I want to fight with everything I have to back away, but his magnetism is too strong.

Cain moves his other hand to my waist, resting his open palm on the seam of my soaked jeans. The energy magnifies tenfold. My breaths are short bursts, his chest is heaving, and I’m sure if I try hard enough, my heart can be heard beating ferociously in my chest.

“Makaylie?” he whispers, and I realize I haven’t answered his question.

With a few blinks, I come crashing back to earth and step away as the doors open to my floor. I stumble slightly, and as he attempts to grab me, I right myself to avoid his touch. Glancing back at him, I take a deep breath to regain some feeling in my tingling body. “I’m fine, thank you. Happy Thanksgiving, Cain,” I reply breathlessly as I finally make it out of the elevator.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Makaylie.” His stare is intense, and then, with a smirk, he steps forward as the elevator doors begin to close in front of him.

Taking a step back, I let out a long, drawn-out breath and hold myself, reveling in the experience that is overwhelmingly Cain Barrington.

That was intense.

Just so I can take a breath, I back myself up against the wall. I’ve *never* experienced anything like that before in my life. The sex appeal and pure gravitational pull were undeniable.

Glancing up at the light above the elevator door, I watch it climb with a sense of dread as it continues higher and higher toward the more expensive

apartments.

Cain Barrington is an enigma, and I have no idea if I'll ever see him again.

But fuck! Every single part of me is desperate to do just that.

Who is this man?

And what has he done to me?

CHAPTER TWO

CAIN

The elevator continues upward, and I swallow hard to regain some composure.

Sure, Makaylie is sexy as sin with her little athletic body, cute blonde hair, and adorable button nose.

But fuck me! If you add in her ridiculous foot-in-mouth problem, that innocent vibe oozing from her, and douse her in torrential rain, that woman is fucking sex on a stick. She had me worked up from the moment I saw her on the side of the road trying to push that exquisite old vintage car.

It was her Thunderbird that gained my attention first, but then her tight ass in those soaked jeans came an incredibly close second.

First off, I thought she'd be an easy lay. Someone I could bring back to the apartment, fuck, then ditch. But she's different.

Something about her screamed of innocence, and her demeanor and sass caught me off guard. So, I fixed her ridiculously named car and returned to my apartment to forget.

I was pretty sure I'd seen her vehicle before—it's not common—so I had a feeling she lived in the same apartment building as me. When she pulled into the parking garage, it was my opportunity to tease her a little. She's so fucking feisty it had my balls aching. I wanted to slam her against the concrete pillar and ram my cock into her so hard and fast she would see stars, but unfortunately, I have things that need doing, and that woman doesn't seem the type to be in for a quick fuck and flee. I'm sure she would want to make love in a bed and cuddle afterward—definitely *not* my thing.

The elevator opens on my level, and I step out and walk down the short hall to my door. Water is still dripping from my fingers, and it lines the floor as I step inside and make my way to the living room. The sounds of the usual sports on the television are playing loudly. Soccer would be my guess—it's Rodberg, my roommate's go-to.

I've known him for four years, and he's been a pain in my ass the entire time. He latched onto me from the moment he came into my life and has been more of an annoyance than a friend ever since.

No, not really. But the guy is, let's just say... *interesting*.

Rounding the corner, I step into my spacious, well-kept living room. I like order and cleanliness.

Everything must be balanced in my life.

Everything must be in its place.

Everything is masculine, including my black leather sofas, and the furnishings, which suit me perfectly, are either silver or black.

Cheering erupts from the television, and Rodberg leaps up from the sofa wearing only his tight white briefs. His toned, black and gray tattooed body starts jumping from foot to foot. "Gooooaaal!"

Rolling my eyes, I shake my arms, trying to rid myself of some of the water residue. Rodberg takes off running around the living room like the fucking *Mad Hatter* with his hands in the air, waving them about like an idiot. Groaning in annoyance, I roll my eyes when he spots me.

He stops and smirks while looking me up and down. "Wow! Either you got stuck in the rain, or you got some pussy really, really wet," he jokes.

Turning my lip up at his crude joke, I shake my head and pull my shirt up my body, but it sticks as I try to remove it. "I helped a woman with her broken down car in the rain."

Rodberg's eyes light up, and he grins wide. "And by help, you mean..." He brings his arms to his sides and starts thrusting back and forth in motion with his hips while waggling his eyebrows.

Scrunching my wet shirt into a ball, I throw it at his head when I finally get it off. He laughs and catches it, throwing it down onto my sofa. I cringe but let it go, knowing that the sofa is leather and the water won't damage the upholstery. *He's lucky*. Usually, I'd kick his ass, but right now, I need to change so we can get going.

"Not everything is about fucking, you idiot," I scold and turn toward my bedroom.

He scoffs, pushing my shirt off the sofa, then throws himself over the back, landing on the cushions in a perfectly lying-down position. "Like hell, it isn't! And that can only mean one thing... she turned you down. Sucks to be you. Your dick's wet, but you didn't get your dick wet. Damn shame that."

"Shut up and get dressed. We have to go in." I look down at the gold 'B' ring on my left hand and twist it slightly as I head to my room.

The thunderous racket of running footsteps makes its way down the hall

behind me as Rodberg runs to his room like the damn child he is while I walk into my en suite. Pulling off the rest of my drenched clothes, I grab a towel from the rack and pat myself dry. I don't have time for a shower, so this will have to suffice. Once dry, I get dressed and walk back out to the living room, where I notice Rodberg's dressed and waiting, which is unusual for him.

This idiot only gets dressed when absolutely necessary.

One of the many things about him I find more than a little annoying.

"Honestly, you'd think with it being a holiday, they'd give us the night off," he whines, and I snort.

"This is when everyone's with their families, so we can sort the real deal from the part-timers. Those who show up today are the ones who mean business, Rodberg," I reply, and he nods, finally with a serious look.

"Yeah, okay, that makes sense. Let's get going then. They better have fucking turkey stuffing for me, that's all I'm sayin'."

Shaking my head with a roll of my eyes, I grab my keys with a quick slap over his head and walk out of the apartment and down toward the elevator with Rodberg in tow. Stepping in, I instantly think of Makaylie, the innocent woman who shared this elevator with me not that long ago. And as we pass level seven, I try not to think about all the things I could do to her.

I met the woman for only a moment, and already she's fucking with my thoughts. This *doesn't* happen to me. Women *don't* get inside me—in my brain. I hardly remember their damn names, let alone think of them again after I see them.

The elevator dings, we enter the parking garage, and I walk over to my Chevy Impala. The shiny black paint sparkles even in the dim lights, and I grin while looking at my beast of a car.

Rodberg bobs his head at the car. "Can I drive?"

Raising my brow, I turn up my lip in a snarl. "Have I *ever* let you drive?"

He harrumphs and moves to the passenger side. We both slide in, and I start the short drive to the warehouse on the docks of the Mississippi. With my thumb, I twist the gold 'B' ring on my pointer finger and breathe a little heavier.

"Will Boss be there tonight?" Rodberg asks.

I glance over at him and then back to the road, the rain lighter than before as it hits the windshield. "I think so. But you know he doesn't do much these days. He leaves most of the grunt work to the soldiers."

Rodberg nods, sinks into his seat, and sighs. "Cain, do you think if I tried

to move up the ranks that Boss might—”

“We’re here,” I interrupt, needing to stop that line of talk and pulling into the gates of the warehouse.

Rodberg moving up the ranks is a bad move. I won’t have anything to do with that, not only because I don’t think it’s a good idea, but I like the guy. Moving up would mean anything could happen to him, which would be out of my control.

And I need control—in all things.

That’s why I’m so good at what I do—everything is controlled to the nth degree.

The thunderous roar of the V8 dulls when I turn off the ignition.

Christophe and Killian nod from the door of the warehouse. They’re both standing under the awning out of the weather but wearing their usual bomber jackets and black slacks, showing they’re part of the warehouse staff. Their shoes shine so much that the droplets of rain that hit them slide off with ease from all the polish.

“Man, Killian looks like he has extra kill to his name today,” Rodberg quips with a chuckle.

I glance over at Killian, who’s scowling with his arms crossed over his chest as he frowns at the damn world. But then again, standing at a door in the freezing weather doing nothing for hours on end would probably make me want to stab an asshole too.

“I would suggest *not* saying that to him. C’mon, let’s go.” I step out, and the rain and bitterness of the autumn night hit me. Gritting my teeth, I close my car door with a quiet click and walk hurriedly over to Christophe. He opens the entrance without hesitation, nodding in greeting. Killian, however, simply glances at me but does nothing in acknowledgment.

The fucker’s in a bad mood.

We walk in through the tattered, rusty, old wrought iron door, which, to the outside world, looks more like a shipbuilding yard. But as I step inside, I take in the sights of my home away from home. There’s a large expanse that looks like an abandoned building. It has shipping containers and sections of plastic sheeting scattered everywhere, giving it an abandoned feel.

It’s all a front.

We continue walking, and I kick an empty soup can out of my way—the cans are there to help with the illusion of homeless people camping here. We make it to the back wall where Harry stands, wearing the same bomber jacket

and slacks. He's a much bigger build than the two outside, standing over six foot six, built like the Hulk, with his jacket barely covering his bulging muscles. I have to admit, even I wouldn't like to go one-on-one with that bastard, and I know how to handle myself. He's standing next to the shelves that hold cans of paint, which look like they're supposed to be there, but I know better. I nod to Harry while Rodberg and I hold up our left hands, showing our 'B' rings even though he knows us.

It's protocol.

It's necessary.

It's a prerequisite.

He turns and slides the shelving system to the side, revealing the doorway, and we both step forward into the deep, red-painted hallway. The heavy scratching sound of the shelves moving behind us is clear as we go down the long hall. I roll my shoulders, trying to rid myself of the uneasiness this place always brings out in me. The red does nothing to ease the tension. At the end of the hall, we turn left, and it opens into the main parlor. This space is like something you'd see in a movie—big Chesterfield sofas, men smoking cigars, roulette tables, a giant mahogany bar with a bartender serving drinks. And women—so many topless women.

"Cain! Happy Thanksgiving. Wasn't sure if we'd be seeing you today," Morgan chimes, rushing up to greet me. His darker complexion is accentuated in the dim lighting of the room. The black ink on his tattoos is clearly visible on his hands and fingers before he wraps his arms around me in a back-slapping man hug. I grin and do the same. His thick dreadlocks are tied back today in a semblance of a man bun.

"Morgan," I reply. "You know me, always on the job. Someone's got to do the work if Boss won't. You know how it is."

He smiles wide and tilts his head. "Don't let Boss hear you say that. He'll gut you for even thinking it."

"Ain't that the truth?" I slap his shoulder. "Where's Trap?"

Morgan looks around the room, and his eyes stop at the end of the bar. "Drinking, *as usual*."

Rodberg lets out a bemused laugh, and my muscles tighten at the thought. "Right... and Morgan?" He raises his brow. "Tell Boss what I said, I'll slice the tendons in your ankles, then make you try to run while I send a pack of rabid dogs after you."

He grins wide. "Wouldn't have it any other way, Cain." He pats my

shoulder and walks off to the roulette table. Morgan is one of the good guys. The man has my back, and I respect him as he respects me. And because of that mutual respect, I know he won't tell Boss what I said.

Trap, on the other hand, I wouldn't say shit to him about any-fucking-thing. I know whatever was said would go straight back to Boss. Trap's rank is below me—third in charge. He has some grand illusion of surpassing me, and because of that, he is an ass-kisser.

You have to know who to trust in this life. We may be a brotherhood, but not all brothers love each other as a family should.

"C'mon, let's get this over with," I urge, looking at Rodberg.

He nods, grabbing a cigar from Jonny's mouth as we pass him and puts it in his, taking a long drag. Jonny simply goes about his business knowing Rodberg's a higher rank than him.

Sometimes authority is a good thing.

Sometimes it's a curse.

Depends on the day.

As we walk through, we notice the NOLA Defiance MC brothers hanging about. It's not often they visit, but they're a fucking important supplier to the Baton Rouge Bachelors, so I better get my ass over there and say hello.

I gesture to Rodberg, and we step over to their president, Hurricane, their VP, City, and a couple of other club members, Bayou and Hoodoo. They spot me approaching, and Hurricane grins before speaking, "Cain, good to see ya. You keepin' busy?"

I snort out a laugh. "Always! What brings you 'round?"

"Waitin' to chat to Boss about our product bein' shipped usin' your Bachelor methods."

I glance at Rodberg and see he's taking all this in. "Well, if anyone can help you with shipping, it is us. How's shit at the club?"

Hoodoo snorts. "You know, we're always at war with some bastards."

Bayou cackles. "That's why we have a pet alligator."

Smirking, I give a half-suppressed laugh. "You guys are in a league of your own. I guess an alligator would come in handy. It's a lot fucking cleaner than how we do things."

Hurricane nods matter-of-factly. "Feel free to use him whenever the need arises. We're in an alliance as long as *you* are here and a part of our negotiations."

I put out my hand and shake it with his. "Deal! I'll keep that in mind."

Alfie signals from the back room to Hurricane, and I smirk. “Looks like you’re being summoned. I won’t hold you up from seeing Boss. You need anything or have any questions, you come straight to me. I’m only too happy to help you out anytime.”

Hurricane slaps me on my shoulder. “’Preciate it, brother.” The Defiance men walk off to chat with Boss about whatever business they’re negotiating.

I glance at Rodberg. “Those guys hold their own.”

Rodberg lets out a small huff. “They’re going to get themselves in deep shit one day with the fucked-up crap they are into.”

“Well, maybe we will be there to bail them out.”

Rodberg lets out a belly laugh. “They’ll probably be here to bail *you* out more likely.”

I shove his shoulder, and we walk toward the bar.

Trap sits at the end, downing what looks to be another round of bourbon from the three empty tumblers before him, and I pull up a seat next to him. His hair is cut peculiarly, shaved on the sides, leaving only a tuft on top and a single long strand falling from the back in a rat-tail. That’s how he got the nickname Trap because his hair looks like the tail of a dead rat in a rat trap.

Rodberg pulls up on his other side.

Trap glances up and smirks. “Barrington... nice to see *someone* made it in tonight.”

“Well, *someone’s* got to be on the job.” I remove the tumbler from his hand and place it on the bar.

He grunts and looks up at me. “What the fuck! You have no idea what it’s like. You get every *fucking* thing handed to you on a nice silver platter, Mr. Second-in-Charge.” Trap wipes a hand over his tatty hair. “Being third is like being handed a booby prize. You don’t get to make any of the calls, and I am just another one of the soldiers. I’m like the rest of the low-life scum.” Leaning across, he picks up his drink and throws it back quickly.

“Hey, fucker, I’m not low-life scum,” Rodberg chides as I raise a brow. “Well... not *all* the time.”

I click my tongue to the roof of my mouth in a tut-tut manner. “Trap, I know you want in on the decision-making. I realize you need to be included more. I’ll try to make that happen.”

He leers at me and huffs. “Cain, I want more. I sure as shit don’t want this.”

Tilting my head, I glance at Rodberg, who tenses slightly. “Look, I can’t

promise anything. I'll talk to Boss when I can. Perhaps you can take on some of my load—”

“There's got to be a joke in there about *your load*, right, Cain?” Rodberg teases.

Trap and I both turn to look at him while gritting our teeth. Trap brings his hand up and pushes Rodberg hard in the chest, to which Rodberg loses his balance and falls backward off the stool straight onto the tiled floor with a thud. The room erupts into cheering and leering while Trap finally grins.

Rodberg stays on the floor, flat on his back, smoking his cigar like he's happy where he is and not bothered at all about being there.

Turning back to Trap, I give him a pointed look. “That's all I can give you right now. If you don't like it, you can either put up with it or take it up with Boss yourself. It's your call, Trap.”

“No, I hear you, Cain.” He sniffs and wipes his nose. “Just want to be more active.”

With a nod, I exhale. “I know. But the higher in rank, the less active you get and the more delegating you do. Trap, you have to realize that.”

He rubs his chin. “Maybe I should be the one to break that rule. Show them that bosses *can* do grunt work too.”

“Bosses are bosses for a reason, Trap. Their hands are clean so they can *stay* bosses.” I slap his shoulder and stand. Trap nods, frowning his brow like maybe he's finally getting what I'm saying.

Looking down at Rodberg on the floor, I nudge his side with my foot. “You... up. Come with me,” I demand.

“Oooh... is it playtime?” Rodberg jumps up as I start to walk off.

“Yes. Time to see how our Thanksgiving present is going,” I reply.

He nods. “It's all wrapped up and ready to go,” Trap states.

“Excellent.” I start the walk with Rodberg in tow as I hear Trap slap the bar to gain the bartender's attention. I grunt, knowing not much gets through Trap's head as I tread through the parlor to the black door. Rodberg pulls it open, and we step inside the warehouse. In contrast to the red parlor, this giant room is gray and in sections.

The first room is the collection zone. This is where most of our business is done. We walk past, noting that the Thanksgiving present is wrapped in parcels ready for shipment as Trap promised. The clean chemical smell in the air is thick as we walk past the next room—the black room. Inside, Benny is wearing his black latex coveralls and a mask concealing his face, and he's

standing over a guy strapped to a chair.

I shake my head. “Guess that’s where your turkey stuffing is happening tonight, Rodberg,” I jab, and he flinches ever so slightly as an ear-piercing scream echoes through the warehouse.

You have got to love a Bachelor Thanksgiving.

CHAPTER THREE

MAKAYLIE

Once I reach my apartment, I push the key into the lock and open the door. As I walk in, soft sounds of ocean waves crashing against the shore echo through the room from the television. Joey is dressed in her yoga outfit in a downward dog pose in the middle of our living room.

Josephine Hinkley has been my best friend since we were three years old, and we started preschool together twenty-three years ago.

“Yoga at eleven at night?” I ask with a slight giggle.

“It’s a good stress reliever,” she calls back as I walk past the curvy brunette bombshell and into my bedroom, still soaking wet from the rain.

“So, I take it Thanksgiving with the parents went well then?” I ask with a small chuckle as I peel off my drenched clothing firmly attached to my skin.

“My stupid brother got into another argument with Mom about his lifestyle choices. You know how heated those arguments can get. Mom basically told Deacon he’s a bum doing nothing with his life. Then he yelled some crap back at her. Then, with her fiery temper, she picked up the jar of cranberry sauce and threw it at the wall. Then Dad goes off yelling at Mom, who’s yelling at Deacon, who’s yelling at me, who’s yelling at no one in particular just for the sake of it. And on and on and on it goes, and where it stops no one knows,” she says with a slight giggle. “It was entertaining, I guess,” she calls out.

I make my way to my en suite and nod matter-of-factly, knowing her family *all* too well. “Well, sounds like Deacon hasn’t changed,” I reply as I shut the en suite door.

Deacon and I used to have a *thing* a few years ago. I don’t know if you could call it a relationship as such, as it was very one-sided. Being I was the one in love, and he only kind of maybe liked me—just a little bit. I was a convenience for him as I always visited Joey, which made me available. After I’d had enough of his blasé attitude toward our relationship, I decided to move to Baton Rouge to be close to New Orleans—the best city in the world, well, as far as I’m concerned—to start my writing career. The part I am so grateful for is that Joey came with me. I don’t think I could stand living on

my own. Actually, the thought scares me.

Hopping into the shower, I need to warm up after spending the last half an hour in a torrential downpour with some stranger I badly wanted to kiss.

Cain keeps running through my mind.

His hand on my face caressing.

His palm on my waist, holding me to him.

I inhale sharply as my clit throbs just from thinking about him.

I wonder if Cain has a girlfriend? Probably not.

A guy that hot would have multiple girlfriends.

The water warms my pale skin, the bluish tinge fading to more of a flushed pink now that I'm warming up. I'm too tired to spend much time in the shower, so I quickly wash my hair and get out.

Once dry, I head into my bedroom and dress in my trusty, comfortable pajamas. Making my way to the edge of my bed, I pull back the covers and slide under. It's nice to finally be warm again.

Laying my head on the pillow, I look up at the ceiling and smile. "I might have had my own little encounter today," I say loud enough for Joey to hear me in the living room.

The sounds of the ocean are quickly turned off. Then fast-running footsteps thump through the apartment and into my room. I laugh as she bolts in and jumps onto the end of my bed with her eyes wide and a big grin on her face. "So, okay, what kind of encounter was it? A guy encounter? Or a *Close Encounter of the Third Kind*... kind?" She laughs as she pulls her legs in to sit cross-legged, facing me.

I sit up, lay back against the bed frame, and look at her with a smile. Joey has this obsession with aliens. She's had it ever since we were kids when she swore she saw a UFO out her side window one night. So she's kind of been captivated by them ever since.

"No. No aliens this time. But I did meet a guy who lives up there..." I point to the ceiling, "... somewhere," I reply, unable to hide my smile.

"Okaaay. Judging by that smile, you think he is..." She pauses for me to fill in the blank.

"Ridiculously gorgeous," I reply, making her giggle.

"So why isn't he here making out with you in your bed?"

Giving her a light slap on her arm, she fakes that it hurts. "Ouch," she utters while rubbing her arm with a frown.

"Anyway, he pulled over when Gertie stalled—"

“Again?” she interrupts.

“Yes, again. He pulled over to help me. And then he gave me his leather jacket to keep me warm in the rain. It didn’t work, though.” She laughs. “And then I made a dick of myself by thinking he was following me, wanting to have a fling with me. But as it turns out, he lives here in our apartment building, and... he didn’t want to fuck me.”

She cocks her brow and sits up taller. “Wait! How do you know he didn’t want to fuck you? Oh my God, you asked him to? You slut!”

After rolling my eyes, I shake my head with laughter. “No! Of course not. But he said he wouldn’t expect to follow me upstairs.”

“Well, doesn’t he sound judgey,” she snaps while turning up her nose.

“Judgey?” I ask.

“You know, judgmental. Like he might think you’re too prudish or uppity for him.”

I didn’t see it that way.

Maybe the connection I felt was all mine.

Maybe he felt nothing and wondered why I was a blubbering idiot.

“I am *not* uppity,” I murmur, sulking. Joey laughs and tilts her head. “What? I’m not,” I defend, picking up the pillow from behind me and smacking her with it. She laughs, grabbing the pillow and halting my attack.

“Okay, you’re not uppity. But you *are* a little prudish.” Joey throws the pillow back at me, then gets up from my bed and runs from my room before I can attack her again.

“I’m *not* prudish,” I call out with a laugh.

“Yes, you are,” she shouts back while running to her room.

“Am not,” I murmur to myself as I lay down, pulling the other pillow over to rest my head on. “Night, Joey,” I call out.

“Night, Kaylie,” she chirps back, using her nickname for me that I’ve had since we were kids.

I love this girl.

Even if she is a bitch to me sometimes.

Resting my head on the fluffy cloud-like pillow, my eyes close, and my thoughts instantly wander to brilliant blue eyes searching mine as a hand caresses my cheek tenderly, and a buzz filters around us in the pouring rain.

What a vision to fall asleep to...

CAIN

“Bring him in,” I mumble to Morgan as I scroll through my cell for the contact I’m looking for.

Morgan laughs and rushes off.

Trap paces the room. “You think this is a good idea, Cain?”

I look up from my cell and glare at Trap. “Really? You’re going to question my judgment?”

He huffs and shakes his head, stopping his rapid pacing as he runs his hands through his ratty hair. “I just think that doing it this way—”

“Is what?” I cut him off. “Going to get the job done a hell of a lot quicker? Yes, me too.” I answer my own question before continuing, “Stop doubting me, Trap. If you want to move up in ranks, then this is what you have to do. This is how the job is done. If you can’t deal with it, you may be better off staying as you are.”

He swallows hard and shakes his head. “No. No, I can handle it. Just don’t go after his woman. Okay?”

Raising my brow, I smirk. Trap, besides Boss, is the only one with a partner in the brotherhood. Her name is Selene, and the bitch is a real piece of work. Tough as fucking nails—gives the men a run for their money. She’s even been to jail when most of the men here haven’t.

Trap is weak when it comes to Selene.

She is the *one* thing that can undo him.

Their love is unbreakable.

And that shit makes you soft.

It undermines you.

Love breaks your soul and cracks your foundations.

And Trap has just proved that to me.

I don’t agree to anything as Morgan walks in with Pyke, one of Zorko’s cronies.

Zorko is on our books and does a lot of deals with us. He’s one of our major clients. But the man is also a fucking dog who undermines us every chance he gets.

“Gabriel Pyke, it’s so good to see you again,” I say politely as he struts into the room.

This is our yellow room used purely for interrogation. The color puts people off. The brightness and general cheery color make people think it’s a

‘happy’ place, but typically, it’s quite the opposite.

“Cain, pleasure as always,” Pyke replies while putting his hand out for me to shake.

Morgan shuts the door, trapping him, Pyke, Trap, and me inside.

Pyke looks to the closed door and rolls his shoulders as if to ease some tension, then looks back at me. “Cain, Zorko wants to keep things flowing with the Baton Rouge Bachelors as much as the next guy. Your elite establishment is well known, but Zorko wants to figure out where his money is best spent, you know?”

I walk over to Pyke, place my hand on his shoulder, and give him a curt nod. “I get it, I do. But you see, Pyke, I have to report to my boss, just like you have to report to Zorko. And *my boss* won’t take it well if Zorko folds on the Bachelors.” I set my mouth in a hard line, my eyes glinty. “You see my dilemma?”

Pyke winces. “Well, yeah, but I’m only the messenger, Cain. And really, that’s not *my* problem, right?”

I turn my back, walk to the other side of the room, spin, and fold my arms over my chest. “Unfortunately, *I* think it is *your* problem, Pyke.” Reaching into my back pocket for my cell, I hit call on the contact and place it on speaker. It rings, and Trap looks to me like he has no idea what I’m playing at, but Morgan smiles wide because he gets it.

Trap has so much to learn.

The cell rings, and finally, it picks up. “Yo, Bachelor maintenance. Your man Alfie on the line,” Alfie, one of my soldiers, states while Pyke looks at me wide-eyed.

“Alfie, Cain here. Do you have the package?”

He laughs. “Yes, sir, all tied up in a nice, pretty little bow.”

I glance at Trap, then over to Pyke. “Open the package, Alfie.”

“With pleasure,” he sneers.

A piercing, harrowing scream echoes down the line. Pyke grunts, standing taller as he glares at me, his breathing coming in short, sharp bursts.

“Oh God. Stop. Please stop!” A shrill female voice screams, and Pyke’s jaw clenches. His hands ball into fists, and he lunges at me, but Morgan holds him back.

“Fuck! Call him off, Cain. Tell him to stop hurting her,” Pyke calls out as another ear-piercing scream echoes down the line. Pyke whimpers as his body sags in Morgan’s arms while his face falls in fear.

“You’ll tell Zorko his deals are exclusive with us?”

Another scream.

Pyke nods, dropping to his knees.

Morgan chuckles, and Trap grins. Fucker looks like he’s enjoying this.

A flash of Makaylie’s face runs through my mind, and I stumble. Taking a deep breath, I try to right myself.

What in the fucking hell was that?

Thank fuck, no one noticed!

“Yes. Yes, I’ll do anything. Please... just stop hurting my angel.”

I nod, bring my cell up to my mouth, and sigh. “Alfie, halt!” I say it loud and clear so he can hear my command over her agonizing screams.

Suddenly, everything dies down to small whimpers.

The cell phone sounds like it’s being picked up, and I hear. “What would you like me to do with the package, Cain?”

I stare at Pyke for a second. “Tend to her wounds, then drop her home. Keep her warm, and give her a meal. Make her feel secure, Alfie. Let her know she’s safe.”

“Yes, sir,” he replies, then ends the call.

As Pyke pants frantically, almost on the verge of tears, I shove my cell in my jeans pocket and walk over to him. He’s still on his knees on the floor, taking in deep, heavy breaths, and I sigh, running my hand through his hair as he tries to come to terms with what’s just happened.

“The thing is, Pyke, the Baton Rouge Bachelors aren’t just any elite establishment. We are a brotherhood. We are masterminds. And we *will* outwit you every. Damn. Time.” I give him a contorted smile. “You think you come to us with new information. Trust me, we already know what you’ll say before you do. If you’re going to be on Zorko’s side, a sniveling little weasel, then be prepared for turmoil. He *cannot* be trusted. Being on his side will only bring pain to your family and loved ones as you’ve witnessed tonight.” I narrow my eyes. “Just something for you to think about, Pyke. Go home. Tell Zorko to maintain his business dealings with us. Tell your wife you love her, and hold her tight. But don’t worry, we *won’t* come after her again unless *you* come to *me* with bad news.” I watch his eyes flash with realization. “So, don’t come to me with bad news again. Got it!”

A single curt nod is all I get.

With a smile, I grab his collar, pulling him off the floor and into a standing position. He exhales as I look into his eyes. While watching the anguish wash

over his face, I wrap my arm around him, pulling him to my side. “Look, your girl will be a while before she arrives home. Alfie’s going to make sure she is taken care of medically. I promise. Come... have a cigar with me?”

He slumps his body and shrugs.

“Good man.”

CHAPTER FOUR

MAKAYLIE

The Next Day

It always takes my breath away.

Waking up to a bright but freezing forty-nine-degree morning, I hop out of bed and move over to my window to look out and watch the cityscape. Joey and I always spend the day after Thanksgiving together, seeing as we always spend Thanksgiving with our parents. We like to have this day as quality BFF time. Stretching as I hear the unmistakable sound of bacon popping and sizzling in the kitchen, the smell hits me soon after, and I move from the window and out to the kitchen.

Joey is sizzling up a huge pile of bacon and pancakes. It's our ritual. We never stray. Every year, it's the same.

"Morning, bitch," I call out, and she pops her head around the corner and waves a pair of tongs at me.

"Morning, slut," Joey calls back as I walk over to the coffee pot to pour myself a cup. I chuckle at the way we talk to each other. Some might think it strange, but it's how we roll. They are like terms of endearment to us.

"Here..." she says, shoving a plate full of deliciousness in my face, almost making me drop my coffee cup. "Pancakes with extra crispy bacon on the side are ready."

Smirking, I raise my eyebrows in appreciation and walk over to our small circular dining table and sit as she brings her plate over and sits next to me.

"So, tell me more about that hot piece of ass last night," she says with a mouthful of food as she digs into her pancakes.

"There's not much to tell. He's obviously good with cars. He lives upstairs. His name is Cain. And that's about as much as I know."

She nods and purses her lips as a drip of maple syrup slides down her chin. "Mm-hmm... so... would you fuck him?"

My eyes open wide as I burst out laughing, but I don't say a word.

She giggles to herself, nodding like she already knows the answer. "Okay, so that's a gigantic yes..." She pauses as a serious look crosses her face. "Kaylie, seriously, let yourself go once in a while. I know my dick-faced

whore of a brother hurt your tender pussy feelings, but you, girrrl... seriously, you need to liven the fuck up.”

“I’m alive,” I defend.

She rolls her eyes and waves a piece of bacon at me. “Honey, double-clicking your mouse does not make one... ‘alive.’ ” She uses air quotes to show emphasis. “You need to get out there and just, you know...” She trails off with a shrug and a big smirk.

“No, I do not... *know*. Please, by all means, enlighten me.”

Joey grunts and picks up a pancake, takes a large bite out of the center, leaving a gaping hole in the middle, which makes it appear more like a donut, and then grabs a strip of bacon and proceeds to shove it in and out of the hole while raising her eyebrows up and down with a heavy chuckle.

I choke on thin air at her childish behavior. “Goddamn, I will never look at pancakes and bacon the same again. Bacon having sex with a pancake is not how I envisioned my morning. Thanks very much, Joey.”

She rolls her eyes, leaning across the table, slaps my cheek with the offending slice of bacon, then shoves it in her mouth, the crunch following soon after.

I laugh as I wipe the grease from my cheek and eat my not-so-sexualized breakfast.

“Okay, but seriously, if you see Cain again, for God’s sake, let it play out. You never know where it could lead, Kaylie. Not all guys are douches like Deacon. By the way, I still can’t apologize enough for my dufus, dick of a brother.”

I shrug. “Meh, I’m over him. That was a while ago. I can’t help but figure with my history of men, and that’s not just Deacon, that maybe I’m too plain, too boring. There’s nothing exciting about me for guys to be interested.”

She scoffs. “Look, the way I see it, if this Cain guy shows interest, don’t shrug it off and push him away. See how it goes. Don’t stop it before it begins. Take a chance. Don’t let fear stop you.”

I weakly smile. “I’ll probably never see Cain again anyway.”

“Maybe. Just keep what I’ve said in mind. Anyway, I need coffee,” Joey announces, standing up and grabbing our plates. She puts them on the counter as I sip on the last of my coffee while she opens the refrigerator and pulls out the plastic creamer bottle.

“Kaylie, you did it again,” she calls out.

I look over while raising a brow in confusion. “Huh?”

“You used the last of the creamer and put the empty bottle back in the fridge, you ditz! Man, I need coffee. I’m gonna go to the store. I need creamer to get that caffeine hit before I continue studying.”

Dammit! I mentally berate myself for doing that... *again*. It’s a bad habit I need to stop. I stand to drink the last of my coffee and shake my head. “No, I’ll go. You start studying, and I’ll grab the creamer. You need to focus.”

“Thanks. I’m already behind because of yesterday, so I gotta get in as much time as possible.”

I walk past and pat her shoulder, then move to my bedroom to get dressed in my finest of crappy clothing. Once dressed, I grab my purse to head out of the apartment and straight for the elevator. Usually, I wouldn’t go in my sweats, but I am only heading out to fetch creamer. My shoes scuffing along the floor is the only sound down the long, narrow hall. The elevator call button is cold as I press it once and patiently wait. The doors open, and I walk in without paying attention. My body smacks straight into a strong ball of muscle, and I gasp, look up, and jolt back in shock.

“Whoa... you okay?” His voice is like deep, silky honey as he steadies me.

Something sparks through my arms where he’s holding me, and I glance up to see Cain’s bright blue eyes bearing down on mine. The undeniable look of lust surging from his eyes sets off a sexual chemistry that blasts through the elevator as the doors close behind me.

He smiles with a slight chuckle. “Nice to see you again, Makaylie.” Cain drops his hands from my arms, and instantly, I feel the loss of contact between us. I can’t help it as I continue to stare into his eyes, mesmerized by their brilliance.

This man truly takes my breath away.

“Hello,” he says with his brow raised as he tilts his head in question.

Instantly, I break out of my trance and inhale abruptly. “Hi. Hey. Hi... oh my God,” I murmur as I look down at the floor, feeling like a bumbling fool.

He moves closer, places his hand under my chin, and lifts my head. My eyes meet his again as that surge passes between us once more. “Well, I usually go by Cain, but yeah... you can call me god if you like,” he teases, and I wince at my own stupidity. “Are you always this awkward?” Cain releases my chin, and once again, I feel bereft at the loss of contact.

“Not normally. No.”

He chuckles. “So, it’s just me then?”

Oh God, he's so freaking hot!

“Makaylie?”

I snap out of my headspace. “Yes. Just with you,” I reply honestly.

“Hmm...” is all he murmurs.

The elevator chimes, and the doors open to the parking garage. Cain takes my hand in his, completely surprising me and pulling me out of the elevator. Cain starts to walk briskly with me in tow. I have to almost run to keep up with his large steps as he drags me along with him.

“Wh... what are we doing?” I ask, breathless, as he walks us out onto the street. The sunlight hits my face, starkly contrasting with the harsh storm of the night before. His hand holds mine firm as he tugs me along the street, not saying a word, toward the corner to cross the road. The light flashes, and he sets off, walking us across the pedestrian crossing, leading me to Hayden’s Diner. I have to rush to keep up with him as his long, toned legs stride toward our destination.

I really want to ask what the hell we’re doing, but he seems so focused right now, and I’m not sure if I should be saying anything or just doing as Joey says and letting this play out.

So, I go with option two, with an echo of Joey’s words in my head, “... *let it play out.*”

He stops at the diner's door and opens it for me with a beaming smile, finally letting go of his tight grip on my hand. Smiling back at him, I enter the cute little diner through the door. The theme of the place reminds me of something you’d see in a scene from *Happy Days*, with vintage car posters on the wall and booth seats that look like the backs of cars. There are stools at the bar and tables for two placed all through the diner.

I love the atmosphere and come here often to get away from the apartment when I am trying to write. They always play sixties rock 'n' roll on the funky-looking jukebox in the corner. I wouldn’t be surprised if, one day, the waitresses start wearing roller skates. I giggle to myself as he leads me over to a table for two and pulls out my chair for me like the perfect gentleman.

Giggling like a freaking idiot schoolgirl, I take a seat and then sit in silence as he walks around to his seat. Cain’s chair scrapes along the floor, making a loud squeal, and I wince when his hand flies up in the air, and he clicks his fingers together obnoxiously, obviously calling for service. I didn’t know people still did that—it’s rude.

A waitress strides over with a not-so-amused appearance when she looks

down at Cain. Then, her frown morphs into a sly smirk as she takes in the incredibly attractive man before her. “What can I get ya?” She pulls out a notepad from her white half-waist apron wrapped around her short yellow dress and grabs a pen from her loose top bun.

“Two coffees, please. Creamer, two sugars in each,” he orders, not even looking at me.

He must be thirsty ordering two coffees because I know he did *not* just order for me.

“I’ll have a—”

“That will be all, thank you,” he interrupts.

My jaw drops as the waitress smiles, then leaves.

“Did you just order for me?”

“Yes,” he says matter-of-factly.

“You do know this is the twenty-first century. Females can order for themselves,” I mock, trying to convey how annoyed I am at the cocky demeanor he’s giving off.

“I know,” he replies.

That’s it?

That’s all he’s going to say?

Is he for real?

My chair scrapes this time, flying back on the linoleum as I move to leave. *I won’t let anybody dictate to me.* But Cain is quick when he grabs my hand, so I stop to look at him. He smirks, which only serves to aggravate me more. His damn hand is warm around mine, which sends tingles up my arm, then down my traitorous spine. I try to pull my hand free, but he tightens his grip. So I stop struggling and glare at him.

This time, I talk low and sternly. “If you don’t let me go, I *will* scream.”

“No... you won’t,” Cain replies nonchalantly.

I let out a small huff. “I *will!* Don’t test me.”

“Sit down, Makaylie,” his voice is demanding, controlling, unnerving.

I attempt to pull my hand free again. “No, you freak.”

“Makaylie, *sit... down...* before I bend you over my knee and spank your beautiful ass.”

Well shit! That stops me in my tracks. *Spank me?* What am I... five?

“Ha! Like you would dare. We’re in a public place, and seriously? Spank? Do you have some sort of Daddy fetish or something? I’m not some five-year-old behaving like a brat. I don’t deserve to be spanked,” I blurt out.

“You’re testing my patience. You want to try me?” he asks, deadpan.

The look in his eyes, the way they are burning with intense lust and seriousness, makes me know he’s being completely serious. He would have no qualms with taking me over his knee right here and now.

And that thought terrifies me.

But intrigues me at the same time.

I’m taken aback by the intensity of the moment and decide to surrender. So I sit back in my seat, and Cain lets my hand go.

Something is menacing about him.

He’s dominant.

Commanding.

Powerful.

But I know my eyes are probably brimming with lust as I stare right back at him.

How on earth could this be turning me on?

Cain leans back in his chair and smiles brightly. “See. Wasn’t so hard now, was it?”

The waitress returns with our coffees, and I nod a thank you to her as she places them down, then walks off again. Picking up the piping hot mug, I bring it to my lips and take a deep breath before I speak. “Why did you bring me here? Was it to embarrass me?” I ask, taking a sip of the delicious hot liquid before it slides down my throat, soothing my tense nerves.

He chuckles as he watches me intently. “No, Makaylie, I want to figure out why you’re so awkward around me.”

I look at him dumbfounded. “I, ah... I don’t know?” I reply, as more of a question than a statement.

Cain chuckles and leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. He licks his bottom lip and drags his teeth against it. That seems to be his thing, and fuck is it sexy.

“How about we get the obvious things out of the way,” he says, confusing me.

“What obvious things?”

“Well, we know I’m good-looking, have a great body under these clothes. So... is *that* the reason for you fumbling around me?”

Closing my eyes and opening them wide, I almost spit out the mouthful of coffee, but instead, I gulp it down a little more dramatically. “Excuse me?”

Egomaniac much? This guy is a piece of work!

“So that’s a yes. You’re affected by my looks. That’s normal... most women are,” he states categorically with a smirk.

“You are *not* “good-looking,” ” I jab and use air quotes for good measure in an attempt to deflate his ego, but he simply laughs.

“Yes, I am. Now, let’s get to the other burning question...”

What an arrogant son of a bitch.

He thinks he’s God’s gift to women.

Well, maybe he is, but you can be a little more subtle about how much one loves oneself!

“What other question?” I ask, not even beginning to imagine what he could possibly come up with next.

“Why am *I* so taken with *you*?”

My eyes bug out of my head, and I gasp in shock. *Okay! Not expecting that.*

“Huh?” is all I can manage.

“Why, out of all the ladies in Baton Rouge, have *you* been stuck in my head since I met you last night?”

He may as well have sucker punched me because the wind is completely knocked from my lungs.

I had no idea *that* was going to come from his mouth.

“You’re... you are... taken with m-me?” I ask, almost in a whisper. “What does that even mean?”

He chuckles with a sincere smile. “It means, Makaylie, that I like you. I think you’re amazingly feisty. You do the cutest little thing with your nose when you fumble over what you say, and you’re beyond beautiful—”

“Huh?” I interrupt, not believing one word of what he’s saying.

He chuckles again as he moves his hand across the table to enclose over mine.

Is this man seriously trying this on with me?

“Really? If you think the old I’ll-compliment-her-till-she-caves-and-gives-herself-to-me trick will work on me, mister, then you have another thing coming.”

He laughs, actually laughs at me.

“What?” I ask abruptly.

“You’re adorable when you’re angry.”

“Fuck off. I am not.” I wrinkle my nose up in disagreement.

Cain grins and rubs his thumb across the back of my hand. Blazing heat

ignites inside me as I look down and notice how easily my hand fits into his. A gasp gets caught in my throat while the urge to jump over the table and take him here, on the floor in the diner, overwhelms me. A small whimper escapes my mouth at that thought, and he chuckles as I look up and realize he's staring at me with the same intensity. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

"Do you feel it?" he asks, and I know precisely what he's talking about. He feels exactly what I'm feeling. I know right now, in this moment, something is happening between us. Cain has a strong pull over me—a magnetism—and even if I don't want to admit it, he has drawn me in.

I simply nod, and he smiles.

"Me too. It's strong, isn't it?" Cain asks, talking obviously about the heightened chemistry surrounding us as he takes my other hand in his. The warmth from both our hands touching sends heat through me, and it looks like his breath catches for a second, and that makes me think that maybe, just maybe, he's being honest in his attraction.

Gulping down a lump in my throat, I stare into his bright blue eyes. There's something dangerous about him hiding, lingering beneath the surface, and I can't quite figure it out. But what I do know is how easily I could lose myself in him.

"Really strong," I whisper without thinking.

He grins, sips his coffee, and then suddenly stands.

My forehead creases in confusion as he leans in and takes my hand again, pulling me up. He retrieves his wallet from his pocket and throws a hundred on the table before leading me out of the diner.

I tense, looking back to the table as we rush out. "You know you gave them a hundred, don't you?"

Cain opens the door and directs us out into the brisk morning air, hand in hand.

He chuckles. "Did I?" His large strides make me almost run to try and keep up as he drags me back toward the apartments.

"Yeah, do you wanna go back and get it?" I ask, a little confused about why he's walking away from the diner.

"The waitress deserved a decent tip." Cain looks back at me with a smile as we stand at the traffic lights, waiting to cross the road.

Holy crap!

Either he's really generous or really stupid with money.

In any case, this man is giving me serious whiplash.

CHAPTER FIVE

MAKAYLIE

We stride—well, I am almost running—across the apartment foyer to the elevators.

“What are we doing?” I ask hesitantly.

“Going to your apartment so we can talk.”

Looking up at Cain, my eyebrows crease. “Couldn’t we do that at the diner?”

Cain chuckles and turns me to face him. His hand moves to caress my cheek tenderly in his usual way, and I exhale at his warmth. How can it be so cold out, and yet he’s so warm? This split personality he presents is a great mystery to me. The man has two sides to him. The cold, calculating side whose need to dominate every situation is overwhelming, then there’s the soft romantic side who seems to tame the beast. I’m just not sure which side of the mask I might get at any moment.

“We could! But then I couldn’t do this at the diner with you sitting so far away from me.”

“Do what?” I ask.

Cain leans in, his hand still caressing my cheek as he slips his other hand on my waist, pulling my body to his. My breath catches as he stares down at me. For the briefest of moments, he closes his eyes—almost like he’s in pain they clench so tightly shut—and then, before I can say anything, his eyes open wide, staring at me, burning full of desire.

“Do this,” he growls out, rushing forward and pressing his lips to mine with so much force it surprises me. His hand on my cheek slides up, rushing into my hair, his fingers clenching tight and pulling on my strands while our tongues collide in a frenzied hysteria. He backs me up against the wall, pressing his body against mine so hard I couldn’t move if I tried. My hands instantly shift around his neck, gripping the seams of his collar to hold him closer.

The kiss is urgent, desperate, and so full of lust my clit throbs. His hard cock presses against me, only makes this experience hotter. I’m breathless. This man is sucking the oxygen from within me, and I can’t tell whether it’s

extremely good or incredibly bad.

My body melts, and I succumb, letting him in, completely taking me. A deep, throaty moan echoes through the area as he leans into me more forcefully, the full, hard, muscular tone of his body pressing against me in the most delicious way. I feel his every muscle as he kisses me deeper while pushing me harder into the wall. But as the heat is ramping up, Cain begins to slow his movements.

He gently pulls back, breaking the kiss with a heavy sigh, then leans in, pressing his lips to mine once more before resting his forehead against mine as we both pant from lack of oxygen.

Opening my eyes, I see he's having the same difficulties I am, but he looks like he's in pain. His face is scrunched, his eyes close tightly while his breathing returns to a normal rhythm.

Moving my hand to caress his cheek, a smile creeps onto his face.

Cain gradually opens his eyes and looks right at me, deep into my soul. He takes his forehead from mine and exhales. "We shouldn't be doing this," he murmurs.

That was intense.

That was amazing.

Or, some first kiss...

... is more like what I was expecting to hear.

But... *We shouldn't be doing this?* That I was *not* expecting.

Furrowing my brows, I tilt my head in slight confusion and a touch of embarrassment as he frowns at the obvious look on my face. I lost my inhibitions with Cain, and then he goes and tells me, '*We shouldn't be doing this.*'

Now I feel like such an idiot.

My hand falls from his shirt, and I slowly rest my hands on his shoulders to gently nudge him back from me. Looking at the floor in my embarrassed state, I slide past him to push the elevator call button.

"Wait! I said *we shouldn't*, not that *I didn't want to*, Makaylie," he defends.

I turn back, confused, glaring at him. "Why shouldn't we?" I ask quietly as the elevator dings and the doors open. I step in, and he follows me, reaching out and grabbing my hand. I let him take it and bite my bottom lip, looking up at him hopeful, waiting for his answer.

"I'm no good for you, Makaylie. I've done some bad shit. Shit that would

stop you from looking at me the way you are right now.” He exhales harshly. “I am not a good guy. This only ends badly for you.”

The tension ripples through the air so thick that my brows crunch together at his choice of words.

That isn’t something you say off the cuff.

What determines a ‘bad guy’?

Is it something you say, or is it the things you do?

Is Cain into something so devilishly bad that I should walk away now and never look back?

But can I even do that?

Or am I sucked into his charms too far already?

All I know is I need to find out more.

“What do you mean?” I ask, anxiety creeping through my veins like a noxious weed.

“It’s too dangerous for you to be seen with me. I can’t take the risk.”

My shoulders tense, and I take a short, sharp breath as my skin prickles.

But curiosity gets the better of me. “Why?”

He looks like he’s dying to tell me something, but he holds back. “It’s complicated. Look, I’ll ah... leave you alone,” he grumbles, stepping back from me.

A sense of dread washes over me, and I clench my jaw tight in annoyance.

No.

He can’t kiss me like that and then avoid me without a proper explanation.

I know he felt the connection. It’s something I’ve never felt before. Even though I sense an element of danger emanating from him, I want to find out where this connection can lead.

“What if I don’t *want* you to leave me alone?”

Cain scrubs at his face, groaning like he’s fighting an epic battle in his mind. He exhales and glares at me. “You don’t know me. Like I said... I am no good for you. I don’t want to bring you into my world and corrupt you. I do *not* want to be the one who changes you.”

I snort. “You’ve already changed me.” I feel nervous that he’s going to leave and never speak to me again, so I need to plead my case.

“Come to my apartment, and we can talk. You can tell me what you want to... or not. Whatever you choose. Just don’t say this is the last time we’ll be together.” *Shit! Instantly, I feel like some clingy girlfriend begging her boyfriend not to leave her.* “I didn’t mean that how it sounded. Of course,

we're not together, but... oh fuck!" I murmur as I peer down to the floor, embarrassed by my awkwardness around him yet again.

He chuckles as the elevator doors open on my floor. I shake my head, admitting defeat, and go to step out as he grabs my hand. Turning back, I look at him and swallow hard.

"Well, maybe we can have one coffee to make up for the hundred-dollar ones we left behind," Cain offers with a smirk, then steps out of the elevator with me.

Smiling, I walk down the hall to my apartment.

The silence between us isn't deafening or awkward. It's comfortable, and I pull out my keys and open the door. We walk inside and head straight toward the kitchen. The apartment still smells of bacon, and I chuckle.

Cain looks around, taking in the extremely feminine apartment, while I move to the kitchen to put on the coffee pot.

I wonder briefly where Joey is when I look down on the kitchen counter to see a note. Picking it up, I read it quickly.

*Hey whore,
Mom rang and said that Deacon and she were fighting again. So
I've gone home to help sort shit out.
I saw you at Hayden's with some guy.
I'm so jealous right now!
We will be having words when I get home.
Love you,
Joey xo*

Smiling, I let out a small giggle and place the note back on the counter. I notice Cain walk up behind me as I put the filter into the coffee pot.

He grunts, letting out a low growl. "What the fuck is this?" he snaps loudly, making me jump. I turn to look at him as he stands holding Joey's note in his hand, the paper crinkling with the force of his tight fist. "You have a boyfriend?" His frown deepens, and his shoulders sag, but above all, he appears incredibly hurt.

I shake my head and smile weakly, which only makes matters worse. "Relax! That's just my roommate, Joey."

"Why on earth would you allow your roommate to call you a whore?" he asks, his voice deep and gravelly.

“It’s a term of endearment. I’m not a whore. In fact, I haven’t been with anyone for a *really* long time.” My eyes bulge out of my head when I realize what I’ve just admitted to.

Shit! I need a damn filter on my mouth.

He puts the note down. “Well, you shouldn’t allow that kind of talk. It’s degrading,” he grumbles.

“It’s fine! It’s what we do,” I reply.

Cain huffs and walks in behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling my back to his chest. Instantly, I relax in his arms as he rests his head on my shoulder, and I continue with the coffee pot.

I can’t help but think of how natural this feels.

I mean, I don’t know anything about Cain.

But the one thing I do know is that his arms around me feel so... right!

“So creamer with two, right?” I ask as I pull out two mugs from the cupboard. He doesn’t let go of me but follows behind every step I take.

“Right,” he confirms as he gently kisses my neck.

I move to the refrigerator to get the creamer and grit my teeth.

“Damn, I forgot. Sorry, we have no creamer. I was out to go to the store but kinda got distracted.”

Cain chuckles, leaning past me and closing the refrigerator door. “Black is fine. Just add an extra sugar,” he suggests, and I nod, doing as he asks, then pour the coffee into the two mugs.

We walk into the living room with him still awkwardly wrapped around behind me and head toward the sofa. Giggling as I go, I place the mugs on the coffee table and wait for him to stop manhandling me so I can sit. He huffs exasperatedly, letting me go, and then I sit, and he follows, sitting beside me.

“So, tell me something about yourself.” Cain leans back into the cushions, placing his arm above me on the headrest.

Leaning back, I sigh and cross my leg over the other, trying to maintain a casual but comfortable position. “Well, what do you want to know?”

“What do you do for a living?” He leans forward to pick up his coffee, his hand on the back of the sofa moving forward slightly and grazes my shoulder.

I exhale at his touch. “Well, I’m trying to be an author,” I reply, gaining a laugh from him.

“Trying to be?”

I nod and take a sip of my coffee, being careful not to get my back up at him laughing at me. He looks at me like I should be explaining myself a little more, so I do.

“Okay, well... I’ve done my studies at college and received my graduate’s degree in English, so I’m attempting to write my first novel, but I’m having slight inspirational troubles at the moment,” I tell him honestly. “I need a muse,” I add.

“I can be your muse if you want,” he replies with a large grin.

Laughing, I shake my head and exhale. “If only it were that easy.” I take another sip of my coffee and continue, “What do you do?”

Cain shuffles in his seat.

He looks nervous.

What’s he going to say?

Perhaps he’s a stripper? Like *Magic Mike* or something? I’d definitely go to Cain’s show if that’s the case. I giggle at my thoughts, and he looks at me, amused.

“Um... you could say I’m an organizer. I organize jobs to be done and people to carry out those jobs,” he offers with a smirk.

Fair enough.

I like my idea better, though.

“What kind of jobs?”

Cain looks up to the ceiling, pursing his lips as though he’s deep in thought, which strikes me as odd, but I let it go. He finally looks back at me. “Couriers and ah... debt collecting. Those sorts of things,” he replies with a grin.

Well, that doesn’t sound dangerous to me.

Why did he say it’s bad to be seen with him when he has such an innocuous job?

I don’t get it.

His hand falls to my knee, and I look at his hand, instantly feeling his warmth. My breathing hitches, but I can’t seem to look up at him. He shifts in his seat so his body is against mine. As we touch, a pulse of electricity courses through our sides, the undeniable spark emanating between us yet again.

He places his mug on the table, brings his hand up to rest on my lowered chin, and lifts my face to meet his gaze. Cain’s breathing catches as our eyes lock, and I gulp as he slowly leans in to kiss me for the second time.

Closing my eyes, I lean toward him, and they finally touch. Our lips move in unison as I swivel to turn my body, and he does the same. His free hand shifts to my hip and slowly eases me backward. Normally, I'd halt this right here, but Cain has some sort of hold over me that I can't shy away from.

Gently, he lays me down on the sofa, moving his weight on top of me. Cain's tongue dances with mine while his body engulfs me. The weight of his strength pinning me down lets me feel every muscle he has. It's exhilarating, thrilling, enthralling, a blissful intoxication, and I can't wait to see where this leads.

Cain's hips press down into mine, and my clit throbs in that delicious way that I've missed. My legs slide up against his and wrap around his waist, pulling his groin closer to my pussy as it aches for him.

He kisses me almost forcefully now. Our breathing is erratic as our bodies rock together on my sofa.

My fingers dig into his shoulder blades, and a muffled moan escapes my lips as his tongue is rapidly entangled with mine. Cain reacts to my moan with his own deep, throaty growl. Without thinking, I grind my pussy up into his prominent hard dick beneath his jeans. He growls again deep in his throat as his hips roll forward into my throbbing clit, hitting just the right spot to cause enough friction to give me some much-needed pleasure.

"Mmm..." I quietly moan as his cock becomes even more evident behind the layers of clothing between us. His lips leave mine, and he presses firm kisses down my cheek and neck, allowing me to catch my breath.

He rolls into me again—*God, if he keeps doing that, I don't think I'm going to be able to control myself*—and my leg wraps around his ass, pulling him to me further.

"Makaylie," he murmurs my name so low and throaty as he continues to lick and nip at my neck.

This is HOT!

He knows how to work up a girl.

My mind starts to cloud and fog as he continues worshipping me.

Cain's hand slowly moves from my hip, brushing my side as he gently caresses my skin. His hand slips under my shirt and grazes my sensitive spot just above my hip, sending a shuddering wave running right through my center, and *not* in a good way. I jerk with a loud giggle, making Cain stop his movements as he lifts his head and looks right at me as my cheeks flush red hot.

His laugh filters through the living room as he grins from ear to ear when he realizes my vulnerability. “Oh, Makaylie! You should *never* show your weakness. I have a lot to teach you,” he states as he pushes my hands and returns to that *oh-so-sensitive* spot on my hip.

“No... no... no, no, no,” I call out, with my eyes bulging out of my head.

Cain laughs and withdraws his hand from under my shirt. “I could seriously watch you squirm all day.” He chuckles as he leans down and kisses the tip of my nose. “But I won’t.” He moves his clenched fists to either side of my face and pushes up like he’s getting off me.

Huh? I thought we were only just getting started.

I wrinkle my face in confusion, and he lets out a bemused chuckle when he stands and moves to sit back down on the other side of the sofa like he’s restraining himself.

Slowly, I sit up, feeling rejected as I bite down on my bottom lip.

Cain sighs as he slides a little closer, obviously sensing my anxiety. He then rests his hand on mine in a show of comfort. “It’s not that I don’t want you, Makaylie, I do. Trust me, I do. It’s just like I said... I’m no good for you,” he reiterates with a cold harshness that makes me wince.

“Shouldn’t *I* be the judge of that?” I snap.

He sighs, shaking his head. “No! You don’t know me. You don’t know who *I... am*, what *I’ve* done, who *I’ve...*” he pauses, gritting his teeth, his lip turns up, and his neck muscles twitch in a sign of tension. “No. You must avoid me. You’re too perfect to be dragged into my world,” he grinds the words out ominously.

A shiver of warning runs down my spine, an unease churning in my gut. The flare in his eyes tells me I need to listen.

The heaviness of the moment should weigh down on me.

It should hit me like a ton of damn bricks.

I should heed his warning.

I should run.

But, in this moment, I don’t care.

I don’t care if he’s dangerous.

I only want to be as close to him as I can be.

So, ignoring the warning bells, I do just that and shift closer to him. So close, I’d be in his lap if I were any closer. Looking into his eyes, practically pleading with him, I sigh. “Tell me,” I whisper in almost a beg.

He scrunches his face, and the feeling of heaviness overwhelms the room.

“I can’t.” He shakes his head and slides away from me. My skin feels colder from his absence.

“Tell me, and I can make up my own damn mind if you’re *too dangerous* for me, Cain,” I beg as I move closer to feel his warmth once more.

He exhales, clenching his jaw like he’s battling his demons about whether or not to tell me. “Well, let’s just say I got into the wrong crowd when I was younger. I haven’t always been a nice guy or a model citizen.” His voice is softer now.

“Well, you’re nice now, though... right?” I ask.

He grins, but there’s a touch of wickedness to it as he scrunches his brows together. “Make no mistake. I’m here for selfish reasons. I’m a bad guy. There is nothing good or safe about what I want to do to you. So I guess all you could say is, I’m trying.”

“Well, that’s all that matters. The past is the past, and I want to get to know you, Cain. So please... let me.” I take his hands in mine, and he exhales a puff of air as his eyes drop to the floor like he’s weighing up his options.

“Goddammit! I hope I don’t regret this, but... okay. On one condition.”

Furrowing my brows, I tilt my head, waiting for the ultimatum.

“You can’t tell anyone about me. Trust me, it’s safer this way.” His gaze is stern, unyielding, controlling.

“Not even Joey?” A small laugh escapes me.

“*Epecially* not Joey.”

Shaking my head slightly, I let out an unladylike scoff. “Why can’t I tell my roommate who I’m... seeing? Dating? What *are* we doing exactly?”

He chuckles. “We’re *seeing* each other. *Exclusively*. You can’t date anyone else while you’re with me. *Understand?*”

I lean back, shocked by his sudden outburst of... *whatever that was*. “Well, if I can’t date other guys, then you can’t date other women,” I state sternly.

“For me, there are no other women, Makaylie. You’re the only one I want.”

This man! He can turn me from pure anger to putty in his hands with a flick of a sentence.

Exhaling, I bite my lip to try to hide my smile. “Wow!” He looks at me curiously. “You really know how to switch my moods, don’t you?”

“What?” he asks, his lips turning up in an amused smirk.

“One second, I am ready to slap you. The next, you make me weak at the knees,” I tell him honestly.

His cocky grin returns, and he tilts his head. “Weak at the knees, huh?”

I giggle and nod as he leans in, kissing me much softer than last time.

The rest of the afternoon is about getting to know each other—favorite foods, bands, books. It surprised me to know that Cain is quite the book lover. He even admitted to reading *The Twilight Saga* and was a firm *Team Jacob*. He said he has deep-dived into smut books and enjoys reading all the dark, depraved kinks that women get into. And I guess that doesn’t surprise me as he seems dominant, which is the total opposite of me.

We found ourselves making out more often than not, but every time it was getting a little too hot and heavy, he stopped it before it went too far, much to my dismay.

He pulls away from me again as our breathing is frantic, and I roll my eyes.

This is the fourth time he’s stopped going further than a good make-out session.

“Did you just roll your eyes at me?” he asks, narrowing his eyes on me sternly.

“I might have,” I reply.

“Well, that just won’t do. You need to be taught respect,” Cain chides.

I laugh as he pins me to the sofa, and Cain runs his hands on either side of *that spot* on my hips. The shudder runs through me, forcing my entire body to convulse while I jerk and buck underneath him. The sensation runs over my whole body, sending vibrations through my soul. It makes my insides twist and turn and my stomach flip. My legs kick out of their own accord, and a combination of screams and laughter launches from my mouth as I can’t control my body’s reaction to the hilarious agony.

“Cain!” I call out with a mischievous chuckle.

“I told you to learn respect,” he declares, grinning like the Cheshire cat.

“Okay, okay,” I groan, and he tickles that spot again, making me almost gag in laughter as my body spasms in reaction. “Okay, okay. I fold,” I yell as I struggle to yank his hands away from my sides. “I’m sorry for rolling my eyes, Sir. It will *never* happen again.” I gasp through fits of laughter as tears

trickle down my flushed cheeks.

“Much better. Plus, I like that you called me sir.” He waggles his brows, jumps off me, and stands as I wipe the tears from my face. He puts his hand out to help me up, then embraces me. “You could be good for me,” he murmurs so quietly into my hair that I’m not sure if I heard what he said correctly or not.

I don’t say anything in response. Instead, I hold on as he embraces me tightly. The smell of his woodsy aftershave floods my senses as I relax into his arms. The scent is calming, and I nuzzle my head into his chest.

Life doesn’t get any better than this!

“I’d better go.” Cain sighs, saying what I feared was coming.

“Okay,” I whisper as he lets me go, and we start heading toward my front door. As we walk past my bedroom, he peers in to see his leather jacket resting over the end of the bed.

“Oh... I’ll get that for you.” I turn to head toward my room, but he grabs my hand, pulling me back to him abruptly so our faces are almost touching. I giggle as he leans in and kisses my lips softly, and he slowly pulls away before licking his lips like he is tasting me.

“Keep it. Let it be a reminder of who you’re seeing. The *only* man you’re seeing.” His voice is low, demanding as his eyes bore into me with a stern gaze.

I grin, breaking the tension. He’s obviously a jealous type of guy. We will have to work on this if— whatever this is—becomes more serious. “Then I should give you something of mine to remind you of the *only* woman you’re seeing.” I pull off my crappy sweater.

He smiles wide. “You look amazing in this outfit,” he tells me with his cocky smirk.

I scrunch up my nose. “Do you want it or not?” I ask while trying to hide my grin.

“Yes, ma’am, I do.” Cain takes the sweater from me and lifts it to his nose, inhaling deeply. Normally, I’d find that sort of thing deeply disturbing. But with him, I find it incredibly erotic.

Cain stirs something inside me.

I’m not sure what it is.

The man makes me feel sexy, even in these crappy clothes, but he makes me *want* to feel sexy for him.

He leans in, pressing his lips to mine. His fingers tighten in my hair,

gripping and pulling, which pulls a gasp against his lips. The kiss deepens passionately, and that feeling of the electrical storm is back again, buzzing and swarming around us. I love that he has this effect on me, and I know that if this is what it's like to simply kiss him, I can't wait for this to go further.

My lips are swollen and sore from all the making out we've done today, but I'm glad. I wouldn't have it any other way. Cain makes me want him more than I have ever wanted another man.

There is an air of danger surrounding him.

I have no idea what I'm getting myself into.

This could be the start of something amazing.

Or I could be getting myself in too deep.

Now, I have to take that leap to find out.

CHAPTER SIX

MAKAYLIE

Two Weeks Later

Over the past two weeks, I've gotten to know Cain. At least, as much as he will let me know. His cryptic answers to my many questions often leave me wanting to ask more.

Finding out he pulled over to look at my car, not me, due to his love for muscle cars, just like my father, made me appreciate his honesty. But it made sense since he owns a Chevy Impala, better known for being 'the car' from *Supernatural*, which happens to be one of my favorite television shows.

My legs slip over the side of the bed, and I make my way to the en suite when I hear my cell beep. The only people who message me are my parents and Joey, and I know it won't be either of them as Joey's still asleep, and I spoke to my parents last night.

I walk back into my room, grab my cell, and unlock the screen to view a message from 'Your Muse.' I laugh because Cain got hold of my cell the first night he was at my apartment and programmed his name and number into my phone. I haven't changed the name he gave himself because, for some reason, it suits him.

Your Muse: *Good morning. This is your muse. Would you like to be inspired by having a picnic with me today at Anna T. Jordan Community Park? Bring your laptop, and I will inspire your creative flair with my dazzling brilliance and outrageous sex appeal. With my help, your story will be the hottest book out there. 11 a.m., you will find me under a tree behind the airplane.*

Glancing over at the clock on my bedside table, I open my eyes wide when I read ten-thirty on the screen.

"Shit," I murmur, then quickly type back a reply.

Me: Looking forward to it, see you soon.

I hurry around to prepare, decide what to wear, and then quickly apply a thin layer of makeup. I want to make an effort for him. Rushing out of my room, I pick up my laptop and slide it into my laptop bag. My purse and cell slip into the bag too, and I bolt out of the apartment, heading for the elevator.

I'm ridiculously excited about seeing Cain again. My heart races, and butterflies are performing the tango in my stomach.

A note is stuck to the windshield when I get closer to my Thunderbird. Raising my brow, I peel it off and glance around the parking lot but see no one.

I thought I would do a once over on Gertie to ensure she's good to go and won't let you down. She checks out beautifully.

C x

A chuckle escapes me as I think about Gertie and her temperamental issues. I shove the note into my bag and open the car to slide in. My bag goes over to the passenger side, and I start the drive toward the park.

The day is beautiful, slightly overcast, as clouds occasionally darken the blue sky. The sun is trying to shine through the breaks in the billowing gray mounds, sending beams of light down in sections, giving the day a heavenly effect. It's a little chilly, but I know Cain's warmth will heat me up.

After parking, I step out of the car and walk toward the park.

There is no doubt the smile on my face is wide as my cheeks ache slightly. Glancing at the few trees sporadically placed around the park, I spot Cain under the biggest one. He's leaning against it, sitting on a red and white checkered blanket, wearing aviator sunglasses, jeans, a black singlet, and a leather jacket. That man looks ridiculously good, so I stand and stare briefly, taking in the incredible view.

Eventually, he looks up and smiles. "You going to stand there all day and stare at me?"

Instantly, I blush. I can't believe he knew I was here.

Cain taps the blanket, and I walk over to him. "Hey muse, how are you?" I ask playfully.

He chuckles, spreading his legs so I can sit between them. Taking off my bag from over my shoulder, I lay it next to him on the blanket. Turning, I sit myself between his legs, my back against his chest. Cain wraps his arms around my waist, one holding me tightly, the other holding his book.

“What are you reading, Mr. Barrington?” I move the cover slightly so I can see the front. My breath catches, and I let out a loud giggle. He chuckles while my cheeks flush red hot, and I pull my lips together in amusement, trying not to break out into hysterical laughter.

“Really? You’re reading the *Kamasutra* in public?”

He grins, nodding his head. “Yeah, why not?” He rests his chin on my shoulder.

I shake my head and say nothing more about it, then open my laptop bag. “So, muse, tell me, what should I write about today?”

Cain leans in, kissing behind my ear, and I smile at the contact of his soft, warm lips against my heightened skin.

“There are a few positions in this book you can write about if you want.”

I smack his leg, and he laughs as I pull out my laptop and open the lid, resting it on my lap. “How do you even know that’s what I write? I might be a children’s author, for all you know.”

He chuckles low and throaty. It’s deeply sexual as his tongue softly slides from the base of my neck up to under my ear lobe, then he takes it into his mouth, tugging gently, causing a shiver and goose bumps to pebble my entire body.

“Because you shouldn’t write anything other than romance. It’s who you are.”

I raise my brow in amusement. “Romance is who I am?”

He sucks on my ear lobe again.

That’s incredibly distracting!

Clenching my thighs together, I can’t help the tingling sensations he brings out in me.

“Yes, you exude romance. You make me want to be romantic,” he admits.

“I do?” I ask, my stomach fluttering from his words.

“You do,” he murmurs, kissing under my ear again. His hand ventures from my waist to a picnic basket sitting next to him, and he pulls out a bottle of non-alcoholic champagne and then a tray of strawberries, followed by cheeses, crackers, and other delicacies. Great food for snacking on while writing.

This man has thought of everything.

“Why non-alcoholic champagne?” I ask, and he smiles, but it’s weak. I will have to store that in the memory bank for later.

“We’re both driving home. Can’t drink and drive. You know how it goes,”

Cain replies, though his voice is weaker. He's right. Drinking and driving is never a good idea, even if you're about to stuff yourself full of brie and strawberries.

"Here, lean back into me, and I'll pass goodies to you so you can concentrate on your writing."

"Why is it so important to you that I write?"

He kisses my cheek and smiles. "Because I want you to succeed in your dreams and achieve everything you want in life. If writing makes you happy, I will help any way I can."

Oh my God! What a sweetheart.

He's known me for a couple of weeks and says something like that.

This man is a keeper.

We spend the afternoon with me cuddling into his front with my back as I type frantically to get all my thoughts down. The words flow effortlessly onto the screen, and his calming energy and the incredible surroundings bring new life to the pages. Fresh air, teamed with the ambiance of having Cain behind me as support, is not only heightening my creativity but also soothing and helping me to relax. And in a world full of chaos and hectic lifestyles, it's extremely nice to sit and be one with nature and not have to think about anything other than the fictional world I am creating.

He's right—Cain is my muse!

I've been struggling to start this story for over a year, but suddenly, with him here today, the ideas keep flowing. He peeks over my shoulder every now and then to try and read what I'm typing, but I quickly shoo him away.

"You can read it when it is done," I scold, and he chuckles as he rests back against the tree, his arms wrapping around my waist again. For some reason, which I can't quite understand, he wants to be with me like this for hours. He's doing nothing but sitting on the ground, holding and feeding me while I work. I'm sure he must be ridiculously bored, especially a man who is more than obviously smart and must be busy with his work.

"We can go anytime you want. You don't have to sit here while I type and ignore you," I tell him happily.

"Are you inspired?" he asks.

"Yeah, this whole environment is great."

"Then we stay. As long as you're happy and enjoying our afternoon together while finding the flow you need, I'm only too happy to sit with you between my legs. I'm not bored. I enjoy seeing you in your element, and

watching you happy makes me happy.”

I look over my shoulder, and Cain appears genuinely content, so I don't question him further. Instead, I plant a chaste kiss on his lips, turn back, and continue writing.

I'm lost in my words for the next couple of hours when suddenly, Cain's cell rings, breaking me from my momentum. “Fuck. Sorry, little dove. It can go to voicemail.”

I turn back, looking at him with a smile. “Don't be silly. You can answer it.” He narrows his eyes on me like he is unsure, and I let out a snort, bumping into his chest. “Cain, answer your damn phone.”

He pulls his cell out of his jeans pocket and swipes to answer, “Yeah?”

I can't hear the other person, but Cain tenses behind me, his muscles stiffening. “Are you *fucking* kidding me?”

He runs his fingers through his hair while his voice drops an octave. “Don't do anything. I'll be there as soon as I can.” His tone is angry, irate, and filled with irritation as he ends the call.

I try not to react to the hostility rolling off him and focus on my laptop as he lets out a long exhale, shoving his cell back into his jeans. He slowly wraps his arms around my waist, holding me to him. His chin drops to my shoulder as his breath whispers on my skin. “I'm sorry, Makaylie. I have to go to work for a little bit—”

“It's okay, we can go—”

“No, you stay here. Keep working. You were in the zone. I'll come back and get you when I am done. This *won't* take long.”

Turning my head to the side just a little, I move my mouth to meet his in a kiss. He pushes back, a little more forceful than I'm used to from him. He is needy, and it feels like another side of him is coming out—that dark and dangerous side he warned me about. Instead of making me cautious, my hand slides up, running into his hair, gripping tight, and deepening the kiss.

I don't know what it is about this darker side of Cain, but it draws me in like a moth to a flame.

A low growl reverbs from deep in his chest as he slowly pulls back from me, his arms tightening around my waist and gently edging me away from him. “If I don't leave now, I will end up doing very bad things to you in this park, and there are kids around. I don't want to be held responsible for mentally scarring them.”

I laugh as he moves to stand, and I reach out, grabbing his hand. “Thanks

for bringing me here. For taking time out of your workday to be with me. I know you don't need to do it—"

"This is where I want to be, little dove. I need to be here with you."

I smile up at him. "I know, and I honestly appreciate it. But go now. Put your full attention into work for as long as it takes. I'll be here lost in my world until you return."

He shakes his head. "You're far too fucking good for me."

"Maybe. But they say opposites attract. And I don't know about you, but I think we're pretty magnetic."

He leans over, pressing his lips to mine once more, that all too familiar spark building inside me. I don't know where this will lead with Cain, but I sure do like how it's going so far.

He pulls back, a boyish grin on his face, and chuckles. "I must go, but I will be back to watch you create a masterpiece."

I snort out a laugh. "I don't know about a masterpiece."

He winks. "See you soon, little dove." He turns, walking toward the parking lot and giving me an amazing view of his ass looking fucking amazing in those jeans he wears. I swear the guy has the body of a god.

Exhaling with a giant smile, I scoot back, resting on the tree trunk and getting back to work on my novel. My mind wanders over the one-sided phone call.

I have no idea what is going on with his work or what he does for a living. His answers are vague like he's trying to talk around them. But what I do know is that he was not happy about whatever information he received.

Cain can get moody. I've seen it firsthand. And maybe his work is the cause of that, which is reasonable. The darker side of him that he forewarns me about—the fact that he is *not* a good guy—I'm not sure if it scares or excites me.

Maybe that makes *me* the crazy one?

CHAPTER SEVEN

CAIN

As second-in-charge of an elite establishment—The Baton Rouge Bachelors, an underground organization specializing in money laundering, couriering drugs, gambling rings, the sex industry, and sometimes even gun shipments—I need to be available at all times. Unfortunately, that includes call-ins when I have time off with my girl.

Leaving my subordinates to do the work doesn't seem to be working. These assholes don't know what the fuck they're doing. The fact they had to call me in at all tells me everyone under me is an incompetent idiot. My anger boils inside of me like a volcano, ready to erupt. The lava seeps through my veins, bubbling and brewing beneath the surface, waiting for the pressure point to send me off into a cataclysmic explosion.

They've pulled me away from relaxation with Makaylie.

I was enjoying my time with her without having to think about this fucking place or the bullshit that comes along with it. And yet, here I am, being dragged back in because Trap and his band of merry fuckwits have fucked up—*yet again*.

Huffing out my frustration, I straighten my leather jacket and storm through the parlor. Bachelorettes scurry out of my way as I stomp to the back of the warehouse. My boots fall heavy on the concrete toward the yellow room. I reach out for the handle, shoving the door open. Trap, Alfie, and a younger soldier, Buckley, are in the room waiting for my arrival. They snap their heads around to see me storming in. I slam the door behind me, the hinges creaking as Buckley backs up against the wall in his fear. Trap steps in front of him as Alfie stands back with a smirk like he's enjoying watching my wrath play out like a movie in front of him.

“What the *fuck*, Buckley?” I yell at the top of my lungs.

Trap steps forward, his hands raised like he's trying to appease me, and I glare at him. “Cain, the kid made a mistake—”

“Mistake? *Mistake!* You're the one who made the fucking mistake, Trap. You sent a new recruit, a *barely commissioned soldier*, to do a job *you* were supposed to do, and instead, he completely fucked. It. Up.”

Buckley steps forward, his body trembling with fear. “I... I need the money. I wasn’t thinking, Cain.”

Storming forward, I push past Trap and grab Buckley by his shirt, shoving him up against the wall, his feet dangling off the floor. He gasps, and Trap is by my side in an instant.

“You *needed* the *fucking* money? You idiot. You think working for the Baton Rouge Bachelors wasn’t going to make you rich beyond your wildest dreams?”

Buckley breathes hard and fast, his bottom lip trembling. “I... I... I needed the money. Fast.”

I drop him from my hold, he falls to his knees, and I slam my fist into his jaw, making him drop like a sack of potatoes to the concrete as he spits out a line of blood.

I pant through my rage. “You do the job. You get the money. *That’s* how *this* works. You don’t take on a job and then steal the *fucking product*, especially when the product is a shipment headed for our brothers at the Los Angeles Bachelors. You *do not* steal from our other establishments.”

Trap moves to my side, tilting his head. “Cain, c’mon, this was his first infraction. Cut him some slack—”

“*Cut. Him. Some. Slack?*” I shove Trap up against the wall, my eyes staring deep into the pools of a complete moron. My temper is about to reach boiling point.

He glares back, almost daring me to make a move.

He’s pulled me away from Makaylie for this?

This is *his* damn mess.

Entirely his fault.

Now we’re in hot water with the LA branch of the Bachelors because we can’t get them their shipment. This Buckley idiot sold it for his own gain, and Trap wants me to let it slide.

I know how *I* want to handle this, but this minefield is too big for me to take the reins on myself. It doesn’t only involve us. This matter concerns another branch as well.

I have to take this to the top.

“Wait here. I have to discuss how to settle this with Boss.” I shove Trap into the wall harder, then let him go, turning for the door.

“Cain. I called you so *you* could deal with it. We don’t have to take this to Boss,” Trap begs.

I turn back, my hand on the doorknob. “*That* was your first mistake, Trap. Your second was thinking I wasn’t going to do anything about this shitshow.” I turn to Alfie by the door and dip my head at him. “Don’t let them leave.”

He nods, moving to cover the exit as I walk out and go to Boss’ office. The anger boils inside me, knowing he will probably tell me to handle it. But regardless, he needs to know. Knocking on his door, I slip my head inside, seeing a Bachelorette on his table, her skirt up around her waist and Boss’ head buried between her legs.

“This better be good,” he mumbles, not lifting his head from between her thighs, as she glances back, smiling at me.

“The shipment to LA was compromised. Trap palmed it off to Buckley instead of doing the job himself, and Buckley took the product and sold it for his own profit. Trap managed to get wind of it and got hold of Buckley before he could leave town. I have Trap and Buckley in the yellow room now.”

Boss lets out a low groan, his fist slamming on the table beside the Bachelorette. She doesn’t even flinch as the glass on his desk rattles with the brute force of the hit, his head still buried between her legs. “I put you beneath me to deal with this bullshit, Cain. You know what needs to be done. Traitors can’t be trusted. As for Trap, tell him he’s on probation. Now, get the fuck out before I rethink my position on *your* role here too!”

Flaring my nostrils, that lava bubbles intensely as I spin, making my way back to the yellow room.

Makaylie floods my mind, and the only thing I can think of is that I should be there with her right now instead of dealing with bullshit like this. Bullshit that shouldn’t have even happened in the first place. Trap should have done his job properly, and I wouldn’t be dealing with the damn consequences.

Shoving open the door, I rush to Trap with my fist clenched so tight my fingers burn. I can’t hold back the venom and hatred I have for this asshole as it floods through my veins, and I slam my fist into his face. He tries to fight back, but I ram my other fist into his stomach. He hunches over, and then I uppercut him in the jaw. He falls back onto the floor, coughing and spluttering, groaning out in pain as I turn with fire in my eyes as I lock them on Buckley.

The idiot has the audacity to step back dramatically, his back pressing against the wall. His hands come up, trying to stop my hastened approach as I reach out, grab him by the collar, and throw him to the floor. He yelps as I

kneel over the top of him, landing a fist into his face. He coughs, trying to fight back, but I am too strong for him as I land another fist into his face. The volcano erupts like an inferno, surging through me so hot I can't contain my rage.

Buckley's head snaps to the side, panting, bleeding as he tries to buck me off him. But all that does is spur me on. The devil inside has come out to play, and there's no stopping him now. My hands slide out, wrapping around Buckley's neck. His eyes bug out of his face as he gasps for breath. His legs begin to kick, his hips jerking as he tries to fight me off. Buckley's hands grip at my arms, shirt, jacket, anything he can to try and fight me off, but I am far too in this now.

Because of him, I'm here, not with my girl.

He is the reason I have to do this right now.

He is the reason I have to let the devil back in.

He is the reason I have to fall back into the flames of darkness.

If I am going to be swallowed by hell, I am taking this asshole with me.

Finally, Buckley's body begins to give out. His muscles relax, his eyes roll into the back of his head, and he finally stops fighting as adrenaline surges through me.

How easy it is for me to take a life should scare me.

But it doesn't.

All it does is remind me how fucking evil I am.

And how I am no good for Makaylie.

The problem is, the only thing I want to do right now is get the fuck out of here, get my ass back to that park, and spend the rest of the afternoon with my woman.

Wipe this fucking crap from my mind.

Letting out a long huff, I unwrap my bloodied knuckles from around Buckley's purple throat and move to stand, brushing out my clothes. Clearing my throat at the deathly silence in the room, I turn to Trap, who looks stunned that I let my animal take hold. Pointing my finger at his bruising face, I grit my teeth, attempting to restrain myself. "You're on probation. You fuck up again, you're going to know about it. You want to step up, Trap, fucking act like a superior, not like a subordinate who doesn't know shit."

Trap glares at me like he's internally stabbing me a million times over in his mind, but he says nothing and simply wipes the blood from his face.

"Clean up this mess, and *don't* fucking call me again today."

Alfie slaps my back as I walk out the door. I tip my head at him as I glance down at my knuckles, rubbing them. There's no denying I've been in some kind of fight. I just have to hope Makaylie doesn't notice. I need to get back to her so she can pull me out of this hell and calm my black heart because as much as she says I am her muse, she is mine too.

She makes me want *more*.

She makes me believe there can be *more*.

But I can't think about that right now.

Because after the fire I felt burning inside me, I need Makaylie to remind me of the man I can be.

MAKAYLIE

It's been colder without Cain beside me, but I am still getting my words down. Though I have to admit, it's better when he is here, cuddled up behind me.

A shadow looms over my laptop, and I glance up at Cain standing over me. A bright smile lights my face, but something about his aura is different from when he left. He weakly smiles down at me like there's no spark inside him anymore.

It concerns me.

So I place my laptop to the side and reach for his hand. "Hey, how was work?" I ask, but the second I grab his hand, I notice his knuckles are bruised and bloody. Cain tries to pull his hand back from me, but it's too late. I've seen everything I needed to see. "What the hell happened to your hands?" I blurt out, standing from the blanket.

He exhales, turning from me like he's annoyed with my line of questioning, which only aggravates me because I am genuinely concerned for him. So I reach out, grabbing his hand, and yank him back to face me. "Hey, don't blow this off. Talk to me."

Cain turns back, his eyes hard, dark, so sinister it shocks me, and I take a step back. "Little dove, I thought about not coming back. I thought about leaving you here."

I jerk my head back in confusion. "What! Why?"

He exhales, running his bloodied fingers through his hair. "Makaylie, can't you see? I've tried warning you, but *you don't listen*."

“This again?” I groan.

He grabs my hands in his and shakes them. “Look! Look at my hands.”

My eyes shift to the bruises and blood on his knuckles. He’s obviously been in a fight. Every inch of me wants to know why. What happened? “I have a feeling even if I asked, you wouldn’t tell me what happened, would you?”

He groans, spins, and starts pacing. “Why? Why don’t you push?”

“You’d tell me if you wanted to. I trust you.”

He spins, glaring at me. “You shouldn’t.”

I step up to him, gently cupping his face. “But I do, Cain. I trust you.” My eyes fall to his hands again, an uneasiness rolls in my stomach, and maybe I am simply susceptible to his charms or his stunning looks. Maybe I am completely insane. But something inside me tells me that I can one hundred percent trust this man. “I can’t explain it. And maybe it’s irrational, and I should be pushing you for more information, but you will tell me when you’re ready. I know you will.”

The darkness in his eyes begins to lift—the Cain I know is returning to me. He slowly wraps his arms around my waist, gently pressing his forehead to mine. “I shouldn’t have come at you like that. Work was just—” He stops midsentence and doesn’t continue, so I bring my fingers up, gently caressing the back of his head.

“Well, I am glad you *did* come back. Because I still have to finish this chapter, and I need my muse,” I joke, trying to lighten his mood.

He smirks and leans in, pressing his lips to mine. I kiss Cain back, just needing to calm the storm raging inside of him. I don’t know what he’s just gone through. All I know is that whatever it was wasn’t good. So I kiss him with all that I have, my fingers clenching in his hair, my tongue dancing in his mouth, until he groans, slowly pulling back from me.

“Makaylie, if you insist on kissing me like that, I will not be held responsible for what I do.”

Snorting out a laugh, I turn in his grip and move over to the blanket. “Well, c’mon then. Let’s assume the position so I can finish this chapter.”

Cain smiles, walking to the tree. He sits, spreading his legs so I can sit between them, and I grab my laptop, placing it back on my lap as I lean into him.

Right where we should be.

His arms wrap around me, his head on my shoulder, and I get to work.

Eventually, I notice the small shards of sunlight that sparkle through the clouds, looking like rays from heaven, fade. The sky turns darker as the blue shifts to a more somber purple hue. It's pretty, but it's becoming cold, and I've gotten hours of writing done.

Now it's time to spend some quality moments with Cain, so I shut my laptop abruptly.

Cain rests his chin on my shoulder again. "Done for the day?"

Nodding, I place the laptop next to us on the blanket and turn around to face him. My legs bend over the top of his, he shifts a little away from the tree, and then they loop around him, so I'm basically hanging onto him like a monkey. He chuckles and leans down to kiss me. That spark ignites as his soft lips caress mine so tenderly I almost forget where we are.

"Woo-hoo," someone calls out as another wolf whistles while passing us. I giggle against Cain's lips as I pull back from him.

He looks up at me and exhales. "You should turn around. The clouds have parted, the sun is setting, and the sight is nearly as beautiful as you are," he remarks. I can't help but smile before leaning in and kissing him quickly, then unwrap myself from around him. Turning, I stare at the sunset with his arms wrapped firmly around my waist. The sun slowly fades in shades of pink and yellow while it moves lower behind the trees. The birds start to quiet as the air becomes still and frosty.

Exhaling abruptly, Cain nuzzles into my neck. "Thank you for today," I tell him, breaking our silence.

He kisses my cheek. "You're welcome. Glad I could help, even if I was absent for a little bit of it. We can do this every Saturday if you want?"

"Really? You'd do that for me?" A smile creeps over my face.

"I hardly ever get downtime, so spending the afternoon with you is perfect."

Biting my bottom lip, I lean in and kiss his cheek. "Guess we better get back to the apartments." I start to move, but he tightens his hold around my waist, making me giggle.

"Just a little longer," he requests. I see in his eyes that he needs this. The down time. The peace and quiet.

"How can I refuse?" I lean back into him and breathe the clean air while taking in the spectacular view before me.

Today wasn't about our sexual chemistry like it was yesterday. Today, we spent most of the day with each other. Sure, it felt electric every time he

touched me, and the urge to kiss him was so strong that I gave in multiple times, but it was fun to know we could be together without it being overly physical. Our attraction goes deeper than that. It's beyond physical—it's emotional. I think when he came back from work with bloodied and bruised hands proved that. The fact I didn't run. The fact he didn't push me away. Being together releases sensations that tell us we have to be together.

It's not an option.

It's a fact.

Eventually, we pack away the items from our picnic and walk to the parking lot, where we agree to meet at my apartment.

As I drive home, I feel elated. This was the best day of my life, even with the hiccup of his work.

Some may think sitting in a park and just being with each other is boring. Let's face it. Most of the time, I sat there, ignoring my boyfriend. *Is he my boyfriend?* I know we're exclusive. It's a little early to call him that, but today was perfect for us, no matter the label.

Taking the fever down a notch was a good idea.

Being in public assured nothing could go further than a kiss.

Now, heading back to the apartment, I know Joey will be there, so nothing too hot and spicy will be going on when she's there to witness.

After parking, I notice Cain hasn't arrived yet, so I head up and warn Joey he's coming. I get to the door and slide in the key when a hand glides around my waist. I smile and lean back into him as I smell Cain's aftershave. Turning my head to meet his lips, he kisses me softly, and I smile through the kiss when he starts to chuckle.

"Is there a reason you're smiling while kissing me?"

"Yes, because I'm so happy. You make me happy," I tell Cain honestly before I can filter my words. *Oh, man, that made it sound like I'm falling for him.* Which I can't be because it's too soon. *Get a grip, girl!*

Cain winces, noticing my uneasiness. He moves his body against mine and pushes me up against my door before smashing his mouth against mine. I let his tongue enter as his body molds against mine. My hands fly up around his neck, and my fingers thread into Cain's hair at the nape of his neck. The constant contact today, but also the lack of sexual contact, has only heightened things for us as he turns the key in the lock, opening the door.

All thoughts of Joey being here to stop *this* from happening escape my mind as he walks me backward into my apartment. Cain closes the door with

his foot as we struggle to keep our hands off each other. A deep throaty growl reverbs through his chest as he bends down and lifts me, his fingers clenching hard into my ass cheeks as I wrap my legs around his waist. Cain heads straight for my bedroom, our lips still entangled with each other's as he walks through the opening and shoves my bedroom door closed with his foot. He walks us over to my bed and kneels slowly, taking me down to the mattress with him. I shuffle up, and Cain follows, crawling over me. His lips find mine again, and he bears his weight on me. Moving his legs between mine, I wrap mine around his ass, holding him to me.

His kiss grows stronger, more forceful, as his hands trail down my body. My hands hold onto his shoulder blades so tightly that my fingers cramp. Cain rolls his hips into my pussy, and I gasp at the feeling. Leaning in, he bites my bottom lip and continues to kiss me while moving his hips like we're fucking, but we're still fully clothed.

I move to pull off his jacket, sliding it down his muscular arms, but he stills, taking his lips from mine. At the loss, I let out a small whimper, and he stares at me, his eyes burning with pure, unadulterated lust for me.

"If we do this, then you belong to me. Do you understand?" Cain asks, the seriousness of his tone undeniable.

"I already belong to you, Cain," I reply.

"I mean it, Makaylie. No one else can have you. Once I take you, you *will* belong to me, and me *only*," he demands as he remains unmoving.

My hands move to either side of his face, and I force him to look at me. He could ask me for anything at this moment, and I would give it to him without question.

"Only yours," I reply before taking off his jacket.

Cain concedes and struggles out of it, throwing it to the floor. Then he rolls his hips into my pussy once again, earning another gasp from me. He knows exactly where to put the right amount of pressure to give me exactly the pleasure I am craving. I grab the bottom of his tank and tug it upward, and he moves back to a sitting position on top of me.

"Someone's eager tonight." Cain lifts the material over his head, and my jaw drops at the sight of him. *Oh my God, that stomach is ripped—this man has abs on top of abs.* I follow the lines of his chiseled stomach down to that perfect V-shape we girls love so much.

"See something you like?" He chuckles when he comes back down to kiss me.

“You’re way too cocky, but I’m sure you already know that.”

He grins, showing me his perfect teeth as his hands run over my shoulders, taking my jacket with them. Cain sits up, as do I, sliding off my jacket fully. His hands are instantly on me again, pulling up my shirt, which is ripped up and over my head in an instant. Cain flings my top, and it lands somewhere on the floor. Then he lays me back, moving his lips from my mouth down my cheek to underneath my ear, and continues trailing soft kisses down my collarbone. My breathing escalates dramatically with each kiss as he gently slides his tongue over my skin, nipping and sucking as he goes.

Moving further, his lips make their way across my breast, then he pauses over my nipple and bites through my lace bra. Squirming, I moan slightly from the sensitivity. Cain slips his hand under my back and easily unclips my bra with his fingers. I giggle as his lips are quickly on my skin after he yanks the fabric away from me. His tongue trails from my collarbone to my taut nipple. Then he takes it into his mouth and sucks gently, grazing his teeth over the stiffened tip. A moan leaves my mouth at the stimulating feeling.

“My God, you’re beautiful,” he mumbles through his assault on my breast, and I whimper in response as he gently blows on my now-exposed nub.

His hand caresses my other breast as his mouth continues twirling, nipping, and sucking. The heat builds inside me, and his warmth only adds to the feeling engulfing me.

My lips feel betrayed as he’s left them unattended for far too long. So I take hold of his hair, fisting it with my fingers, and drag his head back up to mine. Cain chuckles as our mouths connect, and his hips roll into my pussy again. His hard cock is completely noticeable with every thrust that hits me.

I run my fingers down his sides and along the ridges and dips of his abdomen to undo his jeans button. He leans back so I can undo his pants and wastes no time undoing mine at the same time.

Cain abruptly shifts, standing at the edge of the bed, then yanks his jeans down and takes his tactical boots off, leaving him in only a pair of boxer briefs. As he twists and turns, I faintly see the ink of a giant back tattoo, but he moves so quickly I can’t make it out. He grabs my ankle boots and removes them, followed by my jeans. I laugh at the speed at which he carries out such mundane tasks.

Before I have a chance to blink, his lips are back on mine, effectively silencing my giggles, and his tongue dances against mine effortlessly. His hips roll into me again, and this time, I feel *everything*. He moans as his cock

pushes hard into my pussy.

“Mmm...” I moan against his lips.

Cain moves slightly to his side, and his hand grazes down the center of my body. It almost tickles like a feather, he’s doing it so softly. His fingers stop at the top of my lace panties, and his kiss becomes more forceful. He’s become desperate and can’t get enough of me. Cain’s hand slides underneath my panties, and his fingers graze the top of my clit. He’s so close to where I want him to be, but he lingers, and I rock my hips, needing more.

“Please,” I whisper.

He continues to kiss me, but I feel a smile pull on his lips before he says, “I like it when you beg... say it again.”

“Please, Cain,” I repeat breathlessly.

His lips leave mine while he moves down my body so quickly I don’t even know what’s happening.

Suddenly, my panties are ripped off me and flung to the floor as he positions his tongue flat against my clit.

Oh my God.

He lifts my legs and places them over his shoulders to give him better access, and then he starts. His tongue traces up my folds, and when he reaches my clit again, his tongue swirls over it, and instantly, I feel relief. That’s where I’ve needed him to be. His tongue is magic as it works me up into a feverish state. He licks, nips, and sucks his way to ensure I’m well on my way to oblivion. Cain’s fingers slide inside me while he continues his tongue lashing of my clit. He moves his fingers inside me at a slow and steady pace.

Moaning loudly, my hands clench onto the bed sheets, and he circles another round with his tongue while his fingers move faster as I get closer to the explosion point. My insides quiver as he moves quicker and quicker on and in me. He moans loudly, as do I, while the intensity overwhelms me.

“Oh God,” I call out as I clench my eyes tight. My head thrashes from side to side as he circles again, pushing me past the brink. I shift my hands to his hair, gripping tight, holding him to me as lights flash behind my eyes. My muscles clench, and the earth shatters around me as I come apart, hard and fast. My body shakes as it convulses and splinters into tiny fragments with the flick of his tongue.

I can’t help the long, drawn-out moan that escapes me as I come hard, but Cain soon swallows the noise I make as he towers over me, shoving his

tongue into my mouth. The tang of sweetness and salt hits me as I taste myself on him.

Finally, he lifts himself and pulls off his boxers, freeing his massive erection.

I gasp and stare at the sheer size of his cock.

With a hard swallow, I mentally prepare myself for what's coming.

Sure, I'm warmed up, but it's been a while, and now I know why Cain is so fucking cocky.

He grins mischievously and moves back in, smothering me with his body. He kisses me passionately and looks me in my eyes as I wrap my legs around his waist.

"Tell me you want this," he demands, breathing heavily.

"I want this. I want you. All of you. Take me, Cain."

And with that, he kisses me strongly and positions himself at my entrance. Cain looks into my eyes and slowly eases his head inside. It's so thick I have to prepare myself for the sting.

"Relax, baby," he says.

He called me baby.

I relax instantly at his words, and he eases into me a little further. We both moan as he slowly moves in, inch by inch. The feel of his bare cock makes me gasp. My breathing is erratic as he pushes inside me completely. He stills, giving me a moment to acclimatize to his size. His forehead is leaning against mine, and we stare at each other.

"You okay?" he asks, trying to keep himself together.

All I can do is nod.

Slowly, he starts to ease himself out of me and then back in.

It feels so good as I stretch around him.

Cain growls into my mouth. He's having difficulty going slow because I know he doesn't want to hurt me. Gradually, my pussy begins to loosen around him the more he moves inside me, and we push and pull together a little faster. Cain kisses me full of passion as he shifts one of my hands from his back and pushes it down to the bed beside my head. His hand grips my wrist, and he holds it there tightly. He slowly builds his pace while assessing me to ensure I'm okay.

I'm more than okay.

I'm in fucking paradise.

The nails of my free hand dig into the flesh of his shoulder.

He moves faster, rocking back and forth, rubbing me just the right way. My insides are burning, and I'm getting close. Cain circles his hips, causing me to gasp.

"Don't come yet," he demands as he thrusts, hitting the right spot.

"Oh fuck!"

He starts to push faster and deeper, continually hitting that spot to bring me to all new dizzying heights. If he doesn't want me to come, he's not going about it the right way. My body tenses, and my muscles clench. My eyelids close, and I pant for breath.

"Don't you come until I tell you to, Makaylie," he demands, thrusting up into me.

For some reason, I try to hold on to my pending orgasm. Pissing Cain off and riding out my orgasm makes me think he'll punish me somehow, so I'd rather have delayed gratification and make him happy than take what I want because I'm desperate. So, I do the best I can and try to hold out. But when he thrusts up like that, my back arches off the bed, and my muscles scream at me for release.

"Makaylie!" he whispers through muffled moans as we kiss.

"Mmm...."

We both moan together as I tighten around him, and my insides shake right at the brink.

"Now! Come now," he demands, and just like that, my body reacts to his command, and I explode beneath him into a quivering mess of bliss and adrenalin.

Cain continues to move inside me, his hand clenching harder on my wrist as he pounds into me faster and faster. I'm still falling from my high when I feel it rising again.

"Come with me!" His forehead lowered to mine, his grip on my wrist tightening to the point of pain, and he thrusts into me harder and faster, moaning as we both reach our climax and fall apart together.

"Cain," I shout.

"*Mine*," he calls out before he comes inside me.

His grip loosens slightly on my wrist beside my head, and his forehead meets mine again. His eyes bore down into me as I stare into them.

He seems... *emotional*?

Torn even.

It's unnerving.

Cain continues to stare into my eyes. “I never go bareback or come inside a woman without protection. What the fuck are you doing to me?” He growls.

Panting, I smile. “I’ve never gone bareback before either, but it felt so good. And before you ask, I am on the pill.”

His eyes clench shut like he’s relieved as he leans in, his lips hovering above mine. “Now you belong to me,” he whispers, then lowers his lips to meet mine.

“I belong to you,” I reiterate before I kiss him back passionately.

I’m just not sure if those words excite or terrify the fuck out of me.

The room is dark, my body aching, and I’m disorientated in a haze from sleep and mind-blowing sex. But the warmth I felt from Cain’s body at the start of the night is missing.

My eyes are too heavy to open, so I reach my hand out to feel for Cain, but I can’t feel him. I’m not sure if he’s further over in the bed or not here at all, but exhaustion overwhelms me, and blackness engulfs me completely.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CAIN

This woman is having some kind of profound fucking effect on me, and while I want to stay away from her—*I. Just. Can't.*

Being with Makaylie tonight was equally as intoxicating as it is dangerous.

Being inside her felt so fucking right, but the whole time I was torn in two.

She fell asleep so easily in my arms that she didn't even hear the persistent buzzing from my damn cell. I swear this woman can sleep through anything.

Because I need to be available at all times—especially at night when most of our deals go down—tonight is no exception.

So when my cell went berserk, I knew I needed to answer it. But with Makaylie being such a heavy sleeper, not only did I leave the room and answer the call, but I was also able to get dressed and leave her apartment to head into the warehouse for a meeting without waking her.

Hopefully, I can get back to her apartment before she wakes. I took her keys with me before I left so I could get back in. Her smell still lingers on me. *It's distracting.* I must be on my A-game, and she's making it hard to focus. Everything is harder because of Makaylie, but most of all, this woman pushes me to want to be better than I'm capable of being. I hope one day I'm in the vicinity of being the type of man she deserves.

Because right now, I'm not so sure.

Pulling up at the warehouse, I park my Impala and approach the door. Killian and Christophe are at the entrance, and they nod as I step up to them.

"Gentlemen," I mumble.

Christophe opens the door, and I go through the fake warehouse front to Harry. Show him my ring, and he slides open the paint bucket wall. The deep red hall looks the same as always, and the beat of slow music from the parlor makes its way to my ears. The parlor is alive and buzzing as the dim, amber lighting gives the room an extravagant feel.

Making its way around the table, the ball on the roulette wheel spins noisily as the guys all cheer for the winning number. The bartender wipes down the deep mahogany bar while the stale smell of cigar smoke fills my

lungs.

My eyes search the parlor for Trap. He's the one who called me here tonight.

What the fuck for? I have no idea, but it better be for a damn good reason.

Stepping through the parlor, I head out the black door and into the back warehouse. The packages from the other day are gone, letting me know Zorko is back on board, and I smile, knowing Boss will be happy. If there's one thing I want to do, it's to keep Boss happy.

A happy Boss means an easier life for me.

After him telling me Trap was on probation and I could be next, I am treading fucking careful.

My feet feel heavy as I stroll along the hall, past the black room, the yellow room, and the gray and white rooms. Every one of them has a purpose. Making my way to the very back of the warehouse to the offices, Trap is hanging around in front of mine, and I nod to him as he spots me. His eye sporting quite a black shade.

"You called... like seven hundred times?" I state in a pissed-off tone.

"Where the fuck were you? The deal finally went through with Zorko, and he wanted to talk to you in person, but no fucker could reach you."

Tensing, I swallow hard.

I was with Makaylie.

And if *any* of the guys here knew that besides Rodberg, it would be an issue. He's the *only* man in the Bachelors I trust wholeheartedly, even though he pisses me off the majority of the time.

They *can't* know about her.

They can *never* know about her.

I know what happens to women in this industry. Hell, I've been responsible for it. If they're not strong, callous, and built for this world, they will ultimately fall victim to it. And I hate myself for that every day, especially even more so now I can see how it would affect a man.

Sure, Makaylie doesn't know who I am or what I've done. But if she did, I'm sure she'd run for the damn hills, even though she has tried to show me that she won't. She doesn't know my true nature.

"Cain?" Trap asks, breaking my wandering thoughts.

"What?"

"What the fuck is wrong with you? You go missing all day and half the night, you come in for a brief moment, kill one of our soldiers, beat me up,

take off, and then when you do finally show up again, you're looking into space. Are you having a mental episode?" Trap asks while I grit my teeth. Rushing forward, I grab his shirt and thrust him back up against the wall. His feet almost leave the floor when he smirks, which causes me to snarl at him.

"There you are. Welcome the fuck back!" He snickers, and I shove him harder into the wall, and he lets out an "oomph" as the drywall creaks against the tension before I let him drop to the floor. I bring my hand up, slapping him across his head—hard.

He chuckles as he stands straight.

That's when I bring my fist up, stopping it half an inch away from his already black eye when the smirk drops from his face, and his entire body tenses, waiting for the punch to hit.

But I stop so he can look at my 'B' ring. "See this ring..." I move it around in front of his eyes, "... it stands for Baton Rouge Bachelors. It stands for brotherhood. It stands for respecting the ranking system in place. *Don't* disrespect me, or this ring will have fun with your teeth. *You got me?*" I spit out.

"Yeah... yeah, I got you."

"Good! Now, rather than trying to figure out what *I've* been doing all day, which is none of your motherfucking business, tell *me* what's happening with Zorko. Or have you fucked that up like you did with Buckley?"

Trap glowers at me but answers. "Zorko took the shipment to distribute. Said after the little stunt with Pyke's wife that he doesn't want to mess around with you or Boss. He said he's in... he's all in. But he wanted to tell you in person."

"Excellent. Now, I'm leaving... and only call me if it is fucking urgent."

He raises his brow and nods. "You got something happening I need to know about, Cain?"

"If I did, you would know." Swiveling around, I storm out of there and back toward the parlor.

Normally, I'd stay and spend time with the Bachelors.

But not tonight.

I have a girl in bed that I'd rather spend my time completely naked and pressed up against. So I step through the parlor of half-naked women, out through the paint bucket door, and back to my car.

I drive as fast as I can without being pulled over and return to the apartments before four in the morning. I just hope Makaylie hasn't woken

and wondered where I've gone. But with how heavily she sleeps, I assume she hasn't. Pulling my car into my reserved spot, I jump out of the car at lightning speed and rush to the elevator.

Her keys jingle as I pull them from my pocket, the little unicorn key ring making me chuckle as it dangles effortlessly from the silver keys. "Fucking hell, she's so damn innocent," I murmur to myself as I walk to her apartment.

Quietly, I unlock the door. Stepping inside, the apartment is silent as I close the door and place the keys back where they belong. I look to see signs of her roommate, Joey, but I can't see anything of his anywhere. I find it odd, but I head back to Makaylie's room, and she's still sound asleep like a fucking angel when I look in on her. My chest tightens, seeing her cute button nose. I walk in, close the door, start undressing, then slide into the bed behind her. She's so warm compared to the frigid air outside, and I smile, wrapping my arm around her.

Makaylie feels like home.

And I've never had this before.

It scares me.

It comforts me.

It alarms me how much I like being with her.

But even more alarming is how I would give up everything to see her happy.

This woman is dangerous.

A danger to my sanity.

A danger to my career.

And a danger to my black heart.

But I am *far* more dangerous to her.

I should keep away.

I know that without a doubt.

I'm putting her at risk, but I don't have the strength to walk away.

MAKAYLIE

The Next Day

The morning sun glimmers through the window, sending rays of sparkling light into my room. Dust motes float like tiny fairies through the air as I open and close my eyes, trying to adjust to the morning light. The coldness I felt

last night is replaced by warmth, and Cain is wrapped around me, his front to my back, with his arm tightly pulling my body to his. His legs entangle with mine, making the brisk morning feel warmer in the coziness of my bed.

I must have dreamed he wasn't in bed last night.

A smile creeps onto my face as the feeling of waking up with someone—well, not just anyone—fills me with happiness. My hand moves to take his resting on my stomach, and in doing so, he wakes and nuzzles into my neck. I giggle as he pulls me into him further if that's even possible.

“Morning,” he murmurs with a sleepy voice as he continues to nuzzle into my neck, kissing it gently.

“Good morning,” I reply as I turn in his grasp to face him.

Cain smiles brightly as I gaze into his bright blue eyes, which are brimming with lust as he stares at me. His hand embraces my cheek, and I smile, turn my face in his hand, and kiss his palm. He returns his palm to my cheek, pulls my face toward him, and leans in for a morning kiss. Our lips meet, and I feel him smiling as our lips come together. His legs entangle with mine as he moves every inch of his body in line so we're touching in every possible way.

“I could get used to this,” he murmurs, parting our lips.

“Me too,” I reply as he kisses my forehead.

“Well, considering you now belong to me, I guess you *have* to get used to it,” he says with a broad, cocky smile. My face crinkles at the phrase ‘belong to me.’ I know he said it last night while we were in the heat of the moment, but I was too caught up to worry about what he was *actually* saying.

He raises his eyebrow. “Something on your mind?” He starts to trail light kisses up and down my neck.

I decide honesty is the best policy right now. “Yeah, what's with this ‘you belong to me’ shit? That's so dominant. You're not into BDSM, are you?” I ask jokingly.

He frowns, looking like I've completely insulted him.

Shit! Maybe he is into BDSM.

“No. But don't be so judgmental, Makaylie. They won't judge you for living a vanilla life, so don't judge them for their needs and wants.”

My forehead crinkles, and I purse my lips as he continues, “And in answer to the other part of the question, I like to be in control of every situation and everyone in that situation. You belong to me because I want everyone to know that no one else can touch you,” he answers straight-faced.

Huffing, I scrunch my brows, not completely convinced. “Why do you get to decide who can and can’t touch me? Shouldn’t that be *my* decision since it’s *my* body they’d be touching?” I defend, and his brows crease so far together they’re almost touching.

“No. Like I said, *you* belong to *me*, and all decisions regarding *you* have to go through *me*. I want what’s best for you, and me being in control is how I do things.”

“Well, what if I don’t *want* to be controlled? I’m my own person, Cain. I should be able to do what I want when I want and definitely not have to run it past my boyfriend first,” I say harshly.

He screws up his face. “Don’t say, boyfriend, Makaylie. It’s so adolescent... I’m your partner.”

I frown at him. “Partnerships are a two-way street, Cain. You decide on things as a team, not one dominating over the other. If you want me to be with you, you have to accept that I can make my own decisions and look after myself. I don’t want to be one of those girls who has to ask her boyfriend...” I roll my eyes, “... sorry, *partner*, to be able to do things. That is *not* how I work.”

“This is *not* up for discussion, Makaylie. Either you be with me my way, or we’re done.”

My eyes widen with that comment.

I’m baffled.

Outraged.

Disgusted.

Anger seeps through my every pore, the atmosphere bubbling with tension so rife you couldn’t even cut it with a fucking chainsaw.

Gritting my teeth as my chest heaves and my breathing becomes more rapid, I sit up in bed, take the bed sheets with me, and bend down to pick up my shirt.

“Fine! Then I guess we’re done.”

He sits up in bed and stares at me while I fumble to get dressed.

“You can leave now,” I spit as my blood boils so feverishly I feel like my skin might bubble and begin to flake off.

He grunts and stands, letting the blanket fall from his naked body. I’m momentarily caught in his magnetism as I stare at his glorious physique, his amazing back tattoo on show—a marvelous work of art—as he pulls up his briefs and then his jeans. When he turns around and looks at me, I snap out of

the moment and continue to get dressed. My emotions are wreaking havoc with me right now. I am so beyond angry with him, but I don't want this to be it for us.

Is this really going to end?

Right here and now?

I turn to look at Cain and watch him staring at me as if he's going through the same emotions I am. Our eyes lock for a moment, and his shoulders slump as if he's letting his guard down for a second. I step toward him, but his eyes glaze over, and I know he's adamant about having me his way or no way at all.

I exhale and turn, walking out of my bedroom and into the living room. I know he's close behind as I make my way to the kitchen and the refrigerator.

How can a perfect night be ruined so quickly?

Are we seriously over before we've had a chance to begin?

Cain grunts as I continue to ignore him. He's in the living room while I bang about, making a start on the coffee machine, briefly wondering where Joey is. But right now, I don't care. I'm trying not to concentrate on the awkwardness between Cain and me.

"I fucking knew it!" Cain bursts out loud as he storms toward the front door.

Jolting my head back in confusion, I look at him as he walks past me and throws a piece of paper on the kitchen counter. He shakes his head, his nostrils flaring, his face beetroot red, and a vein popping out the side of his neck.

Is he angry?

At me?

He's enraged, and his mood swings take me aback.

"We're done. Don't even try to make up an excuse. I know you're sleeping with your roommate. I. Don't. Fucking. Share! Goodbye, Makaylie," he yells, then slams his palm into the wall. The loud bang and cracking of drywall echo through the kitchen, making me jump. Then he turns, walking out the door before I can say anything, slamming it so hard behind him a few things fall from the shelving onto the floor.

What the fuck?

Why would I be sleeping with Joey?

I pick up the sheet of paper and read the note Joey left me.

Dear Kaylie,

You may have been too occupied to realize I was home last night when you came in with that guy, and just so you know, I can hear through your walls.

Let me say that I'm outraged and uncontrollably jealous that you were with him again.

How could you do this to me?

You little whore!

I'm going out so you two can have fun without me.

Hope he's worth it.

Love Joey xo

Reading Joey's letter, I realize how it must look to Cain. Throwing the letter on the counter, I run off after him, hoping he hasn't gotten into the elevator. My heart pounds, and I want to set him straight as I rush out my door, leaving it open on my way to the elevator. My feet feel extra heavy as I pant, rushing as fast as I can down the hall. I watch him step in as I run, hoping I reach him before those doors close.

"Cain, let me explain. It's not what you think," I yell, gaining his attention.

He shakes his head, stepping further back into the elevator.

"Cain, please, just hear me out," I yell as the doors begin to slide.

"Goodbye, Makaylie," he sneers through the closing doors.

My heart races as I bolt faster, my stomach flips, and my muscles tense. "Joey isn't who you think!" The elevator doors close just as I reach them. "She is..." I mumble the last two words even though he can't hear them. I wish I knew his apartment number so I could go up and sort this mess out with him. My head pounds, and my chest aches at the thought of never seeing Cain again. I'm out of breath from the run, teamed with the adrenaline of trying to set Cain straight.

But I'm too late.

He's gone.

God knows when or if I will ever see him again.

Even though I was so angry at him before, having it turn on me like this only shows me how much I care about him. My anger wanes, and now it's

replaced with sadness at the thought of not seeing him again.

Turning on my heel, I slowly walk back to my apartment, wiping a stray tear from my face. It's funny how you can go from being furious one minute to complete despair the next.

Walking inside, I grab my cell phone, thinking if I try to call him, maybe he will listen. Dialing *Your Muse*, I wait, and wait, and wait, but he doesn't answer.

So I send him a text message.

Me: Cain, please let me try to explain. My roommate – it's not what you're thinking, I promise. I am not sleeping with Joey. Nor have I or will I ever. Can you please just talk to me?

Your Makaylie.

I figure putting 'Your Makaylie' at the end might make him a little more appreciative of his whole stance on me *belonging to him*, which is a sore point, but for now, I'm willing to ease on it a bit if it will get him to speak to me. Hitting send, I sit back and wait—but nothing.

He doesn't reply.

He doesn't call.

And as I sit and wait for a reply that doesn't come, instead of growing anxious and upset, my stomach twists in another way, and anger flairs again.

The bastard is being one hundred percent unreasonable!

I wish I knew his apartment number.

For a moment, a brief flash of insanity takes over my mind as I think about taking each floor and knocking on every door until I find him, but that thought quickly fades as my anger steadily grows. Making my way over to the sofa, I sit with my head in my hands. How can someone—who has only been in my life for a couple of weeks—make me feel so lost without him? Even though he tests my limits and pushes the boundaries of a typical relationship, I mourn the loss of him.

My emotions are all over the place.

I want to hate him—hate him for wanting to claim me as his.

Making a bold statement that I don't have control over my life is *not* something I want. But then losing him altogether is *not* what I want either. Plus, losing him over a confusion like Joey is quite simply just stupidity.

My mind is a mess.

I don't know whether to cry, throw something, or drink a fifth of vodka.

This guy is making me crazy.

How can this man have that much of an effect on me?

It's not possible, is it?

I think back to my life pre-Cain. It was boring and uneventful. I was plodding along through life, waiting for inspiration to hit, and when it did appear in the form of Cain, I knew my life would never be the same.

So now, post-Cain, my life seems even worse.

I'm left feeling empty with the thought of my existence from now on without him.

Without my muse.

Without the excitement.

Without the drama.

Sighing, I slump, falling back onto the sofa, and spend the rest of the day lounging around the apartment. Every noise, every movement, gets my hopes up that he's come back.

But he doesn't.

Maybe it is a good thing.

I doubt he'll change his stance on his stupid ownership rules, and I doubt I will want to change mine on giving up my freedom.

So where does that leave us?

CHAPTER NINE

CAIN

I'm fuming.

Livid.

Absolutely going insane.

Makaylie and her roommate have been together.

What kind of a name is Joey anyway?

He sounds like a fucking douche. The asshole doesn't have any of his shit in their apartment. All I saw was female stuff. He must be one hell of a fucking pushover, that's for sure.

Fucking pussy.

Even though I can't get Makaylie out of my mind—she's engrained in there forever—I know this is for the best.

The woman is too innocent for my world.

Too damn naïve.

The people in my life would chew her up and spit her out quicker than Usain Bolt can run an Olympic sprint. She shouldn't be attached to me. The best thing now is to let her go before we become too attached, and this—this is an easy way out for both of us, even if it makes me furious, and I want to fucking murder.

I have to remember Makaylie is better *far* away from me.

She has given me an out—now I need to heed it.

Opening the door to my apartment, I charge into the usual sounds of Rodberg watching the television. I storm over to the sofa, sit, and shove my foot out, kicking the coffee table over dramatically to ease out some of the tension brewing inside me before I do something rash.

Rodberg raises his brow and smirks. “Do I wanna know what crawled up your damn ass?”

Turning to him, I sink into the sofa and exhale. “No.”

He nods and looks back at the television, seeming pleased with my answer, but I tell him anyway. “Makaylie is fucking her roommate.”

He peers at me sideways and frowns. His nostrils flare before he quickly says, “Cain, tell me you didn't kill him?”

Rolling my eyes, I punch his leg. “No...” I tilt my head. “Damn shame he wasn’t there for me *to* kill him.”

“*Cain*,” Rodberg berates.

“I know, I know. I *won’t* kill him. Fuck! Rodberg, for a filthy pig of an asshole, you really are a do-gooder.”

“Fuck, don’t tell that to Trap... he’ll have my balls.” He chuckles.

“Yeah, he would...” I grunt. “I’m your only saving grace. But unfortunately for you, we have to go in. I have work to do, and you have to come with me.”

He exhales and nods. “I’ve got your back, Cain, always do. Even if you’re a control freak, who’s a little pussy whipped right now.”

Groaning, I slap the back of his head and stand, cracking my neck from side to side. “I’m in the mood for a little mind fuckery. How about you?”

“Cain, every day with you is a constant mind fuck, but I’ll take it ’cause I like a good fucking. You know me.”

Rolling my ‘B’ ring around my finger, I nod. “Yeah, total fucker in all ways. Let’s go.”

Alfie told me that one of our clients has been selling our product for a higher cost and pocketing the difference. This is not only frowned upon, but it also breaks the contract agreed on our terms, and therefore, our deal with him is null and void.

Alfie has brought him in for a little ‘chat,’ and after this morning’s events with Makaylie, I’m ready to deal with treacherous traitors right now.

Walking out the back and into the main warehouse, Rodberg is in the parlor as his rank doesn’t gain him access to meetings of this kind. In a way, I’m glad. Seeing this kind of thing go down could harm our friendship.

I’m in the yellow room again, along with Trap, while we wait for Alfie to bring in Malone—the asshole undercutting us. Alfie rounds the corner, strutting in with his vibrant ginger hair next to Malone, dressed as usual in his pristine suit and looking as arrogant as ever with his blue tie and gold tie clip. His silver hair is manicured to within an inch and swished over to the side, and his freshly trimmed beard looks perfectly neat, covering his square jaw. He looks every part the bustling politician he is.

“Malcolm Malone, it’s good to see you, Governor,” I state, putting out my

hand to shake his.

He takes my hand in a firm grip and nods. “Cain. Look, as you know, I’m the Governor of Louisiana and a very busy man. I can’t just drop everything and come here for a chat and a cigar whenever you want me to.”

I let out a bemused laugh. “No, of course not, Governor, my apologies. But I wouldn’t bring you here unless we had some important discussions to go over with you.”

He cocks his head to the side and raises his brow in curiosity. “Well, get on with it. I have to prepare for the National Governors Association business meeting. It’s in the Virgin Islands...” He raises his eyebrows up and down. “So help me, Lord, I hope the ‘virgin’ part of the ‘island’ lives up to its name.” He winks at me as he uses air quotes, and my lip turns up.

And now I remember why I despise this guy so much.

“Governor, please, have a seat,” I instruct while gesturing to the singular seat in the room.

He nods, tugging on his jacket collar, and sits without a thought. Alfie closes the door to the yellow room, and I smile, leaning back, bending my knee, and propping my foot back on the wall. I peer up at the ceiling, trying to drag this out as much as possible.

This cunt needs to know his place.

And right now, I am the man to show him.

“Cain, c’mon, you know I’m working your profits nicely. Everything is running smoothly on my end. You can trust me.” His eyes squint, and he smiles weakly as I stifle a laugh.

I push off the wall and head over to the cabinet, also painted in yellow. “You see, Malone, the problem is, I don’t think I *can* trust you...” I pause for effect and continue, “Here’s my issue. Alfie here is a wiz on the computer, and while you say you’re working our profits nicely, I think you’re working *our* profits and then turning them into *your* profits.”

His eyes open wide, and his head snaps to the door a little too dramatically as Trap steps in front of it, blocking his path even though he’s still seated.

“Fuck.”

“Mmm... fuck is correct. *You*, of all people, should know, Governor, that when you deal with the Baton Rouge Bachelors, you’re not dealing with small fries. We have eyes on everything. Ears on everything, including *your* bank account. We know where your money comes and goes. Even your bank account in the Cayman Islands.”

“How the fuck...” he drifts off as he looks around to Alfie, who smiles wide and nods.

“Oh, it’s true, I see all the hookers too. Man, your wife would be *sooo* disappointed,” Alfie jabs.

Malone grits his teeth and sits taller while clenching his jaw from side to side. “Right, what do you want?”

I chuckle. “Your son... Caleb, is it? You got into this because of him and his little drug problem, right?” He glances at me suspiciously and nods. “You want him to stay sober by thinking you can control where the drugs are going in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, so you take over selling and distributing them. Is *that* what you were trying to do?” I ask.

He slumps his shoulders, no longer the big man in the room. “Yes. I was attempting to make sure it went to the right places. You know, only the less fortunate parts of town and stayed out of the better parts. I’m doing my civic duty. I’m making the state better, Cain.”

A loud snort erupts from my mouth, and I shake my head. “And you think you’re the only person we deal with, Governor? You think you’re the *only* drug lord in the state of Louisiana?”

He frowns and swallows hard. “No, but I’m your biggest client. I take the most, right?”

Exhaling, I raise my brow and tilt my head. “We have another who is on par with you, Governor. You’re not the best on our books, but you *are* the most crooked.” I raise my eyebrow. “So what are we supposed to do about that? You’re high profile, so we can’t do anything to you personally... can we?” I tilt my head menacingly as I glare at him.

His breath catches in his throat as he looks from me to Trap, then to Alfie. “What does that mean?”

I shrug. “Well, the NLGA business meeting in the Virgin Islands is coming up. We could arrange a press announcement that you have a Cayman Islands bank account and are squirreling money away... but where would they say you’re getting the money from?”

“Cain!” He grunts as he sits taller in the chair.

“Or, we could go a step further and announce that you’ve been selling drugs to the less fortunate parts of Louisiana to make sure it doesn’t get into the better parts... doing your civic duty and all—”

“Fuck, Cain. No, you can’t. It would ruin me!”

I nod and take a breath. “No, you’re right. I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking

straight. It's just, you know, people think they can outwit us, and it gets my back up. I lose control for a second, and then *BAM...*" I slam my fist on the table loudly, making him jump, "... something fucking bad happens."

He opens his eyes wide as I reach into the yellow cupboard and pull out an iPad. I press the video call button, and Morgan answers right away.

"Yellow?" he says cheerily.

"Morgan, I have the Governor with me. He's been a *very* bad boy. So let's show him what being bad means for him."

Morgan smirks and then turns the camera onto Malone's son, lying face down on the carpet next to empty plastic bags with white power smeared all over his nose, completely passed out. I sigh. *It's not a good sight.* I'm not sure if he's lapsed into a deep sleep or gone further, but either way, the Governor is about to feel the wrath of the Bachelors.

Turning the iPad to face the Governor, his eyes bug open wide, and he lets out a muffled wail as he grabs at the device, pulling it out of my hands to inspect the screen closer. His chest is heaving, and his face contorts in clear pain as his mouth twists in anguish. He lets out a heavy sigh and shakes his head. "Caleb?" he murmurs, almost like he's too scared to talk loudly and wake him.

"He's out, Governor. He's got a pulse. It's weak, but he should be okay... *I think,*" Morgan suggests, and Malone lets out a stifled sob.

"You fucking bastard, Cain. He's been sober for eighteen months."

My neck twinges as a thread of guilt washes over me.

What the hell was that? I used to thrive on this shit.

Even though the governor is a piece of fucking crap, and he deserves the pain he's in now, Caleb doesn't, and that thought is what's getting to me.

Makaylie is making me weak.

She's making me feel.

To do this job properly while I'm here, I *can't* think of her.

I have to detach from the Cain I *want* to be and be the Cain I *need* to be.

"*You* did this, Governor, *not me.* This punishment is all on *you.* The money in your Cayman Islands account has been transferred to us as payment for the unauthorized trading you did behind our backs. You will cease and desist any further dealings from now on. Plus, your association with us from here on out is null and void. You will no longer be allowed access to the parlor, the women, the drugs, the money, the trade, our men, or have any interaction with any of the Baton Rouge Bachelors once you leave this

facility. If you mention anything about the Bachelors to anyone, including the press, we will tell *all* your dirty little secrets.” I give him a threatening smirk. “And we mean *all*. We also have access to your email, business and personal, as well as bank accounts, plus a hell of a lot of security footage of you doing, well, a *lot* of questionable shit. *Don’t. Test. Us. Again.* That wife of yours is *very* pretty. She would fetch a hefty sum in Mexico or Thailand.”

His face twists in a distorted rage, but his words don’t convey his feelings. “I understand. I won’t mention your establishment to anyone as long as my son doesn’t die. So you better ensure he lives through this drug binge, Cain.”

I grab Malone by his collar, lifting him off the seat so forcefully that the chair falls backward beneath him. He grits his teeth as I glare and stare him down. “You *ever* threaten me again, Governor, I’ll not only put your son in the ground, but I’ll put you right there beside him, then cut off your dick to send to your wife as a present. You might hold power in the Senate, but in *this* building, I’m the boss... *got it?*”

He snorts out of his nose like he’s having difficulty keeping himself under control, but he simply nods and yanks out of my grip. “I’ll show myself out.”

I huff out a puff of air exasperatedly. “Alfie will show you out. It’s always nice doing business with you, Governor. Good luck on your race to the White House...” I pause. “I’ll vote for the other guy.”

He turns, heading for the door. Alfie steps up to his side as Trap moves aside and lets them leave.

I take a deep breath and start pacing the yellow room in my rage.

“You doing all right, Cain?” Trap asks.

I look at him and raise a brow. “What’s it to you?”

He chuckles and takes a breath. “You seem... I dunno... a little all over the place. Like you almost had a look of regret about what you did to his stupid kid. You appeared weak.”

“I don’t need you hounding me about my facial expressions in the yellow room. I have enough to deal with.”

“Has it got something to do with why you’re not around as much?”

I think to Makaylie and her motherfucking roommate, Joey.

Shaking my head, my muscles tense up, and my neck starts to pulse with anger at the thought of her with him right now. “It’s none of your fucking business, Trap. What are you? My mother?”

He laughs and slaps my shoulder. “Fuck no, but you need to get your head in the game, Cain. Boss will notice if you’re off. You know that as well as I

do. If you're not taking on the brunt of the work, some awesome fucker who's third in charge will come up and take your fucking job from right under you."

I raise my brow at his forwardness. "Is that a threat?"

"No. Just letting you know you better be present." He chuckles.

I grunt and turn, heading for the door. If I drank, right now is when I'm sure I would need one. If I wasn't so hung up on Makaylie, I'd go into the parlor and have my way with one of the Bachelorettes.

But I can't even bring myself to do that.

So what the fuck is there for me to do here?

This place is pissing me off.

So, instead of going to the parlor to unwind, I head to my office, leaving Trap behind as I storm past all the other rooms. Walking into my office, the room is small and stark. It's only here to store paperwork and my computer. I sit, turning on my computer to play a game of solitaire. Not the epic night of partying I'm sure Rodberg and Trap had in mind, but I have Makaylie on the brain, and while she's at her apartment with that asshole, Joey, I can't fucking think straight.

All I can think about is Makaylie.

And at this rate, it will do my head in being away from her.

I hate that I don't have *control* in this situation.

I need to find a way to regain *control*.

I need to get Makaylie back in my life without forcing my control issues so hard that I break her.

She's delicate.

A man like me and a woman like her?

Something is inevitably bound to break.

CHAPTER TEN

CAIN

While sitting in my office, my mind is numb from a couple of hours of solitaire. I feel restless after taking my anger out on Malone and his kid.

I need a drink, a fuck, or maybe beat someone senseless.

The first is off the cards, the second impossible because of that damn cute little blonde invading my brain, and the third may be doable and highly fucking likely if anyone pisses me off enough.

As I lose yet another game, frustration overwhelms me as I groan and shove my mouse across my desk so hard it flies off the other side, crashing to the floor. “Fuck’s sake,” I growl under my breath, then slowly rise from my chair to pick up the damn broken mouse.

My cell rings, so I turn back to my desk to see it’s Hoodoo from NOLA Defiance MC, and I raise my brow. Normally, it’s Hurricane, their club president, calling me, not their medic. *Odd*, I think. Curiosity gets the better of me, so I scoop up my cell and swipe the screen, slumping back into my seat. “Hoodoo? Everything all right?”

“Hey, brother. Sorry for the unexpected call... how’s shit?” he asks.

Sitting back in my chair, I relax a little. “You know how life is... same shit, different day.”

He chuckles heavily. “Ain’t that the truth.”

“Something I can help you or the club with?” I ask, wanting to cut the small talk and get to the damn point.

“Yeah, so the club’s in a bind, and we wanna come talk to the Bachelors for a handout. Can I drive over to talk to you in person?”

The thing is, NOLA Defiance MC supply the Baton Rouge Bachelors with drugs. They have the biggest poppy farm in the whole of Louisiana. We need them to keep ourselves running.

So if *they* have a problem—we have a problem.

If they come knocking, we fucking answer.

“When?”

“I’m thinking now. Should be there in an hour. That suit?”

I glance at my watch. I have nowhere to be. “Yes. See you then. Just tell

the soldiers at the front I'm expecting you. You have any trouble, let them know to reach me, and I'll tell them to let you through."

"Thanks, brother. Appreciate this."

"No problem. See you soon." I end the call and sink back in my seat.

At least tonight won't be a complete bust.

Now I need to waste another hour doing something before NOLA Defiance arrives.

As I sit in the parlor drinking a sparkling water, a topless Bachelorette walks past me with a smirk. "Havin' a good night, Cain?" she asks, taking my empty glass and handing me another one.

Normally, my eyes would wander up and down her exposed breasts, but tonight, I'm not interested. "As nights go, it's fairly bland."

She smirks. "Haven't heard any screams from the warehouse, so I can understand why it's bland for you tonight."

I chuckle, raising my glass. "Touché," I reply as Alfie strolls over with a walkie.

"Cain, Killian's on the line, says he has Defiance MC at the entrance with a civilian female. Says she is with Defiance, but you know the code... no women unless they're part of the Bachelors."

I snort out a laugh, scowling at Alfie. "You do know what Defiance means to us, right? What they bring to the Bachelors?"

"I mean... yeah?" Alfie nods.

"So do you think denying them access to the parlor with their guests is a good *fucking* idea?"

Alfie swallows hard, then shakes his head. "Ahh, n-no... I don't."

"Ding, ding, ding, we have a winner. You tell Killian any member of Defiance is an ally to the Bachelors. Let them in, or I will go out there and show Killian and Christophe what happens when they're not hospitable to our guests. And I can tell you now, they won't be able to walk when I am done with them. I am in the fucking mood—"

"Yes, sir!" Alfie cuts me off while frantically nodding as he rushes away.

I throw back my sparkling water. "Fucking amateurs!"

It only takes a few minutes before the unmistakable stature of Hoodoo—tattoos, beard, leather cut, chest all puffed out—walks through the parlor with

a woman beside him. Raising my brow, she's not the typical woman I would expect to accompany Hoodoo. This woman appears like an MMA fighter—short brown hair, arms covered in tattoos—but damn is she a looker. I'd probably hit on her if my head wasn't so caught up in a little blonde beauty.

But not today.

And especially not with how her face is turned up like a prune while looking around the parlor at the half-naked women. There's fight behind her eyes. She's tough. I can see that in her already, and I haven't even been introduced.

Standing, I head over and place my hand out to Hoodoo to shake. "Hoodoo, glad you could make it."

Hoodoo has a firm grip and dips his head toward the tough chick. "Cain, this is the club horticulturalist, Maxxy. Maxxy, this is Cain."

Chuckling, it all begins to make sense now. "So she's the brains. Guessing the club can't live without her, huh?"

Hoodoo looks at her, and I see that slight sparkle in his eye. "Yeah... basically."

"Awww... you can't live without me," Maxxy quips.

"I said the club can't. Me, on the other hand, would do just fine without you."

"Spoilsport." She grins wide.

Letting out a soft chuckle at the clear chemistry between these two, I gesture toward the bar of the parlor. "Let me show you around," I offer, leading them past a few topless women.

Maxxy watches closely, clearly annoyed that these women are on display purely for the men's entertainment. As a Bachelor slaps the ass of a Bachelorette, Maxxy lets out a clear scoff, her face scrunching in a scowl. She's not wrong. Some of the men are pigs, and while I am never one to treat the women like they are our sex slaves, I know the majority of the men and the elite who come to this establishment think of the women at the parlor as their property.

It's not something I have ever liked about the Bachelors.

But it's steeped in tradition.

And though I am second-in-charge, it's not something I can change.

We walk to the bar, and I glance up at the topless woman behind the bar. "Couple of beers and my usual, thanks."

"Coming right up, Cain," she states, pours the beers and the sparkling

water, and slides the three drinks our way.

I hand the beers to Maxxy and Hoodoo, pick up the sparkling water for me, and wait for Hoodoo to start talking.

“Not sure how much you know, but we’re light on staff at The Plantation due to some run-ins with some less-than-delightful people.”

“You need manpower?” I ask.

“Yeah! Your guys already distribute our product in Baton Rouge. They know what our shit is like. They know us, so what we’re asking is for a few men to come work with us at The Plantation. We gotta get the distribution happening faster.”

It’s not an unreasonable request.

Without the product from these guys, we’d be screwed.

So if they need our help, then we damn well better help them.

“I don’t see why not. I’ll have to run it past Boss. But I can see it would benefit us because the better you run, the better it is for the Bachelors. We can distribute more drugs in Baton Rouge if the supply is available... it can only be a win-win.”

“So, how many men do you think you can offer?” Hoodoo asks.

“How many do you need?”

Hoodoo side eyes Maxxy, and she exhales. “We could do with at least five or six.”

“We can manage that. Some of our soldiers are itching to get their hands into some grunt work. Let me talk to Boss. Will you be okay here if I go have a word with him? He is out back.”

Hoodoo dips his chin. “Go. We’ll have a drink.”

Standing, I gesture to Trap to come over. He’s not my first choice to handle the NOLA brothers, but he is the next in charge. So the duty falls to him. The idiot saunters over like he owns the place. “Trap will keep you entertained. Watch out for Hoodoo and Maxxy from NOLA Defiance while I take care of some business?”

Trap sits where I just got up from and nods. “Sure thing.”

He looks Maxxy up and down and tilts his head. “I don’t see many women bosses here, but you look like you can handle your shit.”

“Thank you. I’ll take that compliment. See, Hoodoo...” Maxxy raises her drink to Trap, “... you had nothing to worry about. I *can* handle my shit,” I hear her say as I walk off to find Boss, leaving them to it.

I head to his office and gently wrap on the door. The smell of cigar smoke

lingers in the air, almost choking me as I step inside.

“What?” he calls out.

When I enter, his back is to me. All I can see is the high back of his chair, the smoke bellowing from his cigar, and the back of his greasy head. He doesn’t make any effort to move around to talk to me face-to-face, so I continue from where I stand. “Boss, NOLA Defiance is here... they need five or six men to help out at The Plantation as extra hands on the farm. Their numbers are down, and they’re struggling to get product out in the quantities they need in the time required. We have the men. We can help. It only benefits us in the long run—”

“You’re overselling, Cain. You have a vested interest here?” He gruffs the words out, puffing out another ring of smoke.

“No, sir. Just want the best for the Bachelors, and what is best is if production doesn’t halt. We can help make that happen by providing hands.”

He clears his throat, putting his cigar out in the ashtray on his desk beside him. “You’re second-in-charge, Cain.”

I raise my brow, not knowing if that was a question or a statement. So, I answer the best way I can. “Yes, sir.”

“Then use some damn initiative and make some fucking calls. You think Defiance need men? You give them the damn men. You don’t need to interrupt my thinkin’ time for this bullshit.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll give them six men,” I reply, moving to close the door.

“We’ll give them five. Now... *get the fuck out of here,*” Boss yells, and I don’t hesitate in closing the door and taking a step back, taking a moment.

I let out a long breath and shake my head. “Idiot,” I mumble to myself. I should have made the call. The problem with Boss is you never can tell when he will go off for making your own call, and then you may very well end up in a meat grinder.

Sometimes, I wonder about this world I am entangled in.

Shaking my head, I turn, walking back out into the parlor to see Trap’s wife, Selene, and Maxxy glaring at each other like they’re about to go full-on hair-pulling, face-slapping, bitch fight in this place. I pick up my pace to get to them as quickly as possible.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Maxxy? Never thought I’d see you again,” Selene snarls.

A look crosses Maxxy’s face, like she knows Selene, like they’ve met before. Like they have history. “I’m part of Defiance. We’re here on

business.”

“You joined an MC? Figures! You needed saving when we were in the slammer, so no-brainer that you need protection on the outside.”

Holy shit. I knew all about when Selene was in jail. I know because Trap wouldn't shut up about it and how Selene took the fall for her cellmate when she stabbed another inmate.

Hoodoo turns to Maxxy. “You were in jail together?”

So Hoodoo obviously doesn't know the story.

“Selene was my cellmate—”

“You're telling me this is *the* Maxxy, baby? The one who left you?” Trap asks, and Selene crosses her arms over her chest.

“Yeah, that's my little ladybug.”

Trap stands, staring daggers at Maxxy. Then he turns to Selene and ushers her away from the Defiance horticulturalist. “Go stand by the bar. Let *me* handle this,” Trap states.

Selene inhales deeply through her nose, her flinty eyes lingering on Maxxy before she leaves.

Trap leans into Maxxy so close I begin to jog because I know he's threatening her, and shit could go south real fucking fast.

“You left her to *rot* in jail. I spent an extra three years without my woman by my side because of *you*. You think because you're Defiance that gives you safety? I would *burn* down the world for my woman. If Selene wants to watch you suffer like she did...” he takes a deep breath through his nose, “... then *I* will make that happen.”

Hoodoo pushes past Maxxy, stepping right up in Trap's face. “You sure you want to threaten a member of Defiance? We might be on good terms with the Bachelors right now, but if you want to start a war because of something that happened years ago, then bring it the fuck on because my guys will stand behind Maxxy until every last one of your men is bleeding out on the Baton Rouge blacktop.”

Trap smirks as I step up, my eyes wandering over the tense as fuck standoff. “Something going down I should know about?” I ask, pretending I didn't just overhear the whole damn thing.

Trap chuckles, though forced, as he slaps Hoodoo's shoulder a little harder than necessary. It instantly makes him grimace. “Just shooting the breeze. We're all good... I'll leave you to it,” Trap states, then turns and walks to Selene, who's still glaring at Maxxy like death would be a pleasure to deal

out.

Exhaling, I run a hand through my hair. “Trap giving you shit? Because I’ll happily have him removed from the premises and thrown into the Mississippi. I’ll even provide the concrete boots myself.”

Maxxy smirks as Hoodoo raises his brow. “I feel like there’s more of a story there between you and him. You looking for a reason to drown him in the big muddy?”

There’s tension between Trap and me, for sure. The way he makes no qualms about wanting my rank in the Bachelors and that he will do anything to rise to the top hasn’t gone unnoticed. I can rely on him to do shit around here, but to have my back—nah, I couldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him. “If only I could...” I chuckle. “Anyway, if he or Selene cause trouble, tell me. I will deal with them. In the meantime, Boss says we can spare five of our soldiers. You good with that many?”

Maxxy’s eyes widen as a bright smile lights her face. “Fuck! Are you serious?”

I shrug. “Not enough? I could get a couple mor—”

“No. That’s awesome. Thank you, Cain. I really appreciate the help. It’s five times the number Hoodoo’s been able to get me,” she teases him.

Hoodoo scowls at her playfully. “Watch it! It was my idea to come to Cain, so you should be thanking me,” he taunts back.

Yeah, they’re definitely into each other.

“Thank you? Pfft, Hoodoo, you’re a pain in my ass. Why would I be thankful for that?”

“You two are like an old married couple.” I chuckle.

They both snap their heads toward me with wide-open eyes as I smirk, but Maxxy folds her arms over her chest and lets it rip. “First of all, marriage is for people too scared to give in to their true animalistic nature. A wedding band is *literally* like a vice around the man’s cock, turning him into a fucking pussy. And second... *me...* and *Hoodoo?* A *couple?*” She throws her head back with a deep, soulful belly laugh. It is so obnoxiously loud that it sounds like a fake laugh those comedians do to prove a point.

Everyone in the parlor turns to look at us as Hoodoo narrows his eyes on Maxxy and the blatant show she is putting on.

She grabs at her stomach, taking in a much-needed breath. “Oh, fuck! That’s the funniest thing I have ever heard. *Hoodoo* and *me?* I mean... he’s *sooo* not my type.” She continues to chuckle under her breath as I glance at

Hoodoo, widening my eyes in a gesture of ‘sorry I said anything.’

Hoodoo folds his arms over his chest, somewhat unamused. “What the *fuck* was that?” He snarls, his eyes hard on Maxxy. His tone sounds more annoyed than amused by her display.

So I step back, moving toward the bar to order more drinks.

I think they are going to need them.

I glance at the girl behind the bar and tilt my head. “Two bourbons and the usual for me, please.”

“Oh, what now? You can’t take a joke?” Maxxy rolls her eyes at Hoodoo.

The Bachelorette slides the drinks my way, and I sit watching these two have at it in the middle of the parlor.

Hoodoo huffs dramatically. “I think the point you’re missing, Maxxy, is that maybe I’m not *your* type. But... if I wanted *you*... if I had the chance to make *you* mine...” He closes the space between them, trapping her between his body and the bar. Her breath catches, and her laughing stops instantly when her eyes lock with his. His fingers slide to her forehead, swiping a stray strand of hair from her face. Hoodoo smirks, his lips moving down the side of her neck by her ear. Maxxy’s chest instinctively presses out, her breathing now rushed as he continues, “I wouldn’t have to seek your permission because the way your body is reacting to me right now tells me *everything* I need to know.”

I take a sip of my drink with a slight chuckle.

I picked it.

These two are so hard-core for each other that it’s not funny. That woman can deny it all she wants, but now, this entire room can see she is dripping for him.

But her eyes widen, her body is tense, and she jerks back from him. Her hands rush to Hoodoo’s chest, shoving him back aggressively. “Urgh, Hoodoo, get real! You’re so fucking delusional.” Maxxy groans loudly.

I pick up the bourbons and walk over with a giant grin.

Maxxy side-eyes me, then grabs at the glass with so much force a small amount of liquid spills over the edge, but then she throws back the entire glass with reckless abandon.

Hoodoo chuckles, happy with himself, knowing he has totally affected Maxxy, but she completely ignores him as he dips his chin at me. “Thanks, man.”

“I can have the Bachelors’ soldiers make their way over to New Orleans

tonight if that suits you. Any training they need, are you good to do on-site?" I ask, deciding not to bring up the crazy that was going on between them. That shit is between them.

But it sure was entertaining.

Maxxy swipes her mouth with her forearm and nods. "Yes, sir. We can do it all at The Plantation. I'll train them there. Thanks again, Cain. You're saving my ass."

I glance from Maxxy to Hoodoo and back to Maxxy. "At this point, I feel like you don't need saving, Maxxy. You're perfectly capable of handling yourself."

"See, a man who actually understands me..." Smiling, she places the glass on the bar. "All right, can we get out of here?"

Hoodoo slaps me on the shoulder. "Talk soon, brother."

I don't answer. I simply dip my head as Maxxy takes off, leaving Hoodoo behind. I chuckle as Hoodoo groans and takes off after Maxxy as she rushes for the exit.

Working with Defiance MC involves something new and interesting every time.

But that?

That took the cake, and it was far better than playing solitaire.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MAKAYLIE

A Week Later

The next week is filled with days of me staring blankly at my open laptop, waiting for inspiration to come. It never does. Nighttime is spent either crying or getting so angry I practice my punching skills on my pillows that still smell like him. I wear his leather jacket to feel closer to him, but all of it is a useless attempt to make me feel better. I still can't fathom why one man, in such a short time, can have such an impact on my emotional well-being.

Joey tries to cheer me up in her usual way of idiocy, but nothing works.

It's Saturday, and my inspiration is seriously lacking. I need to get my creative juices flowing again soon, or my mojo for this book will be long gone. Suddenly, an idea strikes, and I decide to go back to the place where inspiration first hit me.

Packing up my laptop, I make my way to my Thunderbird. Swallowing hard, I glance over my shoulder to see Cain's Impala isn't here. Gnawing on my bottom lip, I briefly wonder where he is but then push that thought from my mind as I hop into my car and pull out onto the street. Feeling the giant white steering wheel in my grip, I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself while an incredible coldness seeps into my bones. I'm unsure if that's from my mood or the weather as I drive the short distance to the Anna T. Jordan Community Park.

Pulling into the same space as last Saturday, I park Gertie and hop out.

The day is a mild temperature for late autumn, but even so, I'm rugged up and wearing a jacket, scarf, and beanie to keep me comfortable and warm, considering I won't have the warmth of Cain to keep me cozy here today.

I begin the walk to the tree behind the life-size airplane they have on display. My feet scuff along the grass, my head down, watching stray stones roll along the ground as I kick them.

Slowly, I glance up, and my eyes lead me to the tree—*our tree*.

To my surprise, someone is sitting under it, and my body halts momentarily, hesitating to make out who it is, trying not to fill myself with hope. My breathing escalates as I take a step closer.

Cain looks up and hesitates but smiles as he pats his hand on the red and white checkered blanket he's sitting on. A wave of excitement rushes over me, and I try to hide my smile. My muscles physically relax from the tension they've been holding since I last saw him. A swarm of butterflies erupts in my stomach as I walk toward him, not knowing how this interaction will go.

"I was hoping you would come," Cain states as he watches me, his eyes intense and his posture stiff.

Biting on my bottom lip, I inhale sharply at his deep, soothing voice and sit on the blanket next to him. He looks at me through his aviator sunglasses.

"Why are you here?" It comes out more abruptly than I was aiming for.

He goes to say something but quickly stops himself. Then he swallows hard, rubbing his chin, and clenches his jaw like he's struggling to say what he needs to.

Sighing, I turn away from him, take my laptop from my bag, and place it on the blanket.

"I missed you," he murmurs.

The air around me pops and fizzes with an electrical surge. My breath catches as Cain leans in close. "*I mean, really* missed you. I couldn't function all week." His nose nuzzles behind my ear, causing my eyes to close and welcome his touch. As he kisses behind my ear, it sends a shock wave of tingles straight between my legs as he wraps his arm around my waist, pulling my back closer to him.

I gasp at the force of his movements, but my eyes stay shut as he takes control of my body. He's so amazingly good at making me weak around him without me even realizing he's doing it.

His hand slides from my stomach, stopping just above my clit, and he presses firmly. My breathing hitches, my eyes still closed as his nose nuzzles into the back of my neck, behind my ear. He's so sweet, and I can't keep my thoughts under control.

"I'm sorry for walking out on you like that. I was... angry. I thought you belonged to me, and then when I found out you didn't, it killed me, Makaylie." He growls out the words like he does when he's angry as his hand moves down, cupping my pussy.

I press against him with a slight moan, not even caring that we're in a public park, as he moves his hand from me, sliding it back up around my tummy, and he pulls me on his lap. His hard cock is evident through his jeans as I sit on him and pant for breath. I can't help myself as I press my ass down

onto his cock to get some friction. He lets out a small grunt as I rock my hips back and forth.

“I do belong to you,” I murmur through staggered breaths.

His head shoots up from my neck, and his hand moves from my stomach to my face. He grabs my chin and turns my head forcefully to look at him. His eyes bore into mine intently.

“What about Joey?”

“Joey is my roommate and my best friend. There’s nothing to be jealous of Cain. I’m yours if you will have me?”

His breathing becomes labored. “And what of my controlling ways?”

“Well, that’s something we’ll have to work on together, okay?”

He chuckles. “Right,” he replies, leaning in and kissing my lips softly. His tongue finds mine, and that undeniable chemistry surges between us. I move in his grip and turn on his lap to face him in a monkey-like grip as I kiss him with all I can manage. Again, not caring that we’re in a public place, and everyone can see us leaning against a tree, making out like no one is watching.

Eventually, I come up for air and part my lips from his when I need to actually breathe. “Did you know I was going to be here?”

Cain shakes his head, placing his forehead against mine. “I hoped. I didn’t want to go another day without you. Somehow, you’ve gained a hold over me, Makaylie. You make me want to be a better man, and I want to be a better man... *for you.*” His brows crease, and his jaw clenches like he’s in pain.

Smiling, I chastely kiss him again. “You have me, all of me, Cain. No one else.”

“Good!” he replies matter-of-factly, causing me to laugh.

Turning on him, he spreads his legs, and I slide between them. My back to his front, in the same position as last week. Grabbing my laptop, I place it on my lap while he wraps his arms around my waist and nuzzles into my neck as I open my document.

Suddenly, like magic, inspiration hits, and the words flow freely.

Muse—tick.

Writer’s block—cross.

This is now my favorite thing to do on a Saturday.

We spend the day together as we did last week. Then, when the chill finally hits the air and the daylight leaves, we head back to the apartments to

have dinner together.

I pull into the parking lot, then walk over to Cain as he slides out of his Impala. Taking my hand, we make our way to the elevator together.

He looks up at the lights above the elevator and then at me. “Do you want to come to my apartment?”

Dragging my bottom lip in by my teeth, I try to hide my bright smile. I’ve wondered for weeks what his apartment is like. So I reply with, “Yeah, that would be great,” as he leads us inside the elevator.

Cain pushes the button for level forty. I live on level seven, so I can only imagine the view of Baton Rouge from that height.

He turns to face me and raises his hand to caress my cheek. I giggle slightly at the thought of his cheek fetish as he leans in, kissing me. We part as the doors open and step out onto level forty. There are only a few doors, so I assume the apartments are larger up here.

“My roommate might be home. Just a warning... he doesn’t wear many clothes.”

A laugh escapes me until I see the look of complete seriousness on Cain’s face. “Oh, like no clothing or just a little?” I ask curiously.

He shrugs. “Most of the time, just a little, but sometimes I come home to total nudity,” he informs me with a smirk.

Grinning, I raise my eyebrows. “Wow! I didn’t pick you for the type to allow another man naked in your proximity,” I reply.

“Oh, fuck no, I don’t allow it. If I come home and he’s naked, he knows to put something on,” Cain states, putting his key into the lock.

Nodding, I tighten my hand in his as he opens the door, and we walk in and down a short hallway before turning right into his living room. Taking in the view, I notice the lavish balcony on the outside.

Wrinkling my nose at him as he pulls me close—it’s almost like a protective instinct—he smiles down at me. “Welcome to the bachelor pad, little dove.” He smirks.

“Little dove?”

“It’s a symbol of peace and purity. You settle my mind, Makaylie. You bring me peace, and I’ve never met anyone more pure than you. So, little dove it is.”

I can’t help but smile, and I say nothing in return, loving my new name.

Spinning around, I gaze over the large living room.

It looks—neat.

Not what I was expecting.

I think because of the ‘naked housemate’ and two men living together, I was anticipating a real bachelor pad, but this apartment is modern and well-kept. Almost has a model-home feel to it. The sofas are black leather, and the tables are all glass and chrome. The furniture is metal or glass, and everything is sparkling under the lights. My eyes bug out of my head when I spot the living fern in a pot by the balcony doors.

These guys have a plant...

... and it's *alive*.

What the hell?

This is *not* your typical bachelor pad.

I'm too busy staring and taking in everything around me to notice Cain steering me toward a room. We quickly walk in, and I realize it's his bedroom as he flicks on the light. The hue from the filament lighting sends an amiable glow around the room as I take in the sheer size of his bedroom. *It has to be at least twice the size of mine*. As I look around, I stare at the opulent furniture, which is dark mahogany and black pieces.

Cain's got to be loaded.

He shuts his door, turning me and pushing me back against the wall. My body awakens as he pins me to the drywall, his hard body pressing against mine, encasing me in every way.

I've missed this.

The sexual energy is igniting within me, awakening at his touch when his lips crash to mine.

Hard.

His hand moves to my wrists, and he pulls both my hands above my head, pinning them to the wall with one hand, and the other slides down my side to my breast. Heat pools as he squeezes my sensitive mound. Cain's hand slides under my top, and he pinches my nipple through my lace bra hard, causing me to gasp. With skill, he rolls his hips into mine, pushing at just the right angle to make me quiver and squirm. This man knows how to push all the right buttons.

Cain pinches my nipple again as he grips the material of my bra and pulls it down, freeing my breast from its confines. He grinds his hips into me again as his kiss leaves my lips and trails down my jaw.

My chest heaves, my wrists still pinned tightly above my head in his dominant hold, as his lips make their way down to my exposed, tightened

bud. When his warm lips reach my breast, my back arches forward, thrusting my chest into his face. Cain takes my nipple between his teeth, clamping down firmly, sending a shudder of excitement through me.

I throw my head back against the wall and close my eyes, chewing on my bottom lip as he sucks my nipple, sending a shock wave straight between my legs. I tilt my hips, seeking friction to try and dull the ache, but all it does is work me up even more. I'm practically panting and begging when suddenly, the door bursts open beside us.

"Hey, fucker! Oh... sorry dude..." He looks at me, smirks, and tilts his head in a greeting. "Hey there, cutie pie," some guy utters while wearing an extremely tight pair of white briefs, which leave *nothing* to the imagination.

Cain breaks away from me, dropping my wrists from his tight grip. My muscles clench instinctively, and my shirt falls, covering my exposed breast. My arms wrap around my body to hide the embarrassment coursing through my veins as Cain turns, pushing the burly, tattooed man out of his room.

"Fuck! Knock next time, and stay the fuck out until I tell you to come in." Cain gives the man one final shove, then slams his door shut. He turns back to face me, his brows furrowed, and his lips turned down in concern like he's worried I'm going to fall apart at his friend seeing my naked breast. Instead, all I can do is bellow laughter, which rumbles up from the pit of my stomach and escapes through my mouth.

Cain's forehead creases, and he tilts his head like he's slightly confused and equally amused by my outburst as he steps back in front of me. "You okay?"

Raising my brow, I cock my head. "He's... um... interesting." I attempt to suppress my laughter from returning as I lift my top and pull my bra back into its rightful position.

Cain winces, whether from the memory of his friend seeing my flesh or the fact I'm covering myself up, I'm not sure. "He's a douchebag." He sneers, which causes me to snort out some more giggles.

Taking his hand, I gently kiss him, then lean over, opening the bedroom door.

Cain's mouth drops open slightly. "Where are we going?"

"To meet your roommate."

"Really? I think we should stay in here," he rebuffs with a smirk as he wraps his arms around my waist and thrusts his hard cock into my side.

"C'mon, I have to be nice to your friend if I'm going to be your girl. So I

may as well get the formalities out of the way.” I detach from him and walk out of his room and down the hall into the living room. Cain groans as his heavy footsteps trail behind me.

I notice his friend on the sofa watching sports, and as I make eye contact with him, he itches his crotch.

Charmer!

“Hey, want a bit of double action? Maybe some tag team with Cain and Iron Rod, cutie pie?” he asks.

Cain’s hard body presses into mine, his arm wrapping around my waist, protectively pulling me to him hard, so hard it almost knocks the wind from me.

“Fuck off, Rodberg. And I keep telling you just because you have Rod in your last name doesn’t mean you can keep calling yourself Iron Rod. It’s not like you’re anywhere near as cool as *Iron Man*. Grow up!” Cain chides, making me want to giggle, but I don’t.

“Nah, man, you got it all wrong. It’s Iron Rod... as in, I have a rod made of iron. You know... as in my coc—”

“Okay, we get it,” Cain berates, shaking his head. “Remember, you were the one who wanted to come out here and talk to him,” Cain mentions quietly to me.

“Yeah, we should’ve stayed in your room,” I murmur with a slight giggle.

“We can always go back.” He wiggles his brows insinuatingly as he pulls me to him in an embrace.

“So anyway, when you two are finished, want to go a round with me, cutie?” Rodberg asks quite seriously this time.

Cain grunts with a cold, hard glint as he lets me go and storms over to Rodberg. His nostrils flare, his skin turns red, and a vein pops in his neck as he leans over to pull him up by his ears. You can practically feel Cain’s fury pulsing through the air. It swirls and dances at the edge of reason with no sense of cause other than to wreak chaos and take no prisoners. Cain is furious. Rodberg is the water flowing like an ocean, and Cain is the riptide in this turbulent typhoon unfolding before my eyes.

My body goes rigid, watching as Rodberg screeches while Cain yanks him up. The aggression Cain is exhibiting toward his friend takes me by surprise. Rodberg winces and groans as he is marched over toward me and shoved right in front of me. My breath catches, looking at the sheer terror in Rodberg’s eyes.

Is he scared of Cain?

I know I'm scared right now.

"Apologize!" Cain demands loudly into Rodberg's ear.

"Okay, okay... geez, dude, don't get your panties in a twist." Cain pulls on his ear, yanking it down, causing Rodberg's body to twist. My breathing stops altogether. "Ahh... fuck, man."

"A...*pol...o...gize!*" Cain grunts through gritted teeth once more.

"Fuck, man, okay, okay. I'm sorry," Rodberg snaps. "This must be Makaylie. I'm sorry, I didn't know. I thought you were trying to forget about her by bringing a whore home, and you know we sometimes share and—"

Cain's fist draws back, then connects with Rodberg's jaw, and I gasp, taking a step back, swallowing hard as I wrap my arms around myself for comfort. The punch wasn't a massive blow, not enough to draw blood, probably not enough to even bring out a bruise, but it was a warning shot for him to shut up.

But Rodberg let slip enough for me to know that Cain is a sexual player, and they like to share girls. Now it makes sense why Rodberg would be asking about me like that.

"Shut up, Rodberg. Makaylie is off-limits. *Do. You. Hear. Me?*" he demands, dropping his hold on Rodberg's remaining ear. "And put some fucking clothes on!"

Rodberg slumps his body, looking from Cain to me while rubbing his ears and moving his jaw from side to side. He simply nods, seeming like he's fine with what just happened, and walks back to the sofa, sits down, and scratches his crotch again.

Letting out the breath I was holding, Cain takes my shaking hands in his and turns me to face him. I'm not sure if I want to slap him, hug him, or run away screaming. He wanted to ensure his friend was respectful toward me, but in doing so, he physically hurt him. Not to a standard of sheer brutality, but still enough for my nerves to be uneasy. I'm not a big fan of physical violence, even if it is deserved.

"Sorry you had to see that," he tells me, grabbing my hand and leading me toward the kitchen. The cold of the 'B' ring on his finger feels like ice against my skin—coldness I have never felt from him before.

Taking a deep breath as I try to gather the strength to talk, I figure it's best to say what's on my mind. "You didn't have to be that hard on him. I can handle a bit of trash talk."

Cain glares at me. “Makaylie, *no one* is allowed to talk to you that way. Do you hear me, *no one*? Especially a fucking asshole like Rodberg.”

For friends, they seem like damn good enemies to me. I wonder how good of a friendship they truly have.

“What’s his first name?” I ask curiously.

He tilts his head and looks upward like he’s thinking hard. “You know, I have no idea. I’ve known him for four years, and I’ve never asked,” he replies matter-of-factly.

I nod, wondering if their friendship is not a friendship at all. I have no idea if there’s something more to their story that I’ll find out with time, but I’m not pushing that boundary tonight.

“I don’t like the idea of you sharing girls with Rodberg, though, Cain,” I let slip.

He reaches out and grabs my wrists and holds them tight, forcing me to look at him. “I’m not sharing you with anyone, and that...” he exhales, “... that was a guy who wasn’t interested in only having one woman in his life. When I say you’re mine, Makaylie, I mean... you’re mine, just as I am yours. You won’t be shared, and neither will I. You have nothing to worry about. *That guy... that’s not me with you.*”

I simply nod. I have many more questions to do with that statement, but it might ruin everything if I ask them now. My nerves are already on high alert, and I don’t need to add any more drama.

“The punch... why’d you do that?”

He furrows his brow like he’s confused by my question. “He was talking too much. I didn’t want him to upset you.”

“So you punched him?”

He tilts his head like he’s confused again. “I had to shut him up.”

“Then *fucking* tell him to shut up. Don’t hit the guy, Cain!” I raise my voice at him, and he opens his eyes wide as if to tell me to shut up so Rodberg can’t hear me. I wonder briefly, *Would he punch me?* And before I know it, I’m blurting out my thoughts, “Would you punch *me* to get *me* to shut up?”

He jolts back. “Fuck... no. I’d never hit a woman, no matter what.”

“So why is a guy different?”

“Because they can handle themselves.”

I scoff and try to pull my wrists free, but he holds tighter and backs me up against the kitchen island, closing me in. My teeth grit in annoyance. “What?”

You think I can't handle myself?"

"You're not doing a very good job at the moment," he teases as he grinds his hips into mine.

"Cain, this is a serious discussion. Don't deflect it with your cock."

He chuckles and takes a step back, pulling his hips away from mine, but his hands keep their tight grip around my wrists as his mouth moves in next to my ear, and his hot breath causes goose bumps to ripple over my skin. "Remember, Makaylie, I'll never hurt you. That is unless you begged me for it," he whispers in a deep, seductive voice that sends a shiver down my spine. It should be a shiver of terror, but for some fucked-up reason, it's a shiver of damn desire. My body has abandoned me and is running toward him, even though my brain tells me to run from Cain.

So I do the only thing I think I can right now, to be safe to my brain and body.

Turning, I yank him with my arms, and he moves with me as I head for the front door. His hand finally moves from my wrist, sliding down to take my hand instead, and he leans into my side.

"Where are we going?"

"We're going out for dinner."

He chuckles knowingly with a nod of his head. "I know just the place. Let's go." He takes my hand, leading me out of the apartment.

"Bye, Iron Rod," I call out with a slight giggle.

Cain looks at me sternly. "Don't encourage him," he scolds in his more than a little bossy tone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MAKAYLIE

Cain pulls into the parking lot of a French-creole building in the New Orleans Central Business District. The restaurant looks expensive. As a writer who has not yet published, money is kind of an issue for me, so going somewhere like this doesn't happen at *all* in my life.

"Cain, I can't afford a place like this. Can we go to a café or something?" I ask.

He smirks, obviously amused. "I want to spoil you, so let me. You agreed to be my partner, and this is part of it. Being spoiled is something you deserve. Plus, I can afford it, Makaylie. So, no arguments," he states categorically.

Smiling, I take his hand as we walk into the flashy restaurant. I glance around at the astonishing interior with its rich, original architectural details, hardwood floors, soaring columns, mahogany paneling, and antique mirrors.

I love old-world New Orleans, and this place has it in abundance.

It's romantic and intimate.

An elderly waiter walks past, and Cain nods to him. He returns the gesture and quickly scurries off.

"Do you know him?" I ask.

"We go way back. He will seat us at the best table in the restaurant," Cain says as a waiter leads us through the crowded restaurant to the back of the room, where there's a romantic table set for two. Glancing up at Cain, I smile as he leans down and kisses my head, then pulls out my chair for me.

Cain seems to have many differing sides—a gentleman one minute and a control freak the next.

"Good to see you again, Cain. You haven't been in for a while," the waiter states.

Cain smiles as he sits. "Haven't had anyone worthy to bring here with me. Until now," he says.

Biting my bottom lip, I smile.

"Well, it's nice to see you happy again, Cain. I'll let Tahlee know you're here," the waiter replies, then walks away.

Taking a deep breath, I look to Cain, waiting for an explanation that simply doesn't come as he glances away from me. *Is he purposely trying to avoid eye contact with me?*

So, I ask directly, "How do you know the waiter?"

Cain's slight grin falls to a frown.

Instantly, I regret and backtrack immediately. "It's okay, you don't have to tell me." I pick up the menu, swallowing hard.

Cain opens his mouth to talk, then stops and swallows hard. Exhaling, he steadies his shoulders and looks me in the eyes. "I used to come here with my parents before the new owner, Tahlee, took over." He said 'used to' like he doesn't see them anymore.

"Used to?" I ask as I watch him screw up his face like he's living a memory.

Again, I instantly regret pushing him to answer.

"Yeah," is all he says.

With a nod, I let it go. He obviously isn't talking to his parents, so I try to change the subject. "Do you have any siblings?"

His face lights up, and I smile in response. "I have an older sister, but I hardly see her. She lives in West Virginia, so she's too far away to pop over whenever she likes." Cain beams when he talks about his sister. With that gorgeous smile, I can tell he loves her very much.

"What's her name?" I ask, genuinely curious about her.

"Amelia. She's married to Mike, and they have a daughter, Annalie. She's the light of my life." He is practically glowing as he talks about them, and I have to say it's nice to see this lighter side of Cain.

"How old is Annalie?"

"She'll be seven next month. Annalie was born on Christmas Day...." his eyes twinkle, "... so it's easy to remember."

"I can't wait to meet them," I reply honestly.

Cain's face scrunches as he gnaws on his bottom lip. "Um... I don't think that will happen," he murmurs as his lips turn down in a pain-filled stare.

"Oh? Sorry. Am I moving too quickly?" I ask before I think about what I'm saying.

He shakes his head emphatically. "No, not at all. It's just... I don't really talk to them anymore. I haven't since..." He scrubs his hand through his hair, and his eyes go glassy. "Anyway, let's talk about *you*," he says, avoiding further discussions about his family.

I furrow my brows as I try to think of reasons why he doesn't talk to his family. Perhaps he will tell me when he's ready.

"Okay, well, what do you want to know?" I ask, but his cell rings.

He pulls it from his pocket and looks at the screen, clenching his jaw. "Sorry, but I have to take this. It's work. I'll just be a second," he adds, then answers the phone.

Shifting, I pick up my menu and look down at it, trying not to listen.

"I am in the middle of something right now. Can this wait?" he asks, and I wonder why he said that rather than admitting he's on a date.

He pauses, running his hand over his head as he grunts. "Fuck! Are you serious?" he questions in a deep, hushed tone, catching my attention.

My eyes peek over my menu to see him pinching the bridge of his nose like he's really annoyed.

"No! I understand, Trap. I'm out, and I can't help you."

There's silence while he listens, then he continues, "Did you at least deliver the goods before he got sho—" He stops, looks up, and then says, "Injured?"

Keeping my eyes on the menu, I raise my brow. My interest has been well and truly piqued.

Cain's body sags into the chair with a heavy sigh. "At least the package was delivered. We don't need another incident on our hands like last time. Tell Morgan to toughen up. I'll sort him out on Monday," he says blasé. "No, Trap! I'm busy. *You* sort it out. If he needs to go to the hospital, take him. You know the drill." He ends the call.

My muscles clench, and I death stare at the menu, probably being way too obvious that I heard everything.

That did *not* sound like a typical work call to me.

Honestly, I am not sure what that sounded like.

Tension rolls off my shoulders, my neck stiff as my jaw aches from clenching it so hard.

Cain's soft chuckle not only startles but confuses me, making me look up at him. "If you read that menu any harder, your eyes will pop out of your head." He reaches out for my hand over the table.

My body tenses, and he winces slightly. I wonder why he's so unconcerned about a member of his staff needing to go to the hospital.

That concerns me, so I ask without thinking, "Is that Morgan guy going to be okay?"

He nods. “He’ll be fine,” he declares, abruptly closing the topic.

My leg begins to agitate under the table. Maybe Cain is one of those terrible bosses like in the movie *Horrible Bosses*. I’ve only known him for a few weeks, and I can already tell I’d hate to work for him. He’s controlling as a partner, but a boss? I’d hate to imagine how demanding and dominating he’d be. I feel sorry for Trap and Morgan—*whoever they are*.

A waiter comes over to the table, breaking the tension, and even though I was staring at the menu, I wasn’t actually reading it. I was too busy trying to listen to the call.

Crap!

“Are you ready to order tonight, sir?” the waiter asks.

Cain nods. “Yes. We will have a starter each of scallops, and I will have the Steak Deville, medium, and Makaylie will have the grilled chicken breast. Thanks,” he orders.

My mouth drops open as I gawk at him. “You ordered for me. *Again!*”

The waiter turns and walks off. Cain nods, the smirk telling me everything I need to know. *Cocky bastard*. “I told you, everything concerning you goes through me first. So yes, I ordered for you, *again*, and I will continue to order for you in the future. And before you argue with me, this is non-negotiable,” he snaps.

Is he serious? I can’t choose my meals.

This is the most absurd shit I’ve ever heard.

Just as I go to rain down hell on him, his cell rings again. He puts his finger up as if to say one minute and abruptly answers his phone, halting my imminent tirade. Sitting back in my chair, I fold my arms over my chest in a huff, letting him know I’m not happy.

“What?” he answers the phone. “I heard. Did they take the deal we offered them?” He nods. “Okay, make sure they know this was a one-off. I won’t endanger my crew again.” Another nod. “Good. Now fuck off, and tell the other Bachelors not to bother me again tonight unless all hell breaks loose.” He ends the call.

Bachelors? What a weird thing to say.

Cain looks up at me. “They won’t interrupt us again.” Then he pulls my hand to his lips and gently kisses the back of it.

Sighing, I prepare to ask my question with suspicion in my tone. “Cain, what do you do for work again?”

He shifts nervously in his chair while clearing his throat. “I manage

distribution and selling of, ah... goods,” he says with a cocky smile which I see right through.

“Mm-hmm... what kind of goods?”

“Nothing you’d be interested in. I think we should make Saturday in the park a regular thing. What do you think?” he asks, completely changing the subject.

I exhale as he sips water, eyeing and watching my every move. I figure I’ll let this slide for now until I can get us somewhere a little more private to discuss this in more depth. But I must say, his job sounds sketchy as hell to me.

I decide to go with a new line of conversation instead. “Yeah, I think we should make it a regular thing. I’ll have my book written in no time,” I reply, making Cain chuckle as our starters are served.

As promised, we continue our dinner with no further interruptions.

The living room of Cain’s apartment sounds of soccer blasting from the television. Rodberg is on the sofa, still in his white briefs, with his eyes glued to the television. He scratches his balls, and I smirk. Then he nods his head in a gesture of greeting but still doesn’t look at us. I’m not even sure if he knows I’m here.

“Hey, did you hear about Morgan? He totally got sh—” Rodberg stops midsentence as he turns to look right at me, his eyes open wider as he sits up taller on the sofa. “Shingles. He totally has shingles, poor fucker.” Rodberg then looks to Cain, frowning his brows as his breathing increases like he’s scared about how Cain will react.

“Yeah, I heard. Trap is taking him to the hospital to get checked out,” Cain replies as he eyes Rodberg intently.

“I hope Morgan’s okay. Shingles can be bad and last for a while,” I say, full of concern for their fellow worker.

Cain turns to me, relaxing his posture, kissing my temple. “Yeah, but I’m sure he’ll fully recover.” He takes my hand, leading me to his room.

“Have a good time in there, cutie pie. Be nice and loud so I can get off too,” Rodberg calls out.

Jesus! Forward much.

“Stop talking,” Cain calls out as he shuts his door behind us, and I have to

suppress a smile. I wonder if that was his attempt at being nice after what happened earlier.

Looking at him through sheepish eyes and reddening cheeks, he grins at me. “You know I can’t sleep with you now, right?”

“Like fuck, you can’t!” He grabs hold and pulls my body flush with his. My insides ignite instantly, and I gasp at the contact of being so close to this man, but I chew on my bottom lip while shaking my head. “Cain, no.”

“What? Why?”

I push him off me, move to the edge of his bed, and sit on the soft mattress. It dips beneath my weight, and I wish it would swallow me whole.

“Because I’ll be too worried about being loud and Iron Rod hearing us,” I say with a hint of sarcasm.

“Are you serious? Because I’ll kick him and his filthy briefs out on the street. I won’t let him be the reason I can’t be buried deep inside you tonight. So tell me, and he’s gone,” he states in all seriousness.

I can’t help but let out a small giggle at the stern look on his face.

He is *deadly* serious.

For me, he’d kick his friend and roommate out just so he could fuck me.

I laugh as I reach out to touch his hand and pull him down to the bed beside me. Our lips meet, and my attraction to him reacts as it always does.

Cain’s hands slide up the back of my shirt to caress the bare skin on my back, sending a shiver of goose bumps down my spine as his tongue tangles with mine. A moan erupts from deep inside me as his warmth overwhelms me. Cain holds my back tightly as he pulls me down to the mattress and spins us so he’s hovering over me.

“I can never get enough of you,” he mumbles through our kiss.

I moan in response and move my hands over his shoulders, removing his jacket. He shrugs out of it and throws it to the floor. Pulling his lips from mine for the briefest of moments, he grabs the hem of his shirt and pulls it up over his head, revealing his god-like body. My clit throbs in anticipation as his lips come back to meet mine more forcefully than they ever have before as he moves his hand to my breast.

I exhale as he leans up, taking me with him, and pulls my jacket off, followed by my shirt, in record time. He lays me back on the bed, and his lips move from mine down my neck. Cain’s hand shifts and makes quick work of my bra as he yanks it from me and throws it to the floor. His hand fists in my hair, tugging my head back, exposing my neck to him, while I pant in harsh,

staggered breaths.

Cain's kisses move along my neck and collarbone to my taut bud. His teeth draw it in and clamp down, biting my nipple firmly, not enough to cause pain, but just enough to send a shock wave through me and a tingle straight to my clit. I moan as his fist in my hair tightens, and my head is locked back, unable to move.

It's a little scary, the control he has over me, but the thought of him taking that control is also intoxicating. Letting him have control of my life is one thing, but control in the bedroom is another, and I'm okay with him taking charge. I find it oddly arousing.

My hands move to his hair, and I pull. A soft growl escapes his throat, and his mouth continues south. Tensing as he reaches the top of my jeans, he unbuttons them and pulls down my zipper, slowly building the anticipation while my breathing becomes faster. The thoughts of what he's going to do to me are causing my blood to pulsate through my veins.

Lifting my hips slightly, he pulls down my jeans, taking my panties with them. I gasp as he pulls off my boots and clothing, then leans in, his warm breath against my skin, increasing the heat building between my legs. His tongue darts out, running up the arch of my foot. The feeling prickles into my core.

Cain's lips move up my leg from my ankle all the way to my apex, worshiping my body. He reaches the inside of my inner thighs and nuzzles his nose into my clit, sending a jolt of pleasure to move like an ocean wave through me. My breathing escalates as he gently eases a finger inside me.

"You belong to me," he says as he nuzzles into my thigh.

"I belong to you." I pant breathlessly as he moves his finger inside me, swirling around, opening me up for him. He pushes in deeper and thrusts in another finger as he kisses the side of my thigh.

The pressure is building and building as he motions in and out, around and around. He moans against my thigh, and the vibration of his lips heightens the pleasure, but I want more. It's everything and not enough.

"Cain..." I moan as he continues his rhythm.

"Yes, little dove?"

"Please," I whisper, his lips turning into a smile against my skin.

"I like it when you plead," he says, then instantly, his tongue flicks against my clit, swirling relentlessly. My back arches off the bed as my head slams to the side. My whole body is in a state of bliss while my hands fist the bed

sheets, and heat engulfs me like a swirling wildfire.

“Oh... God!” I moan as he gently sucks and licks me. “Cain, I’m close,” I whimper.

He moans, and the vibration sends me over the edge. My body loosens and contracts in spasms. Lights dance behind my clenched eyes while the feeling of floating on a soft white cloud overtakes me. I shake and quiver, and then everything explodes around me before I fall from the clouds dramatically while gasping for air.

My body goes rigid when I climax, and before I have time to come back to earth, Cain is up, pulling off the remainder of his clothing. I’m in such a daze while I lay on the bed spread-eagled, indulging in my own personal euphoria.

Cain grabs my ankles and pulls me down to the edge of the bed, breaking me out of my fog-induced coma. As I sit up on the edge of the bed, he smiles mischievously. Then he grabs my waist, hoisting me up, and I open my eyes wide as he flips me over, so I land on the bed on my knees. I bounce slightly with the force, then he grabs my hips again and pulls me back to the edge of the bed where he stands. Swallowing hard, I look back at him with my eyes wide.

“Don’t look so terrified... trust me, Makaylie.” He runs his hand up my spine, his fingers soothing as they go, sliding into my hair. He wraps his fingers around the strands and pulls my head back, forcing me to face upward.

The way he has me positioned on all fours, grasping my hair, standing behind me, he has *all the power*. This is the most exposed I’ve ever been with a man. Sure, I’ve had sex before, but it has never been like this—wild, untamed, animalistic—and I’m sure this is only the tip of the iceberg with Cain.

My whole body throbs at the thought, and I’m not sure if that thought electrifies or terrifies me. I’m not adventurous, but right now, as Cain stands behind me, rubbing his hard cock against my slickened pussy, holding my hair in a vice-like grip, everything about this turns me on even more.

Cain runs his free hand over my ass cheek, then pulls back, slapping my skin not painfully hard but enough to sting and jolt, causing my head to move forward, but he’s holding my hair so tightly it tugs, sending a sliver of pain through my scalp. I inhale almost like a gasp, then he rubs my ass and positions his tip at my opening, sliding the head of his dick in only a fraction. I chew on my bottom lip and push back, taking him in a little further, but he

stills, teasing me.

“Be a good girl and obey my rules, Makaylie, and I won’t have to punish you. You understand me?”

I breathe out heavily, wondering what his form of punishment could be.

Is this it? Teasing me with his cock rearing and ready to go, with me aching for him and him doing nothing about it. Or is there something much, much worse? I just don’t know with Cain, and I’m a little reluctant to find out.

He slaps my ass again, causing another sting to my rear and more hair-pulling, which of course, makes me jolt forward, and a moan echoes through the room. I’m just not sure if it’s a pain-filled moan or more of an aching-with-pleasure one.

“Answer me.”

“Yes.”

He pushes his cock inside me a little more, stretching and teasing. “Yes, what?”

Panting, I swallow hard and give in completely—I just want him to fuck me already. “Yes, I understand you.”

He groans and thrusts hard inside me, taking me by surprise. His length fills me so full that my breath is knocked from me as intense feelings engulf me.

“You feel so fucking good,” he murmurs.

Cain pushes into me...

Hard.

Deep.

Fast.

His hand fists in my hair, holding onto it so tight my head is pulled back at an angle as he takes what he needs from me. And while this would seem like he’s doing nothing more than fucking me and taking what he wants, he’s making sure to hit all the right damn places.

Fucking like this is new for me. I’m used to a more vanilla lifestyle, but this is on a whole new level, and I love every kinky second of it.

Cain yanks on my hair as he thrusts harder if that’s possible. My scalp prickles in pain, but the pain radiates down my spine and straight between my legs while his free hand shifts to my hip to help guide me on and off his cock.

Our bodies are slick with sweat as I push back into him, and he thrusts into me with speed and purpose. I gasp for air as I’m worked up quickly to where

I was only moments before.

“Don’t come,” he demands as he rolls his hips into me, and I moan, holding my breath, trying not to disobey him.

“Cain,” I whimper as the intensity builds to breaking point.

“Not yet, little dove,” he commands, thrusting hard. I don’t know why I’m holding off, but the threat of an unknown punishment is enough to heed his warning. His relentless tempo pleasures me beyond my wildest dreams as he moans and plunges into me while pulling my hair tighter, causing me to whimper.

“I can’t hold on,” I squeak as my body shakes.

“A little longer,” he demands as he continues to pound into me.

I moan so loudly I’m sure I hear laughing coming from the other room, but I don’t care because I’m so close.

“Fuck, Makaylie... *now*.” His fingers dig into my hips so hard I know it will bruise as he pulls me deeper than I thought possible, hitting every damn spot there is. I shake uncontrollably, my back arches, and I pant harshly while everything tenses and releases in ecstasy.

Cain unloads inside me, jolting a few times with a long, drawn-out groan. My arms give way, I fall onto my stomach, and he follows behind me, finally letting my hair go.

My scalp prickles when my hair moves back into its rightful place. Cain’s weight crashes on top of me as he rests his head on my shoulder while we both pant and come down from our high. He tenderly kisses my cheek, and I smile with my eyes still closed, just trying to catch my breath.

“Were you purposely trying to be loud?” he questions with a slight chuckle.

Opening my eyes as he rolls off me and to the side, I giggle. “I wasn’t *that* loud,” I reply, as he tries not to laugh. “What? I wasn’t,” I defend as he slides his hand between my still wide-open legs and presses on my clit, forcing out a loud moan. “Oooh... okay, maybe I was a *little* loud.” I let out another giggle, and he moves his hand back between my legs, pressing on my swollen clit again, causing another loud moan.

He laughs and lets out his own exaggerated moan. “Oh God, Makaylie,” he calls out, and I open my eyes wide as I hear a creak behind the door. I look back and realize what Cain’s doing, and since Rodberg’s already heard, I may as well play along with Cain’s little game.

“Oh, Cain, you’re amazing! Harder, harder...”

Cain bangs the headboard of his bed. “Oh God... Makaylie come with me.”

“Ohhh...” We both moan loudly in an epic performance for Iron Rod, and I can’t hold in my giggles anymore, so I shove a pillow against my face.

Then I hear clapping coming from behind the closed door.

“Woo-hoo. Encore, encore, encore. Whoop whoop!” Rodberg cheers, and I see Cain shaking his head as he moves in beside me and pulls me back to his chest.

“Fucking pervert,” Cain murmurs, and I giggle. We did encourage him, so it’s our fault.

It’s amazing how he can go from a crazy dominant sex machine to this cuddly version in a matter of seconds.

He seriously gives me whiplash.

“Maybe you should be an actor instead of an author?” Cain asks as he chuckles, running his fingers gently up and down my arm.

“No, I think that was a one-time-only performance,” I say, suddenly feeling a twinge of embarrassment.

He chuckles again as he nuzzles his nose into my still-tingling hair. The way he pulled at my hair like that, though—that’s something I’m not going to forget in a hurry.

I cuddle with Cain, knowing I might be getting myself into a whole world of trouble with this man.

But right now, with the way he just made me feel?

I don’t fucking care.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CAIN

Makaylie is a heavy sleeper.

This is a blessing because I couldn't do business if she was a light sleeper.

And as I lay here with her nuzzled into my side, her chest slowly rising and falling while I stroke her hair, I can't help but think about Morgan, who was shot tonight, and I haven't even checked in on him yet. I am too busy avoiding the Bachelors, so I can spend time with my girl.

But the longer I lay here thinking, the more the guilt weighs me down. So I plant a chaste kiss on Makaylie's temple and slowly edge her off me as I slide out of bed. She mumbles incoherently but doesn't wake as she lets out a very unladylike snore. I chuckle to myself at how amazing this woman is and how lucky I am to have found her.

Pulling on a pair of briefs, I grab my cell and head quietly out into the hall. Taking a deep breath, I dial Trap, and he soon answers, "Cain, where the ever-loving-*fuck* are you?"

I run my hand through my hair. "Indisposed. Give me the intel on Morgan without your fucking attitude. Is he okay?"

"We took him to Dr. Reynolds. She patched him up. Was a through and through. Smashed his rotator cuff, though. He's out of surgery. Needs rest. But he'll be fine. Cain, this shit with Zorko's men is getting out of hand. We need to deal with him directly. His men are becoming unpredictable."

As anger builds inside me, my muscles clench. Morgan shouldn't have had to deal with this, and someone *has* to pay. Time will come for that, I'm sure, and the taste of revenge will be ever so damn sweet. I can't wait to find out who did this to him, so we can enact vengeance and begin clearing up this shitstorm.

Letting out a long, drawn-out exhale, I nod even though Trap can't see me. "I agree. But for now, we need to get this deal back in motion."

"We need a Bachelor to head out there. Someone with a calm attitude. Someone to ensure the deal," Trap suggests. "I only know one person who's best at that."

My stomach sinks as I roll my shoulders. "Okay, I'll let him know. Is

someone taking care of Morgan?”

“Yeah, Alfie’s keeping him company.”

“Good. I’ll check in soon. Don’t call me, I’ll call you.”

His chuckle down the line is almost contagious. “It sounds like you’re breaking up with me, Cain.”

“If only I could, Trap, if only I could.” I end the call, pinch the bridge of my nose, and sigh. I’m not looking forward to this. Taking a deep cleansing breath, I knock lightly on Rodberg’s bedroom door, then step back against the hall wall and wait.

It doesn’t take too long, and Rodberg appears in his usual briefs, wiping at his eyes. I gesture with my head toward the living room. He glances at my bedroom door, which is closed, then looks back at me and nods.

I turn to him and keep my voice low.

Because one—I don’t want to wake Makaylie.

And two—if we do wake her, I don’t want her to overhear what will be said.

“Morgan’s okay, but the deal is walking a fine line. Zorko’s men are being fuckheads, and it’s creating a shitstorm. We need a level head to go back in and work it out, man to man. We all know when it comes to women, you’re a fucking maniac, but when it comes to business, you’re spot on.”

He scoffs. “Wait, you want me to do a deal with Zorko’s men? Me? I’m nothing but a lackey, a soldier, Cain.”

“I know, I know... and I know you haven’t trained for it. I know it goes against the grain, but Morgan is out, and Alfie is with him. Makaylie is here, so I can’t leave. If we’re going to keep Zorko on our books, which is part of the end game, we’re a man down. If we can keep our eyes on the prize, who better to do this than you? I *need* you to do this, Rodberg.”

“Motherfucker! Fine! But I don’t like it. *You* know that. I’m not your fucking lackey, Cain. You shouldn’t be getting attached to that girl...” His forehead crinkles, and his mouth sets in a firm line—this is the most serious I have ever seen him. “She shouldn’t be here. It’s too dangerous for her to be affiliated with you. If anyone found out...” he shakes his head, “... her blood *will* be on *your* hands. You know that, right?”

My nostrils flare in annoyance. “No. Fucking. Shit. You think I don’t know that? I’m going to be careful. And as long as *you* don’t say anything, it should be fine. Now fuck off and do your damn job.”

“It’s not *my* damn job, Cain, it’s *yours*,” he jabs, walking off toward his

room. “But I’ll fucking do it anyway, for the brotherhood... for *you*,” he murmurs as he walks out of sight.

I crack my neck from side to side, trying to relieve the growing tension.

When I hear his bedroom door close, I make my way back to my room, peeking in at Makaylie, who is still fast asleep.

She’s a fucking angel.

And if anything happened to her because of me, I’d never forgive myself.

I’m so fucking weak when it comes to her. *It’s pathetic.*

And now I know what they mean when they say a woman can be a man’s kryptonite.

Because Makaylie doesn’t just have me weak at the knees. My entire being is weak, right down to my black-hearted soul.

MAKAYLIE

The Next Day

My eyes open from a restful sleep.

I’m sure I woke up during the night to something—*was it whispering?*—but I’m just not sure what it was. But then again, it was probably a dream, so I won’t bring it up.

Cain is wrapped around me. Every inch of his body is entangled with mine. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he has separation issues. Rolling over in his grasp to face him, he inhales and slowly opens his eyes, blinking a few times. Leaning in, I press my lips to his softly, and his turn into a smile against mine as he fully wakes.

“I sleep well when you’re in bed with me,” he murmurs, then kisses the tip of my nose. Giggling, I scrunch up my nose. “God, I love it when you do that.” He groans as he grabs hold and rolls over on top of me. Laughing, he nuzzles into my nose and then looks down into my eyes. “Do it again,” he requests playfully.

I laugh and wrinkle my nose once more.

Cain raises his eyebrows insinuatingly. “That drives me crazy!” His tone is filled with lust as he leans in, kissing me passionately, his tongue twisting with mine as his hips rock into me slightly. My hands shift into his hair and hold him to me as we kiss for an eternity.

Most of Sunday is spent in his bed talking, kissing, and adding in a couple of rounds of hardcore, kinky fucking, which is something I never thought would be my style. But Cain makes being sexual seem like the most natural thing in the world. He makes me feel sensual, and even though the things we do I've never done before, he ensures I'm completely comfortable, leaving me feeling safe and satisfied at the same time.

Eventually, we both crave sustenance, so we get dressed and go to the living room. I feel a little shy about finally coming out of the bedroom after our show last night and spending all day in his room today, so I hope Rodberg won't embarrass me too much.

He's sitting on the sofa watching more soccer with a Budweiser in one hand and the other down his briefs.

I scoff when I see him. *Jesus! That image is now firmly implanted in my brain.*

He looks up and smiles wide. "Hey, fuckers, thanks for the show last night. My Iron Rod got a good workout after that fucking performance," he states.

Eww. Too much information!

"You felt the need to tell us that?" Cain asks, looking annoyed.

"Well, I was thinking about ramming my Iron Rod into her *Wonder Woman*, if you know what I mean?" he asks, nodding his head up and down in satisfaction.

Oh my God! Is he for real?

Do men actually talk like that?

"You're not going near her with your Iron Rod. Period. So get that thought out of your head before I have to smack you the fuck out with a crowbar and pry the thought from your cold, lifeless body," Cain declares, looking to me like he wants my approval regarding his behavior.

At least he's trying not to be violent.

It was much better than grabbing him by the ears and punching him in the jaw. So yeah, I'll give him that. I smile and nod.

Rodberg shrugs before Cain leads me toward the kitchen.

"You know she wants my... Iron Rod," Rodberg calls out from the living room.

Cain groans as I let out a small giggle out of ridiculousness.

“Is he always like this?” I ask.

Cain shrugs like he’s used to Rodberg’s apparent lack of social etiquette.

“Unfortunately,” he grumbles.

Three Weeks Later

Time flies by, and I spend Christmas with my parents but New Year’s with Cain. After the new year, Cain and I spend every weekend together as he’s busy during the week with work. Every Saturday, we head down to the park and sit under our tree while I work on my manuscript. He quietly situates behind me, feeding me, gently playing with my hair or kissing my neck while I work.

He is my rock, my safe place.

Rodberg tries to persuade me, every chance he gets, to touch his Iron Rod. To which I always politely but firmly decline, usually with a giggle.

Joey is out most of the time. I think she’s been partying, which gives me plenty of alone time with Cain, which is just how I like it.

However, his dominance is starting to become an issue, and more importantly, his evasiveness when he receives phone calls at all hours has me thinking there’s more to his job than he lets on.

It’s confusing.

It’s confronting.

And I want to ask.

But I’m terrified of the answer.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MAKAYLIE

Five Weeks Later

We step out of the elevator and walk to my apartment.

Lately, we've been spending all our time in his, but tonight, we thought we'd change it up and come to mine mainly to have some time away from Iron Rod. Plus, Cain still hasn't met Joey. I haven't talked about her much, which is incredibly bad on my part. She's my best friend, and I've been neglecting her lately. But she's so busy studying and partying, and I'm always out with Cain. It's like we're living in different time zones at the moment.

When I open the door to my apartment, the lights are off, and I exhale with a sigh of disappointment. I really wanted Cain and Joey to meet, but it appears she's out again. She's such a social butterfly.

Flicking on the lights as I go, Cain follows me in, and I take off my jacket and scarf as a flash of lightning, followed by a clap of thunder, rolls outside the windows, echoing through the night sky. I look down at the table to see a note from Joey. Cain steps up behind me as he wraps his arm around my waist, resting his chin on my shoulder.

Dear Kaylie,

*Where the hell have you been? With him, I bet.
I've said it a million times, but I'm incredibly jealous.
When will you give me a chance to talk?
I'm out late tonight, so don't wait up.*

*Love you to the moon and back,
Joey xoxo*

Giggling, I put the note down on the table.

Cain lets me go, grabbing the letter, his eyes darting over the words like he's in a reading frenzy. His face is stone cold, his eyes glaring at the words

like they're his worst enemy while his nostrils flare and his face turns bright red. "*What the hell, Makaylie?*" he yells.

Exhaling, I slump my shoulders.

Not this again!

"What?" I ask in *that* tone. You know, the one that says he's being ridiculous as he shoves the letter in my face.

I move away from him, shaking my head. "Are you always this jealous?" I spit out sternly.

He looks at me like I've just said the stupidest thing ever. His body slumps slightly like he's calming down, but only marginally. "No... only with you!"

"Why?"

He throws his hands in the air, scrunching the letter in his clenched fist. "I don't *fucking* know. I've said it before... you have this hold over me. I've never felt this way before. Never cared. And Joey's obviously jealous and wants you. I don't handle well the idea of someone else wanting what's *fucking mine!*" he yells the last word as he glares at me.

"How many times do I have to tell you? I am *yours!* Why are you so jealous of Joey?"

"Because *he* blatantly wants *you!*" he bellows, his voice the loudest I've ever heard, and my ears rattle with the intense volume.

My head jolts back, and I open my eyes wide, letting out a shocked laugh.

"Wait! What? You think Joey is a guy?"

He glares, his eyes glint with anger, and his fists are balled at his sides like he wants to hit something so bad, but he's restraining himself. "*Obviously.* He always writes that he loves you and is jealous you're with *me,*" he yells even louder this time.

My chest heaves as I groan, throwing my hands in the air in annoyance, and roll my eyes as I turn from him pacing the floor. "Oh my God, you're impossible!"

"*I'm impossible?*" He slams his fist into the nearest wall, the noise echoing through the small space mirroring that of the thunder outside. It catches me off guard as I jump back from the shock and turn to glare at his audacity.

"What? So *you* think I'm cheating on you?" I scream back at him.

"Are you?" His body is rigid as he stares me down.

"I can't believe *you're asking me that!*" I yell because I can't help throwing all my pent-up rage at him.

Something in him clicks.

His eyes turn dark.

His chest puffs out.

He picks up a vase from the table, and his muscles ripple as he uses all his force to hurtle it against the wall. The sound as it hits the drywall, shattering into a million pieces, makes me jump almost through the roof. Flowers and water cascade down the wall and fall to the floor as I jump back even further, disturbed by his aggression.

“For fuck’s sake, Makaylie. Stop. Avoiding. The. Question!”

The intensity in the room sparks like the voltage of an electrical storm. I can feel the charge seeping into my pores as the friction bolts into my lungs. It’s so astonishingly overwhelming my entire body is tense with an all-consuming rage. My anger bubbles over the top, and I rush forward, pushing into Cain’s chest hard, even though he doesn’t budge.

“No! I am *not* fucking cheating on you, *you asshole!*” I yell. “When *the fuck* would I have time to cheat on you?”

His face contorts as he grabs my wrists, stopping me from trying to push him, and holds me tight while breathing harshly through his nostrils as they flare in and out. “Good! As it *should be*,” he yells back in my face.

“Why are you still *yelling* at me?” I scream back and struggle to push against his chest with all my might. He stumbles backward but steadies himself, gripping me tighter and pulling my hands up so my body falls against his. I gasp when I feel his hard cock press against my pussy, and I grit my teeth, angry that this shit is turning him on.

“Because I care about you. So much, Makaylie...” He pauses. “Too fucking much. It scares the shit out of me. *You. Scare. Me!*”

My stomach sinks as my heart leaps into my throat. I stop fighting against him and take a deep breath, attempting to soak in Cain’s words. Blinking a few times as we both pant heavily, I swallow hard. His tight grip on my wrists softens, and he leans in, resting his forehead against mine.

“I scare you?” I ask quietly, and he nods, his eyes sparkling as he stares into mine. Cain lets one wrist go as his hand moves up to caress my cheek in his usual way.

“You scare... and... electrify me, Makaylie.”

I weakly smile and sniff slightly as I move closer, needing to touch him. “I care about you too. And trust me when I say you scare me, Cain, in so many ways.”

“I know. I want to open up to you, tell you everything... everything there is to know about me, but that’s what has me scared.”

Nodding, I press my lips to his. “You will tell me when you can...” I take in a deep breath and release it. “For now, I trust you. So please, trust *me*.” He exhales with a nod. “And Joey is a girl, you imbecile! If you listened to me, you would have realized that before you went off on this tangent.” I slap him on the chest as he backs up, looking down at me like I’ve said the most incredibly shocking thing in the world.

“Wait! What? Joey is a chick? As in boobs and pussy?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, and don’t be so crass. She’s my best friend, and she’s jealous that I’m with you because she thinks *you* are hot, and *she* wants to be with *you*, not because *she* wants *me*!”

He lunges forward and plants kisses all over my face.

I laugh as he talks through the kisses. “Thank God...” Kiss. Kiss. “Because I was getting ready to kick his damn ass.”

“You mean *her* ass!” I laugh at his stupidity.

He chuckles. “Yeah, that’s what I mean.” He can’t resist kissing my lips hard in his usual dominant manner.

Suddenly, the front door opens, and we separate like we’ve just been caught by my parents making out. As Joey rounds the corner and walks in, she looks at the broken vase on the floor, the surrounding flowers, and a massive water stain, then slowly places her bag on the table, eyeing Cain suspiciously, then looks back at me.

“You, ah... wanna tell me what happened to my grandmother’s vase? That was a precious family heirloom,” she says deadpan, making me roll my eyes as she crosses her arms over her chest.

Cain tenses as his face falls, his mouth agape as he shakes his head like he’s in shock at his actions. “Oh fuck! I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I’ll replace it,” his voice cracks, sounding devastated.

Joey frowns and snuffles like she will cry, making me tilt my stature and raise my brow. She looks at me with her lip turning up slightly as she snuffles again and shakes her head. “It’s sentimental, it *can’t* be replaced.”

Cain looks at me for guidance.

“Okay, that’s enough. Cain, Joey is messing with you. It was a cheap vase from Target, not a family heirloom—”

“Oh, you’re no fun, Kaylie. You should have waited to see what I could have gotten from him to replace it,” she teases, slapping Cain on the arm and

wagging her eyebrows.

Cain lets out a bemused chuckle, unsure how to take this or her. “I think you’d get along well with Rodberg,” he mumbles.

Oh my God! I burst into a fit of hysterics as Joey creases her brows, trying to figure out what Cain just said.

“Don’t worry, Joey, he’s messing with *you* now,” I tell her as I walk over to pick up the pieces of shattered glass.

“Baby, let me do that. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“Yeah, baby, we wouldn’t want *you* getting hurt,” Joey mocks.

“Shut up!” I throw back as I pick up a piece of glass, but Cain instantly takes it off me and points to the sofa for me to sit on while he cleans up his mess.

“This is ridiculous! I can clean up broken glass without...” I reach down to grab some more. “Ouch, motherfuck—” I stop and place my bleeding finger in my mouth. I should have listened to him because now I will cop his constant whining.

“See? You should listen instead of defying me every chance you get.” Cain takes me toward the sink. He turns on the faucet to wash away the blood that’s now pooling on my finger.

“Ouch!” I murmur as he wipes the blood away. “Aren’t you grossed out? I can fix a little cut.”

His fingers brush over my cut, and my blood runs over his fingers in the water. “I’m used to blood, Makaylie. It doesn’t bother me.”

I go to ask what the hell that means, but he continues talking, “You *will* listen to me from now on,” he snaps, grabbing some paper towels and wrapping my finger up.

Rolling my eyes, I’m lucky he doesn’t see, as he’s too busy getting a bandage from the drawer.

Joey giggles, watching us from the living room, making Cain look up. She walks into the kitchen, grabs the dustpan and broom, and then moves back into the living room to clean up the broken glass.

Cain watches Joey and smiles, letting her continue.

I scoff. “So you’ll let Joey play with glass but not me?”

He knew that was coming, and he beams cheekily. “I’m sure Joey will be fine. I care about *you* and don’t want *you* hurt. Hence, no glass for you...” the corners of his mouth twitch up, “... and you proved me right.”

“Gotta give the man props for being honest,” Joey calls out, laughing as

she picks up the half-dead tulips.

“Huh? How did I prove you right?” I ask, ignoring Joey and concentrating on what Cain said while Joey laughs at me.

“Ahh... look down at your hand, little dove. Need I say more?” He wraps the too-long bandage around my sore finger, making a huge deal out of nothing. I huff, scrunching up my nose at him, and he lets out a small chuckle.

“Do it again,” he whispers.

Oh shit! I let out a slight laugh but do as he says and scrunch up my nose once.

“God, that does things to me...” He groans as he turns me, pulling my back to his front and pushing his newly formed erection into my ass. Letting out a stifled giggle, I bite my bottom lip as he slowly rubs himself against me. Swallowing hard, I try not to give it away as Joey is in the living room, oblivious to his advances.

Cain brings my ridiculously bandaged hand up to his lips and kisses over my cut. He gently rolls his hips into me, awakening my inner desires. The fight, followed by Cain telling me he truly cares about me, is making me need him as he rubs himself against me, my whole body begging for his touch.

There’s just one problem.

Behind the dividing half wall between us and the living room is Joey, who’s cleaning up our mess.

Cain’s hand slowly makes its way down my side to the top of my thigh, and he presses between my legs. I gulp as his hand is hidden from Joey’s view by the counter, but she can still see our faces.

He moves slowly on me. This is beyond a public display of affection, and Joey surely knows what he’s doing, but I’m too stunned to stop him. Plus, it feels too good. I rest my head back on his shoulder as he rolls his hips into me again. His hand slowly rubs me so I can just feel the friction under my pants.

“Breathe, Makaylie,” he whispers in my ear as he moves his hand, trailing his fingers across the top of my pants. He slowly undoes the button, and I tense up, moving my hand to stop him.

I mean, for crying out loud, Joey is right there in the next room, and she can see us, for God’s sake!

He chuckles and rolls his hips into me again, sending a shock wave

straight to my clit.

I exhale as he leans in and kisses behind my ear. *Oh God!*

“Anywhere, anytime, little dove,” he whispers in my ear. His voice is so deep, so gravelly, and so sensual it sends goose bumps over my entire body. Cain’s hand slides inside my jeans, and I let him take control of me.

Moving his fingers down the front of my panties, he gently presses on my clit. My eyes attempt to close at the intense feeling, but Cain softens his touch, so I open my eyes and glance at him.

“Keep your eyes open, or you’ll give us away,” he whispers as I rest my head back on his shoulder.

“So what have you guys been up to besides destroying vases?” Joey asks as she continues to clean up the mess.

Instantly, I tense as she looks over at us. Cain kisses my cheek and firms the pressure on me, rubbing just the right way to send a shudder through my very center.

Oh, fuck, it feels good.

Joey furrows her brows, looking at me for an answer.

“We’ve just been hanging out. I’ve been helping Makaylie with her writing. Isn’t that right, little dove?” Cain kisses my cheek again, and his finger circles effortlessly as I try to suppress a moan and gain some composure.

“Oh God, yes,” I say breathlessly.

A slight laugh leaves Cain as he quickens the pace with his finger.

Joey looks at me strangely but continues to chat, “Oh, awesome. You’ve been writing again, Kaylie?” She walks closer toward the dividing counter, and I tense even more, which only heightens the pleasure unfolding inside me.

It’s becoming overwhelming.

“Yes. Mmm...” I moan a little at the end, and she laughs.

“Glad to see you’re enjoying writing that much,” she says as she stares at me with an eyebrow raised.

My hands fist into the seams of Cain’s jeans as I try to keep my breathing in check. He circles on me again as he rolls his hard cock into my ass. I’m so close, but I’m holding back because of Joey.

“Okay, well, I’m beat. I’ll see you tomorrow. ’Night,” she says, placing the dustpan and broom on the dining table and walking to her room. “Nice to finally meet you, Cain, and look after Kaylie. She is stubborn, but she is

awesome.” She waves to him.

He waves back with his free hand. “Good night, Joey. I’ve definitely got my hands full of Makaylie,” he says, circling on me again, making me gasp.

“You mean you’ve got your hands full *with* Makaylie?” Joey asks.

Oh, just fuck off to your room, Joey!

“Yeah, that’s what I meant.” Cain chuckles as he rolls his hips into me again.

Joey walks into her room and shuts the door.

Exhaling against him, I relax instantly. He kisses my neck, sucking on my skin as he hastens his circles on my clit. My breathing escalates, and I whimper slightly, still trying to be quiet. Closing my eyes, I roll my hips into his hand. A low growl echoes from his chest, and he sucks on my neck, marking his property. The heat builds inside me as he slides his fingers around and around. I move one hand from the seam of his jeans, up and into his hair, holding his lips to my neck as his heat overwhelms me, causing me to quiver. My breathing is quick and shallow as I pull his head to mine, crashing our lips together.

A muffled moan escapes my mouth into his as I begin to unravel. My muscles clench with one last twirl of his finger and a roll of his hips. My back arches and a shudder runs down my spine. Everything tightens, restricting my movements as it all reaches a crescendo and then hits me like a wave of water crashing into the shore. It smashes full force and then spreads over my body, rushing through me from my head to my toes, sending a flood of euphoric pleasure through me as I climax and moan loudly into his mouth.

Cain’s smiling against my lips when my muscles finally relax enough to tell. My body is still slightly shuddering and shaking as I ride against his hand. My breathing begins to slow as he takes his hand out from inside my pants. My grip loosens on his hair and his jeans as he turns me around to face him. My eyes look up at him in a hooded lust-filled state when he takes his finger, sticks it in his mouth, and sucks me from him. Scrunching my nose up at him, he pulls me closer.

“You do realize that little action you did there? That’s what started all this in the first place.”

Laughing, I slap him on the chest as he rolls his hips into me again, making me painfully aware of his still-raging hard cock.

Joey’s door opens, and she steps out, looking right at us, and I move to embrace Cain so she doesn’t see my open pants. He wraps his arms around

me and kisses my head.

“Did you guys say something?” she asks. “Sounded muffled?” she asks, oblivious.

“That was Makaylie. I was just rubbing her cu—” I cut him off with a glare, and he chuckles. “I was rubbing her cut, and it ... hurt, so she moaned,” he says, looking at me with a shit-eating grin.

Exhaling, I rest my head on his chest.

Asshole!

“Okay, no worries. ’Night,” Joey replies as she closes her door.

I look up at Cain and open my eyes wide. “You almost gave me a heart attack.” I glance down to do up my jeans.

He chuckles. “Well, like I said, Makaylie, I *will* take you anywhere, anytime. Remember, you’re *mine* to do with as I see fit.” He smirks.

Knowing he’s trying to rile me, I let that one slide rather than give him the satisfaction of working me up. We have had enough fighting for one day.

“Whatever you say, Cain.”

“See, you’re learning, little dove.”

“Mm-hmm...” I mumble. “Doesn’t mean I have to like it, though.”

“No, but you *really* like me. I think you might learn to love me one day,” he says with a bright smile.

“Yeah, I wonder why sometimes, after a stunt like that,” I scold, making him pout his bottom lip.

“C’mon, let’s go to bed.”

I nod, grab his hand, and lead him to my room, flicking off the lights as we go. It’s been a while since we’ve slept here, but his leather jacket still takes pride of place on the chair in the corner of my room.

“Hurry up and get naked. I want to feel your body against mine.” Cain starts to pull off his clothes.

I shake my head at his demanding attitude, but I can’t deny him this request.

Because I sure as hell want to feel his naked body against mine too.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CAIN

This is not my choice, and I hate leaving Makaylie in her bed like this while I head off to the brotherhood for a night of God only knows what.

As I get dressed, I look back to her lying in bed, cuddling into the pillow, breathing heavily as she sleeps soundly. I shake my head, hating that I'm doing this yet again. But I have been going in less and less to the warehouse, and I know if I don't make an appearance, it will raise alarm bells, not just with the other Bachelors, but more importantly with Boss. And that's one man I don't want checking on me.

So I get dressed, grab my cell, lean down, plant a chaste kiss on Makaylie without waking her, and leave the apartment, making sure to grab her keys and then head for the warehouse.

After a short drive, I make my way through the usual safeguards of the parlor, where the room smells of cigars and booze. Looking around, the men are lusting after power and greed. It seeps through their veins like frenzied sharks waiting to attack their prey. Their desire is for blood as if it spills on the earth like water, and there's something powerful and appealing in that. It makes the devil inside me sing, but sometimes, this devil lives in his own personal hell.

Swallowing hard, I look over at Trap sitting at his usual place at the bar, drinking the night away. I shake my head at his tolerance for alcohol as my feet pound the floor over to him.

I shift my weight onto the stool beside him, and he glances up to look at me with a stifled laugh. "The prodigal son returns. Oh, how we've missed thee." He sneers.

"Fuck off. I haven't been away for that long. And remember who you're talking to."

He nods and takes a deep breath. "Mmm... sure if you say so. Let's catch you up then. After Rodberg's meeting with Zorko's men, Zorko decided that as an offer of compensation for Morgan, we could have the guy who shot him. Oh, and our deal is back on. But fuck, man, this Zorko crew is a shady bunch. They're nothing but general thugs and heathens. The bastards are

shifty. Not the general crew we consort with.”

Running my hand through my hair, I nod. “I hear you. We might need to do something about Zorko’s deals, but we will let it play out for now.”

Trap nods once, takes a large sip of amber liquid from his tumbler, then shifts his gaze to Kamara, a topless Bachelorette walking past. He looks her up and down and smirks. “She used to be one of your go-to’s, wasn’t she?” he asks.

I shrug. “She was.”

He snorts. “Kamara not doing it for you anymore?”

“Who I fuck is none of your business, Trap.”

He tilts his head and looks around the room at the other Bachelorettes. “Hmm... well, to me, I don’t see you fucking any of our women. So, if you’re not getting laid here, then maybe you’re getting pussy from outside the brotherhood. And now I am thinking, that’s why you’re not here anymore? Am I right?”

With that little statement, my stomach churns, and my muscles tense. My neck twitches as I look Trap dead in the eyes, glaring at him. “I’m not interested in *any* pussy. I have bigger fish to fry. I am sick of this bullshit. As I said, who I fuck is none of your motherfucking business, Trap.” I clear my throat and continue, “I’ve had enough of your inquisition. I’m going home. So deal with this shit on your own!” Standing abruptly from the stool, I turn and start heading out of the parlor with a sinking feeling in my gut.

“That’s it, Cain, run off to whatever secret you’re hiding,” Trap calls out, but I’m too rattled to turn back and defend myself or to beat the living shit out of him this time. So I simply keep walking out of the parlor to my Impala. My chest is heaving the entire way, thinking of Makaylie and the possibility that maybe, just maybe, Trap already knows about her.

I’m pretty sure I’m not targeted, being so high up.

But fuck, I might be.

You never know.

I have Bachelors followed to check on them all the time, and they have no idea.

What if I’m the same?

What if Boss has ordered it?

Paranoia starts to creep in, and the idea that any of these guys, other than Rodberg, knows about Makaylie is making me feel physically ill.

Opening my car door, I slide in and slam it shut. The darkness of the

blackened night sky peers in through the windows, and I let it seep back into my soul where it should be. My dark heart needs a kickstart because I am getting soft.

I take off, the wheels spinning and turning up dust and pebbles in my frustration as I speed off, fishtailing it out of the gates.

I'm almost to the apartments, internally seething from the conversation with Trap, but I need to know what's happening. Taking a centering breath, I yank out my cell and call Rodberg. Even though he's under me, way under me, he might know something I don't.

He may have heard whispers I can't.

He's friends with Bachelors, I am not.

"Cain, where the fuck are you?"

The roar of the engine vibrates through the car as I accelerate harder, putting my cell onto speaker and placing it on the passenger side as I continue to drive. "I was at the warehouse, but I'm heading back to River House now."

"Did Trap tell you what Zorko has decided about the guy who shot Morgan?"

I pull into the parking garage of the apartments and park my car. Making my way up to Makaylie's apartment, I take my cell off speaker and place it next to my ear.

"Sure did. That's going to be fun. But Rodberg, I don't want to talk about that right now. I need to know if there are whispers in the brotherhood about Makaylie?"

I step up to her apartment and open her door quietly, slowly walking in to make sure no one is up, and then keep my voice low as I continue the conversation in the living room with Rodberg.

"There's whispers about you not being around as much, for sure."

I tense, not liking that answer, as I grit my teeth and walk toward Makaylie's door, ensuring she isn't coming out before I answer him.

MAKAYLIE

Muffled murmuring wakes me from a deep sleep.

My eyes are foggy, my body aching, and I'm still not sure if I'm awake or asleep and dreaming.

“No, you’re not hearing me. I know I’m not around as much, but there’s a reason for that, Rodberg. Just deal with it.”

Cain is on the other side of the door, and I’m pretty sure he’s on his cell, but I’m so tired I’m only just making out what he’s saying.

“Do they know about her?”

I roll over in bed and go to sit up when the door creaks open, and the slight glow of a cell phone light against Cain’s ear glints as he peers in to see me looking at him through glassy, tired eyes.

“Okay, look, I have got to go. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” He ends the call, closes the door, and walks up to me, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Go back to sleep, little dove.” He caresses my cheek and leans in, kissing me gently.

“Was that Iron Rod?” I ask, and he nods. “Checking up on you?” I tease, and he chuckles.

“Yeah, something like that. Come on, you scoot back to sleep,” Cain says, kicking off his shoes and climbing back into the bed, and it’s only now I realize he’s fully dressed.

When the hell did that happen, and why?

“Why are you dressed?”

He cuddles into me and starts playing with my hair. “Didn’t want to scare Joey if she came out in the dining room while I was on the phone,” he replies.

The air in the room shifts.

It fills with uncertainty.

And my heart beats a little faster at the tension seeping between us.

I’m not sure I buy what he is putting out.

There’s no need to put your shoes on. Cain only needed his briefs and a shirt if he was worried about modesty.

Something does not add up.

But right now, my heavy body and foggy brain are too tired to care.

I’ll ask when the time is right.

Maybe tomorrow.

Maybe another day.

With Cain, you have to get the timing exactly right to get straight answers.

He’s arrogant.

Dominant.

And volatile.

So right now, I know the timing isn’t perfect.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MAKAYLIE

Two Weeks Later

Even though I still get lost in Cain every chance I get, I'm wary. Phone conversations, his middle-of-the-night antics, and some of the things Rodberg says, plus the amount of time he spends behind closed doors where prying ears can't hear him, all concern me. I'm not sure what he's doing, but I know I don't want to be involved in whatever it is.

Even though I've given myself to him completely, I don't ask about his work, and he doesn't tell.

I'm too scared to ask the questions I'm thinking because...

What would happen to us if I did know the truth?

Or am I making something out of nothing?

I don't know.

But I do know that Cain is incredibly secretive when it comes to his family and me. He never talks about his parents, and every time I bring them up, he talks his way around to another topic. And as for me, he never says he's out with me when we're interrupted by one of the many phone calls he receives.

He's always extremely vague about where he is. Answers like "Oh yeah, I'm just out," or "Nah, I'm not doing anything right now." I'm starting to have a phobia that he's ashamed of me or something because he never mentions me to anyone. It's like the only person in his life who knows about me is Rodberg.

And we all know how adorable he is, I think, and internally laugh.

I'm lost in my thoughts when Cain and I walk into his apartment.

"Hey, cutie pie. Are you ready for my Iron Rod?" Rodberg asks from the sofa.

Cain's arm stiffens around my shoulders. I tighten my grip on his hand when he grunts, and I giggle, shaking my head. I have gotten used to Rodberg's greeting style whenever I visit Cain's place.

Rodberg grows on you after a while. He reminds me a lot of that guy, Spike, from *Notting Hill*, the masturbating Welshman and his scene-stealing antics. I know it's strange, but Rodberg is funny, and I know he wouldn't try

anything, especially now he knows I'm Cain's property.

God, listen to me!

But really, Rodberg is harmless. He's all talk. I just had to figure that out, and now that I see the funny side of him, he's no longer a complete douchebag.

"Shut the fuck up, Rodberg. How many times do I have to tell you? Leave what belongs to me alone," Cain says.

I roll my eyes. I just can't help it.

This whole belonging to me crap is driving me insane.

"Baby, it's fine," I whisper into Cain's ear, then gently nip at his earlobe.

He looks down at me with a salacious smirk, and I lean in to kiss him.

"Get a room! No, wait. Actually, scratch that and do it right here, in front of me. I've heard the show. Now I wanna see it in action," Rodberg says, grabbing his cock.

Scratch that, Spike wasn't that bad! Just when I think Rodberg's starting to grow on me, he says shit like that.

Cain grunts, his body stiffening, seeming to puff out and grow larger. Almost like he's hulking out as he lets me go and storms over to Rodberg. "That's it! Get the fuck out. Don't you have some hooker on standby you can go harass or something?" Cain yells, glaring at Rodberg as he stands chest-to-chest with Cain.

Rodberg stares Cain straight in the eyes for the first time like he's defying him. Friends and coworkers stand off with the weight of the world on their shoulders, turning on each other like a pack of hungry wolves ready to slaughter their prey. The prey, in this case, is each other. Both of them grit their teeth and turn their lips up in obvious anger that's rising between the pair. The tension rippling off the two men has the air so thick you could carve it with a knife.

My heartbeat races frantically, so hard I hear the thumping in my ears. Chewing on my bottom lip, I swallow hard, knowing Cain's anger overtakes him when Rodberg talks about me like that.

I can't stand the tension anymore as they both clench their fists, ready to take this to the next damn level. "Baby, let it go," I call out as I race over to the two men, their chests now touching and their nostrils flaring.

"Yeah, baby... let it go," Rodberg mimics.

I exhale, as all I can do is watch in slow motion while Cain draws back, and his clenched fist collides harshly with Rodberg's jaw. The sound cracks

through the room as Rodberg drops his knee to the floor. My feet move before my brain registers. I'm at Cain's side, pulling on his arm to stop him from continuing his assault on his roommate and friend.

"You're a fucking asshole, Rodberg. Don't you ever mock me like that again! *Do. You. Hear. Me?*" Cain annunciates in his face as Rodberg rubs his jaw and weakly nods.

I pull at Cain to step away, but he won't budge. "Cain... *Cain. CAIN!*" I yell at him to break his death glare on a broken Rodberg.

"*What?*" he yells back at me, glaring with such a fierce intensity that I let go of him and take a step back with a small gasp.

I'm not sure if it's the fear I'm exuding or the look of horror on my face, but his harsh glare softens, and he visibly relaxes his tense body and exhales. "Sorry, little dove." His reaction is immediate as he lurches forward, pulling me into an embrace.

I'm tense in the hug, but his warmth and the way his hands gently soothe up and down my back are somewhat easing my discomfort. I relax into him and slowly wrap my arms around his waist, hugging him back.

"Dude! Why'd you hit me, you fucking cunt?" Rodberg asks as he slowly stands from the floor, a bruise and bright red lump already clearly visible on his jawline.

Cain tenses again, and I hold him tighter to me out of fear of him lunging after Rodberg again.

"Walk away, Cain. Please. For me? Take me to your bedroom," I whisper the last part in his ear, and he exhales with a grunt but turns toward Rodberg and shakes his head.

Taking hold of his hand, I gently rub my thumb over his skin, and he looks down at me, that salacious grin returning with an almighty force.

He points to Rodberg. "I'll deal with you later." And then he bends down abruptly and hoists me over his shoulder. I squeal as my face almost collides with his ass, and his chuckle filters through the air when he slaps me on the ass and walks us to his room.

This is probably not a good thing, but even though Cain is being a big macho buffoon when he stands up for me, I find it kind of sexy. My racing heart and the blood coursing through my veins are heightened by the arousal that engulfs me. I want to be alone with him as much as he wants to be alone with me.

He storms into the bedroom, kicks his door shut, then throws me onto the

bed. I laugh as I bounce on the springy mattress and sink into the fluffy comforter. He climbs over me as I wriggle up the bed to rest my head on the pillows, and he follows, stalking me like his prey.

It's deeply erotic.

Resting my head on the pillow, he moves in to kiss me. Our lips meet as his body weighs me down. My hands fist in his hair as his tongue enters my mouth. All breath escapes me as he kisses me hard and passionately, our bodies entwining as a small moan escapes me. A slight chuckle breaks through the kiss, and I open my eyes, stopping the kiss to look at Cain as his chuckle turns into a fit of laughter.

My eyes widen as I scrunch my brows together in utter confusion. "Um... something funny?"

He moves off me, leaving me feeling cold and unsatisfied as he continues laughing.

Sitting up, I start to feel self-conscious as I look down at myself. "Cain?" I ask again, now agitated, as I pull my legs up to my chest, wrapping my arms around them.

He finally looks at me as his laughter dies down, and he falls from whatever was making him carry on like this. "Sorry. For some reason, the look on Rodberg's face when I hit him flashed in my mind... priceless," he states as he leans in to kiss my cheek.

I raise my brow. "You were thinking about Rodberg's face while you were kissing me... *like that?*" I start to giggle myself, the idea ridiculous.

"Yeah, I was in the moment. Then, an image of his face popped into my head. Sorry, little dove, I shouldn't have laughed while kissing you. Feel free to punish me however you see fit," he suggests, winking at me.

Letting out a small laugh, we both lay on the bed, and I cuddle into his side. "Cain, can I ask you something?" Now is the time to take advantage of his good mood.

"Yeah, little dove... anything."

"Why don't you talk about your family?"

He exhales loudly, and immediately, I feel him tense up beside me.

"Cain, I want to trust you, and I want to know all about you. I want to know every detail of your life, and I want to tell you every detail of mine. I guess what I'm trying to say, rather badly, is that for two people who are so into each other, I don't know a heck of a lot about your family other than you have a sister and a niece. What about your parents? Where are they? Can I

meet them? Do you want to meet mine?”

The mood shifts, and he sits up abruptly, running his hands through his hair and letting out a loud grunt. “Seriously? What’s with the twenty questions? You’re serious all of a sudden,” he replies, taking me aback.

I swallow hard and slowly sit up next to him. “Okay... sorry. I just thought—”

“No, Makaylie, you didn’t think!” He growls, getting up from the bed hastily, the mattress bouncing so much that I fall back hard. I feel like the wind has been knocked out of me, not literally, metaphorically. Swallowing hard, I sit back up in the same position and furrow my brows.

“Cain, I simply want to get to know you better. I just... I’m sorry.” I feel the anxiety pooling in my stomach as I look down at my hands.

It’s like he has a switch, and bam! His mood has flicked into darkness.

Cain paces the room as I watch him cautiously. His heavy feet pound the floor, sounding like lead weights on the carpet. My heart is pounding violently like the weight of his boots. He exhales as he runs his fingers through his hair and finally turns to look at me with his lips turned down. Cain appears as if he’s in pain. His jaw is clenched, and his brows furrow. I think I even notice him breathing slightly heavier, but it’s hard to tell with how quickly he’s moving.

What the hell is this all about?

A sudden wave of anger ripples through me in annoyance at his demeanor.

No. I’m not sorry for asking a simple question.

He’s the one getting his back up.

Well, fuck him!

I’m not going to back down and defend myself in this.

No way.

The anxiety levels in the room are making the air buzz and crackle with an electrifying energy, but not in a good way. I always feel electrically charged around Cain, but right now, the static in the air could light us in flames rather than ignite us in desire.

My chest heaves, and I grit my teeth as I let it rip. “Actually, you know what? No, I’m not sorry. *Fuck that.* I’m *not* going to apologize for wanting to know more about you. Fuck pussyfooting about here, Cain. I’m not going to cower down and let you treat me like shit because you don’t want to talk about it. I have done enough of that already. If we’re going to be together, then you need to be able to trust me, goddammit!” Letting out a heavy breath,

I watch him in silence as he continues his heavy footsteps, pacing the room.

The surge fizzles slightly and is doused when he stops and stares at me, his furrowed brow easing slightly as his body relaxes. Cain exhales as I look away dramatically, and he walks over to where I'm sitting and slowly sits on the edge of the bed next to me. He rests his elbows on his knees, placing his head in his hands.

"I understand you want to know everything about me, just like I want to know everything about you. But my life has *not* been filled with love and happiness. My life story is nothing to be happy about. My family... my parents... they mean everything to me, but it's difficult to talk about. No one knows, Makaylie. No one except for my sister and me, and I don't want you to think any less of me. If you knew what you need to know, I don't know how you'll take it," he admits, confusing and intriguing me at the same time.

I figure I'd better take this slowly. Right now, I think he might open up to me if I don't push him too hard. "Cain, I would *never* think any less of you for *anything*. I don't care about your past. I just care about you... *here and now*. Nothing you say will change the fact that... *I'm falling for you*," I admit honestly, and he reaches out and takes my hands.

He nods like he's preparing himself to tell me something. "I wasn't always like this... tough and ruthless, I mean. I'm good at my job, but I didn't plan on my current career path. I went to college and studied for a degree in business economics. My father was so proud of me for following in his footsteps, and I was happy to be doing so."

Cain's eyebrows knot together. "You see, I haven't always had that back tattoo and the controlling behavior. It all started after I graduated. Mom, Dad, and my sister, Amelia... we called her Millie back then... were coming home from my graduation party. I was driving, but I'd had too many bourbons before I got in the driver's seat."

He tenses, his jaw clenches as he cracks his neck to the side. "I knew I was over the limit, but it wasn't far to drive home, and I was supposed to be the responsible one. So no one even noticed the alcohol on my breath."

He gulps and looks down at our entwined fingers as a cold sweat invades my body.

I am sure I know where this story is going, and my heart is breaking for Cain.

"It was raining... pouring actually, and it made it hard to see. The fact I was drunk didn't help. I was never a control freak, but in saying that, I had no

control over the situation that was about to take place. All the factors were there and were my fault. If I didn't drink and drive, it would have never happened."

Sadness clouds his features as he continues, "Millie was in the back behind me. Mom and Dad were in the passenger side, Mom in the back, Dad in the front next to me. I should have seen him coming. I mean, a logging truck isn't hard to miss, but the rain was heavy, and I ran a yellow light just as it turned red over a giant intersection..." He pauses, taking in a long, deep breath to steady himself.

My chest constricts, and I chew on my bottom lip, watching his face contort in sheer pain as he relives the memory in his mind.

"Mom and Dad took the full brunt of the collision. The car was a wreck, and Millie and I walked away with some minor injuries, considering. She had a broken collarbone on impact, and I got away with hardly anything in comparison, but our parents were both trapped in the car. I got Millie out as the police turned up. Then someone shouted out about the gas line being ruptured."

He shakes his head as he swallows hard. "I started to panic... Millie was screaming." He winces, scrunching his eyes tight, his muscles going rigid like he's in extreme pain. I watch it ripple through him when his breathing quickens. "I still hear her screams sometimes in my sleep," he whispers.

My breath catches in my throat at the imagery it's casting in my mind.

"A policewoman was holding Millie back while I was wrenching on the car door to get my parents out. A passerby had stopped to help me, but for the life of us..." he pauses, "... we could not get the fucking doors open. Mom was passed out, but Dad was awake and moaning in agony. I will never... ever... forget the sounds of that night."

I cling to him, my chest squeezing in sadness, as he continues, "It was still raining, and everyone was soaking wet when the fire started on the logging truck." He shakes his head. "Obviously, there was plenty of fuel for the fire with all the wood, and the blaze took over instantly. A policeman yelled to evacuate the scene, but I stayed, wrenching the car door, just trying to get it open. I was *not* going to let my parents burn..." Cain wipes his hand over his head. "Dad was slowly fading in and out of consciousness, and I remember yelling at him to wake the fuck up."

Cain shakes his head like he's angry at the memory as he continues, "He mumbled something about taking care of Millie, and that's when the

policeman dragged me away kicking and screaming...” He swallows a large lump down his throat as he swipes his hand through his hair. “I couldn’t do anything as the fire made its way to my car with my parents inside. Millie was screaming and crying in the arms of a medic while I watched on being held by a policeman as the flames engulfed my car. I dropped to my knees, and then I heard it... the torturous screams of my parents both burning to death.” He shakes his head. “Their agony haunts me to this day.”

A deafening silence fills the room as my pulse races so hard in my chest that I can hear my heavy heartbeat in my ears.

“It was only a few seconds later that the gas exploded, and it was at that moment I think I realized I must keep control of everything. I have to ensure I’m always in complete control of my life so nothing like that can *ever* happen again. It was the worst day of my life, Makaylie, and I don’t blame you if you hate me. God knows *I* hate me.” His voice cracks under the strain.

I gulp as fresh tears stream my face for Cain and his loss. Not only did his parents die, but he watched it happen. *No wonder he’s the way he is.*

Lunging forward, I wrap my arms around his neck. “Cain, I could never hate you. I think you hate yourself enough,” I tell him as I lean in and kiss his lips. “But I am so sorry I made you tell me. Cain, that must’ve been so hard to relive. I promise I won’t push you for any more information until you want to tell me.” I lean back as I watch him only just holding it together. Cain is a strong man, a tough man, a hard man, and being brought to the brink of tears makes me think maybe he isn’t as unbreakable as he portrays.

“No, it’s fine. You needed to know sooner or later. I wish I could take it all back. Especially Millie, she deserved to live a life with her parents, and I took that away from her.”

Taking his face in my hands, I look him dead in the eyes. “Cain, there’s nothing you can do to change what happened. You can only move forward and try to be the best man you can possibly be.”

“But I’m *not* a good man, Makaylie. The things I’ve done since the accident...” He shakes his head slightly. “I’ve been locked up, met the wrong people, chose the wrong path, and now I’m taking *you* down that path with me.” His face stiffens, and his body tenses while his jaw clenches. “Fuck! You have to go.” His chest heaves as he pants heavy breaths. “I can’t see you anymore.”

My eyes fly wide open as my breath is knocked from me. “What! Why?” I ask as my pulse races and every muscle in my body constricts. My palms

start to sweat profusely, and my heart pounds so fast I think it's going to burst through my chest.

"Just go, Makaylie," he snaps, letting go of me and bolting upright as he paces the floor of his room.

My lip quivers as he breathes heavier like he's panicking as much as I am.

"Fuck, *fuck*, *FUCK!* I lost control with you. I *can't* have you in my life. I care about you too much to let anything happen to you. And if you stay with me, something bad *will* happen to you, of that I am sure. I've been careful up to now. Only Rodberg knows about you, but if anyone else finds out... *fuck!*" He yells the last word as he races over to me, pulling me up from the bed and dragging me toward the door.

My entire body shakes, and my legs feel like Jell-O.

I can't seem to gather my bearings enough to fight back.

What the hell is going on?

He tells me something deeply personal and then breaks it off with me.

Something strange is happening.

Cain pulls me so fast toward the front door that I don't even hear whatever Rodberg calls out before I find the strength to talk. "Cain, you're hurting me," I murmur, and his death-like grip on my arm lets go. He stops with me at his front door, opening it, but everything is happening so quickly that I have no time to react to anything he's doing.

"That's why I can't be with you anymore. Because it *will* end up with you getting hurt. Goodbye, Makaylie." He leans in and plants a rushed, hard kiss on my lips. They tingle, feeling like popping candy sizzles against his. Then he pulls back just as quickly and pushes me through the doorway, slamming the door in my face, the wood almost splintering off, he slams it with such force.

What the actual fuck?

I stare at the gray door, my bottom lip quivering. My head is a fog, and I have no idea what the hell is going on other than a black fog streaming down and surrounding me, swallowing me whole.

My body feels heavy, like a lead weight is pulling me into the depths of the ocean, and I'm drowning in Cain's wake.

For what seems like hours, I stand in front of Cain's front door, just staring.

My mind tells me I need to move. I need to walk away. But I'm rooted to the spot, my body numb. No matter how I try to rationalize what happened, I'm met with the same answer. *I don't know*. The same thing would be to turn around and never look back, but it's like he has an invisible hold on me.

I know he comes to see if I'm still here every now and then because I can see a shadow at the door, but he never opens it. As the sun fades through the windows, the afternoon shifts from a dreary, overcast day into the endless black pools of a darkened night while my legs stay steadfast in their attempt to keep me here with Cain. A perpetual pit of despair flows over my body, entangling with my emotions, only making this even more confusing as the night takes hold. Emptiness wracks through me like a vast void, riddling my shell of an existence while I wait and hope for him to change his mind.

Only he can make this right again.

The shadow appears once more at the bottom of the door, but this time it opens. I blink rapidly as the light shines through the doorway, beaming brightly in its contrast against the darkened hallway.

A silhouette appears and rushes forward.

Relief fills me as I smile, waiting for Cain's face to come into view. I don't know if my mind is playing tricks on me—it looks like an angel is walking toward me, but my body isn't reacting.

Instead, I flush in a cold sweat, my muscles shaking with adrenaline, and all light turns to black as I feel myself falling. Falling into a blackness, I don't know if I can come back from.

It's like every ounce of strength I had to keep me going is gone, and I have nothing left in me to fight as I crash to the floor, my head slamming with a thud.

Pain radiates through me so intensely that I can't think, I can't move, and my ears ring as I begin to drift out of consciousness.

"Little dove? Makaylie! Fuck!"

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Much love,
K E Osborn



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With a flair for all things creative, *USA Today* Bestselling Author K E Osborn, is drawn to the written word. Exciting worlds and characters flow through her veins, coming to life on the page as she laughs, cries, and becomes enveloped in the storyline right along with you. She's entirely at home when writing sassy heroines and alpha males that rise from the ashes of their pasts.

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