

*A Steamy Valentine's Day Romance Anthology*

XOXO 



*C.D. Gorri \* April D. Berry \* Becca Fogg  
Calla Claire \* Kryss Strong \* Tamara Whitlow  
Tonya Ink \* Rebecca Hefner \* Saam King  
Sheri L. Williams \* PS Nail \* Andi McClane*



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by

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## *Note from Authors*

All twelve stories in this anthology contain explicit sexual acts and are intended for readers 18+.

Other content warnings are noted at the beginning of each story.



## *Our Goal*

Dear Readers,

Thank you so much for grabbing your copy of XOXO: A Steamy Valentine's Day Romance Anthology! We are so proud to be a part of this set, and grateful to you for giving our stories an audience, and allowing us to be heard.

The twelve of us have come together to deliver this collection of emotion driven Valentine's Day themed romance for your reading enjoyment, and to bring awareness and raise funds for the National Alliance On Mental Health, our nation's leading voice on mental health. By spreading awareness and offering support, NAMI brings hope to those in need. Let's normalize stigma free and encourage people to ask for help when it's needed. You can find out more about NAMI here: <https://www.nami.org/Home>.

Thank you so much for supporting this worthy cause. We hope you enjoy our stories. Keep being awesome.

XOXO,

The Authors

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*Her Chocolate His Bar*

Cherry On Top Tales 2

By C.D. Gorri





## *Blurb*



*Enemies become lovers during the sweetest time of the year...*

Ever since she moved next door to *The Whiskey Bar*, Sonny Delgado has been fighting a losing battle. He tried to ignore her, focusing on work. But the sweet, succulent scents of her chocolaterie fill the air, whetting his appetite in more ways than one.

With potential investors coming to a tasting event on Valentine's Day, the last thing Sonny needs is his bar smelling like the inside of a candy wrapper.

Sexy or not, Delani's neighbor must be loopy if he thought she was going to close during her busiest season. Resisting his kisses might be tough, but this curvy girl takes crap from no man.

Will Sonny come out on top? Find out in this sexy Valentine's Day story.

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# Prologue

## Sonny

I looked around at the highly polished mahogany bar top, satisfied with the pristine sophistication of my establishment. It took me years to find just the right location, and Montclair, New Jersey, was simply ripe for this kind of place.

No, it wasn't my first rodeo. I'd spent years helping entrepreneurs open bars up and down the east coast. Was pretty damn good at it, too. Especially when it came to marketing. But this place was special. This one was *mine*.

*The Whiskey Bar* had its first soft opening a few months ago, and so far, so good. The reviews were amazing, and we were bringing in crowds all the way from New York City to our little Jersey town. We featured premier whiskey, bourbon, scotch, with a special section for local artisan liquors.

Oh sure, we serve other stuff, beer, and spirits, but whiskey, that was the star. There was just something about it that spoke to a clientele with a refined palate. I wanted to reach that customer base. Men and women with good taste and money to spend, who wouldn't scoff at a \$35 glass of the good stuff.

Something was missing, though. I knew it and my staff knew it. But fuck me if I could figure out what.

“Yo, Sonny, the guy’s here to fix the ice machine,” Eddie, one of his bartenders, said from the doorway to his office.

“Great. You got this or you need me?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

I nodded and watched him go, steeping my fingers as I thought more about the issue. I’d just signed a contract with a very popular New Jersey whiskey distillery and was planning an entire marketing campaign around them. Bite was a damn good whiskey. Older, established, it was the perfect foil for my own upcoming label.

But none of that mattered if I couldn’t get the right crowds in. I closed my eyes, shaking my head when a now familiar scent reached my nostrils. Fuck. It must be late afternoon already. That was usually when *she* started mixing her sinfully sweet confections. I growled and rubbed my hand over my face.

Ever since she moved in, I was having the hardest fucking time concentrating on work—and I meant that literally. My dick twitched behind my pants, and I flicked the thing to get it to behave.

Last thing I wanted was for one of my staff to accuse me of something untoward because I couldn’t control my boner every freaking time I got a tantalizing whiff of what my new neighbor was whipping up next door.

*Fuck me.*

No, really. Would she? It’s been the only thing on my mind ever since I first saw that delectable ass hauling a fifty-pound sack of sugar inside her small confectionary shop. Of course, I helped her. Flashed her my best smile, too.

You know the one. Guaranteed to melt a pair of panties at 100 yards or more. But Delani wasn’t like other women. She smiled sweetly, said thanks, then turned around to introduce me to her boyfriend. The asshat was on the phone, sitting in the corner while she did all the work.

Apparently, the woman was taken by some loser who didn’t deserve her. But that wasn’t my business. No. My business

was getting The Whiskey Bar off the ground. As it was, I was bleeding money into advertising that simply wasn't working.

What was I doing wrong? Why was this so easy for me when it was someone else's bar on the line? And what the fuck was she making today?

Holy hell. My eyes crossed as the tempting fragrance of fine dark chocolate, sweet sugar cane, Tahitian vanilla, and something dark and subtle filled my office. I closed my eyes and let it sink in, grimacing when I started to imagine Delani Whitman wearing that cute little red apron of hers—and *nothing else*—while she fed me one of her tasty little morsels.

Fuck. I was sick. Delani was not for me. She had a man, and I had a bar.

*Best remember that.*

The phone rang, and I answered it on autopilot. Straightening in my very comfortable leather office chair when the caller provided her name.

*"Hello, Mr. Delgado, this is Cynthia Blair of Blair Investment Group,"* she said.

"Yes, Ms. Blair. How are you?"

*"Very good, Sonny. Can I call you Sonny?"*

"Sure. Of course."

*"And it's Miss Blair, I am single,"* she said, and her voice held that familiar note of invitation I'd received with increasing regularity ever since my balls had dropped.

But this was not a pleasure call. I had been waiting for Blair Investment Group to get back to me with their answer to my proposal. You see, I didn't just serve whiskey. I made it. I just needed the right backers to support my brand.

"Okay, Miss Blair. What is your news?"

*"It's good, Sonny. Blair Group would like to come to a tasting at your bar on Valentine's Day,"* she said, and my heart stopped.

"A tasting?"



*“Yes, all the brands do it these days. Expect us at around seven, and I can’t wait to see what pairings you offer, Sonny. Until then.”*

“Yes. See you.”

Fuck.

I had no idea what she meant, but I knew the names of some talented chefs in the area. Blair Group wanted a tasting party, so I guess had to give one. *The Whiskey Bar*, and more importantly, *Whiskey Neat*, my label, needed their support and if that meant some wining and dining, I could sure as shit provide that.

Afterward, everything would be gold. The scent of chocolate got stronger, and I frowned. I just had one annoyingly sweet problem. It seemed avoiding my neighbor would not work anymore. I readjusted my dick and gave my balls a pinch to keep the damn thing under control.

When I walked into the tight alley that connected our properties. I overheard a telephone conversation she was having with someone, a woman, I quickly discerned. Shamelessly eavesdropping, I leaned closer to the door. Once I heard what was being said, I couldn’t have walked away if I tried.

Holy. Fuck.

She’d broken up with that asshat. Finally, I had an opening. But what was she going to say when I asked her to close for a few days? I pursed my lips and cleared my throat. There was nothing else to do, so I raised my hand and knocked.

*Time to confront the buxom beauty to find out.*



# Chapter One

## Delani

I could not believe it. He cheated! That dirty, lying liar!

“Ugh!” I grumbled as I fought with the lock to the front door of my chocolaterie.

I’d stuck with Pete, my disingenuous ex for the last eighteen months, even though I knew something was just not there. Being a curvy girl I was used to having some not so wonderful choices with the dating world, but I never thought I’d be taken in by such a jerk.

Why was I even upset? Well, seeing Pete with *little Peter*—yes, the loser named his tiny prick—inside the waitress from the coffee shop next to his apartment was a shocker. I suppose I had a right to be angry.

After all, Pete had pursued me. No, I didn’t find him particularly attractive, but he was attentive and sweet. At least, he was at first. He said all the right things, took me out, brought me presents.

Then, about six months into our relationship, came the not-so-subtle hints to lose weight. The oh-so-polite hints to join a gym, avoid fried food, skip desserts, and my favorite, the ‘*I’m only saying that because I love you babe*’ suggestions about what I should wear and eat.

*“Hello? Delani? Are you listening to me?”* My best friend, Jan, yelled through the receiver on my cell phone, and I sighed.

“Sorry, Jan. It’s just it will be another Valentine’s Day alone. Again! I am fucking cursed,” I wailed.

I actually forgot I had her on speaker, and I felt slightly guilty, but not much. Jan could be a bit much and was better in small doses. Especially when I hadn’t had any coffee yet.

But the idea of another dateless Valentine’s Day made me cringe. What a cliché! The chubby chick stays alone while everyone else goes out and gets lucky every February the fourteenth.

*Ugh.*

*“I told you Pete was a complete loser before you guys got to date three, remember?”* Jam replied.

The infamous date three, of course, I remembered. We had this thing where we gave a man three dates to fall into one of our acceptable boyfriend categories. If he passed, the relationship could progress from there, but if he failed to meet some pretty important standards, we moved on to greener grass.

My favorite dates fell into the following three categories. The alpha male who treated you like a princess but knew when to let you fend for yourself. The cinnamon roll who was all things sweet and charming but knew when to pull a girl’s hair in the bedroom. And the tall, dark, mystery man who swooped in and made your wildest fantasies come true. Of course, there weren’t many of those on the ground, which was how I settled on Pete.

*Sigh.*

Yep. Several categories of male we could choose from. Dozens that Jan and I and some of our other friends had written out in this long Google doc we shared access, too. And it worked, mostly.

One of our own had actually just found her HEA ending. Rena and I were old college pals. She’d recently announced

her marriage to her old high school flame and added a category to our list of acceptable ones. Men seeking redemption, worthy of second chances, were her top one now.

We all added when we felt like it, and yes, we rated them, too. I admit, I had a sort of obsession with fictional men as our unofficial *Book Boyfriends I'd loved to Fuck Club*, or BBILF, as we called it, could attest too.

What could I say? No one did it for me the way some of those guys did between the pages. That was probably because it was mostly women writing them.

*Go figure.*

The point was, everyone had their own thing that drove them wild. Whether it was tattoos, an accent, a penchant for making love under the stars, or, well, whatever, it was all fine and good. We gave our prospects three chances to prove their potential and then went from there. We couldn't dismiss a man after one date because there simply wasn't enough information to do so unless he was completely gross.

As long as we avoided any who were emotionally unavailable, already involved with another woman, or unhealthily attached to his mother. And liars. We all wanted to avoid liars.

*"You're better off, sweetie. What do you say? Wanna come for a visit?"*

Jan was still talking, and I felt guilty for not really listening.

"No thanks, Jan. It'll be Valentine's Day in a few and you know it's my busiest time of year after the holidays. Besides, there's this new health inspector who keeps showing up for surprise inspections. He is driving me bonkers," I told her.

*"Fine, but call me later. And report that inspector. Clearly, he is being stalkery."*

"Oh my God, stop. He's just doing his job."

*"Uh huh. You are too nice, Del. Oh! I have an idea, maybe you should go next door and shoot some whiskey with that*

*sexy guy who owns the bar? He'd put you in a better mood for sure,*" Jan said, only half joking.

"I am hanging up now," I told her before clicking *end call* on my phone.

I made the mistake of telling Jan about my handsome, yet taciturn neighbor, and now she managed to bring him up in almost every conversation. Sonny Delgado was fire. I meant it, too. The man was hotter than Hades himself. Just thinking of his name sent tendrils of awareness coursing through my blood.

And that right there was why me and Pete were never going to work.

The extra staff I hired to sell chocolates during prime business hours and to box orders that needed to be shipped the next day had already left for the evening. I was not there to wait on customers, but to mix and mold fine chocolates and candies for the next day.

I wasn't kidding when I told Jan this was my busy season. Eyebrows raised, I looked over the list of items we sold out of, and my belly warmed with satisfaction. There was nothing like a job well done—*well, except for maybe one thing, and I hadn't had any of that in a very long time.*

Actually, I'd been avoiding doing the deed with Pete. We hadn't had sex in about four months, and that was mostly my fault. With switching locations and getting this new business off the ground, I was often way too tired to even try to get into a sexy mood with the stuffy city planner.

I was still tired. Sick and tired of all the bullshit. I looked at the screen of my buzzing phone and saw ten texts from Pete. Without reading them, I deleted them and sent him a one-word reply before blocking his number.

*Stop.*

Just that one word, and I prayed he let it go. I had one really hard rule with relationships. Cheaters didn't get second chances. If you were dumb enough to step out once, that was a

clear sign you'd do it again. And I was too smart to let that happen twice.

Truth was, I felt kind of guilty because instead of being sad and angry once the shock wore off, I was relieved. Humming to myself, I donned my favorite red apron and started the mixers. Next, I had my robot servant, which is what I called my Google Nest, to start some David Bowie tunes through the wireless speakers I had in every corner of the chocolaterie kitchen, and I got to work.

Usually, my moods dictated what flavors I mixed, but it was an important holiday, and my customers had their favorites. First, I was going to create a couple of batches of my most popular items—*truffles*.

Chocolate truffles were the epitome of decadence, in my not so humble opinion, and I made some of the best. I prepped my ingredients and had the first batch ready before I heard the knock on the door. I went to answer it, wondering who it could be, pausing when I saw him.

My neighbor. Sonny Delgado. His shirt was half open and his short hair looked mussed, from his own fingers or someone else's, I wondered.

“Can I help you?”

“Yeah, you can help me,” he said.

But before he said anything else, his eyes glittered like black diamonds as they raked over me from head to toe. I admit, when I worked, I was hardly anything to look at. Black leggings and a short-sleeved top, red apron in place, a hat on my head, and a hairnet covering my low ponytail. But Sonny looked at me like he was dying of thirst, and I was a tall glass of water.

I wasn't tall, though. I was barely five three on a good day. Sonny, however, was tall. He was six feet of well-muscled, wide-shouldered man, with a healthy smattering of five o'clock shadow covering his square-jawed face and the sexiest dang tribal tattoos I had ever seen on his chest, abs, and arms, from where it was visible.



I wondered if they went around his back too, but all coherent thoughts left me as he moved, walking right into my personal space. Sonny cupped my cheeks, and I gasped, shocked at the sizzle that spread through me from where his skin met mine.

“I’ve been wanting to do this for so long,” he growled, and I gulped.

Then he kissed me, and all coherent thought left my addled brain.



## Chapter Two

### Sonny

I knew I shouldn't be doing what I was doing, but once I touched her, I couldn't stop.

Seriously. I. Could. Not. Stop.

Delani Whitman was positively addicting. All my dreams come true, wrapped up in one deliciously perfect package. Any thought she might object disappeared when I felt her arms wrap around my neck and her soft, curvy body press against me.

Fuck yes.

All those furtive, stolen glances these past few months boiled down to one thing—I wanted her. The fact of her boyfriend was the only thing keeping me away, but now that I knew he was out of the picture, I had no reason to.

*Fuuckk.*

She tasted so good. Even better than I imagined. Yeah, the place was full of rich, decadent chocolate—a *true weakness of mine*—but really, she was so much better than that. And I was hooked.

I crushed her lips beneath mine, sucking on the pillow soft flesh before plundering her mouth with my tongue like some

treasure-seeking pirate. My pulse raced and my heart pounded so loudly I thought I might go deaf.

I couldn't hear anything but a resounding roar inside my brain built of desire for this perfect creature. That and the sounds of our rough breathing, and the slide of our clothes as we rubbed against each other. I swallowed her groan, pulling her body into direct contact with mine as I walked her backward. Once I had her back pressed against the wall, I was free to allow my hands to roam all over her beautiful curves.

All I could think about was how much I wanted her. My brain was in neanderthal mode, and I could hardly think in coherent sentences. This woman had been on my mind for weeks now. She was all I could see, hear, and think about.

*Kiss her. Touch her. Taste her. Fuck her.*

How many nights had I dreamed about sinking into her hot, sexy body? How many times had my mind wandered over to the ways I could make her scream my name? My dick throbbed, and I ground my pelvis into the hot apex of her thick thighs, holding one high in my greedy hand.

Seriously, the amount of headspace she'd claimed was already way beyond what I'd experienced in my thirty-seven years. I had enjoyed the fuck out of my bachelorhood. Sexual encounters were not new to me. But nothing compared to having this sweet, curvy goddess in my arms.

"Wait," she said, and I slowed my sensual assault.

"Don't wanna wait, Del. I just want you."

Her eyes dilated at my husky whisper, and heat sizzled between us. Was it possible she felt it, too? That unmistakable pull between the two of us? I didn't believe in magic or fate, but fuck, this woman tempted me like no other.

"Yes, Sonny. I want you, too. Have for a while now," she confessed—*and at that exact moment, the whole entire world stopped moving.*

Her eyes were glazed with lust, and I lost myself in them for a long, drawn out moment until I processed what she'd said. Somehow, some why this gorgeous woman wanted me, too.

And I was more than ready to take our polite neighborly acquaintanceship to a whole new level.

*Fuck yes.*

With a barely contained growl, I recaptured her lips, reaching beneath her apron to pull down her pants. Her hands were on the buttons to my shirt and my pants. I groaned as she ran her short nails down my chest and stomach to dip inside my jeans. Her hand wasn't big enough to fully circle my cock, but she had a good grip, and fuck me, I went cross-eyed when she offered a long, tight stroke.

"Not yet, baby. First, I get to play," I growled, dropping to my knees in front of her.

Delani went to untie her apron, but I grabbed her hand. I'd been wanting to fuck her while she wore nothing but that bolt of red tied to her body for weeks now.

"The apron stays, but you can get rid of your shirt and bra," I commanded, watching carefully as her eyes dilated with pleasure at my terse instruction.

Good. she wasn't going to fight me on this. I wasn't usually a control freak, but here, with her, I needed to be in command. Otherwise, this would be over far too soon. My cock throbbed just knowing she enjoyed being told what to do during sex, and I couldn't wait to praise her with plenty of *good girls* and pats on her perfectly round ass.

"Lift your thigh onto my shoulder. Lemme see that pretty pussy," I told her.

"Like this," she whispered, her breathy moan more stimulating than I could ever imagine.

"Good girl," I growled, pressing kisses to the soft skin of her inner thighs.

Her hair was closely cropped, and I was relieved she wasn't bald down there. I liked my women neat and tidy, but I also liked knowing they were women. Still, no one ever compared to Delani or the feelings she was conjuring deep inside me.

I wanted her so fucking bad. And not just for sex. I wanted to own her. To possess her. To make her mine. And that was just downright crazy. Hell, I'd hardly ever spoken more than a few words to her, exchanging pleasantries. But I'd heard plenty. The alley between her store and my bar had been a place for me to sort my thoughts since I'd leased the property with an option to buy.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, the walls of these buildings weren't soundproof, and I'd heard her plenty these past few weeks. Her staff loved her. Customers asked for her by name. She was an excellent businesswoman, and both clients and employees were loyal to her. Best of all was her throaty laugh.

Fuck, I loved hearing her laugh. She didn't do it often enough, but maybe I could change that. Now that jerk ex of hers was out of her life, I was damn well going to try. The tasting party and me asking her to close her shop during it were just minor complications. That was business, and this was pure pleasure.

"Sonny," she moaned, and I grinned unrepentantly.

"Patience." I tsked, and she glared at me through hooded eyes.

I couldn't help but chuckle. Fuck, she was so hot. I looked my fill, listening to the hitch in her breath as I used my fingers to part her hot folds. She was dripping wet and glistening for me and some primal instinct made me want to beat my chest, knowing I caused such a reaction in this female.

"Need to taste you," I said, leaning forward to lap at her slit.

My cock grew even harder at the first swipe of her honey. More and more, I licked and sucked, swallowing every drop of her arousal and loving every minute of it. She tasted so fucking good. Bucking her hips against my ministrations, I fucked her with my tongue and fingers.

"Oh, God, Sonny, I'm gonna come," she groaned, and I stopped, keeping her teetering on the edge of ecstasy. "Nooo," she moaned, hips still flexing, but I stopped her movements.

"Not yet, baby. Not till I say so."

I stood up and stepped out of my jeans, fully erect and naked, I grabbed her to me, my left hand finding her naked breast beneath the small apron bib. She writhed against my touch, seeking more pressure, but I wanted this to last. Drawing her nipple between my finger I plucked and teased, taking her mouth with mine, and letting her taste herself on my lips as I did so.

Desire and heat spiked, and I knew this time neither of us was going to stop. But I needed to be in her if we were going to finish together like I planned.

“Fuck, baby, you are so hot. Go in my pants and grab a condom from the wallet,” I told her.

Loving the view as she bent and rifled through my things, I counted the seconds until she came back with a tiny foil packet in record time. She dropped to her knees, taking the condom out. She paused, her eyes big as she looked at my dick, and I could almost feel her wanting to taste it.

“Maybe later, baby. Put the condom on,” I told her, expecting naughty Del to obey.

*And she did. Thank fuck.*

“Now turn around and face the wall. That’s it, good girl. Palms flat, stick that ass out for me, gorgeous.”

I grabbed a handful of her beautiful globes, squeezing them as she lowered her hands and head, bending over more and giving me a perfect view of her sweet, glistening pussy. Her apron strings made a little red bow over her sweet ass, and fuck, if this wasn’t even better than I’d dreamed.

I took my condom covered cock in hand and rubbed it all over her slick folds. She was so hot, and so aroused, moisture dripped down her thighs.

“Fuck, baby, look how wet you are for me. Gonna fill you with my cock now,” I grunted, holding her in place with one hand on her hip and the other on the back of her neck.

I notched myself at her entrance, pressing in an inch, then withdrawing. Next push, I gave her another and pulled back. Then again.



“Please, Sonny,” she begged, and that was when I let her have all of it.

With a single thrust, I filled her with my cock, hissing as her hot, tight channel squeezed me so fucking good. I didn’t know how long I was going to last, but I knew I was going to enjoy this. And so was she.

Fuck yes, she was.

The sounds of our bodies slapping filled the space, and I groaned as her sex squeezed me even tighter. The woman was a fucking goddess, taking my dick so good. So, I told her so.

“Fuck, baby. You should see how good your pussy looks, taking my cock.”

“Oh God,” she whimpered, panting now as I switched angles, spreading her thighs wider and filling her even more deeply.

“You feel so good. So tight and hot. So wet for me, baby. Yeah, fuck, that’s it.”

“Fuck, Sonny. I’m gonna come. Please, lemme come,” she begged.

“Soon. Gonna let you come real soon. Squeeze me tighter with that hot little pussy, baby. That’s it. That’s my pussy. Say it,” I commanded.

I never got like this with women, but for some reason, I needed Delani to tell me what I wanted to hear. Needed her to admit I owned her sweet sex.

“Your pussy, Sonny. Yes,” she groaned, her head back as I quickened my pace.

I could feel her getting close and my balls reared up in response.

“Now, Del. Come for me. RIGHT. NOW.” I punctuated each of those last two words with hard thrusts, pinching her clit between two fingers each time.

Her pussy rippled around my cock, and Delani screamed my name. It was the sweetest fucking sound I ever heard. I

pumped into her faster, harder, damn near blacking out at the intense pleasure ripping through my veins. My forehead leaning on her neck as I held her tight to me, ringing out every ripple of pleasure that I could from us both.

This felt too good. This felt right. Fucking perfect.

*So, of course, I went and fucked it up.*



## *Chapter Three*

Delani

*Holy balls! Did that just happen?*

I was sucking in air like a marathon swimmer who'd just done a zillion laps. I could feel the aftermath of the tumultuous sex I'd just had with the super hot owner of the bar next door dripping down my leg, but I was too damn sated to think, never mind move.

To think just moments ago I'd thought this was the worst day of my life. After all, it's not every day I wake up and catch my so-called boyfriend cheating. But now I was somehow caught up in the most fantastic sex of my entire life, and with a man I'd been secretly fantasizing about for weeks!

Turned out, I didn't have to move just yet. Sonny untied the apron from my waist and grabbed the box of napkins off a nearby table. Without saying anything, he carefully disposed of the condom and cleaned my thighs with gentle pats to my skin, quickly followed by soft kisses. He petted me, caressed me, and before I knew it, I was hot and bothered all over again.

*Whoa! Down girl.*

I didn't know what had come over my sexy as sin neighbor, and really, I wasn't even complaining, but I had to get myself

under control. Unfortunately for me, I had a difficult time separating sex from emotion.

Hence why I'd stayed with Pete for so long. I fucked him, so I had to love him, right? WRONG. Like really, really wrong. If I'd loved Pete, there was no way I'd have just banged the shit out of Sonny. My cheeks heated, and I grabbed my shirt off the floor while Sonny went for his underwear.

Gray boxer briefs, actually. Damn, they looked sexy on him, and they gave me one helluva view. The man was seriously packing in a way I had personally never experienced. Now that I had, I wondered how any man would ever compare.

"Hey, what's going on inside that head of yours, beautiful?" he asked, gathering me up in his arms and kissing me on the lips.

"Um, well," I began, biting my lip and gazing up at him through my lashes. "This was, um, unexpected."

"Unexpected? Delani, I've been walking around with a hard on for you since I first saw you," he admitted, and something inside me warmed at that.

"Really?"

"Hell, yeah. I only stayed away cause you had a man. But now that he's out of the picture," he said, kissing me again.

"How do you know—oh, these walls are pretty damn thin, aren't they?"

I shook my head, and he just flashed me one of his patented panty-melting grins. Really, that expression should come with a warning. Already I felt my pussy respond, growing hot and wet at the flash of his white teeth against his gorgeous, olive-toned skin.

"They are, but I hope you don't think I intentionally—"

"No, of course not," I replied with an easy shrug.

I mean, I was a chocolatier, not anything interesting, like a master of espionage or an exotic dancer. I cleared my throat, cheeks burning as he was holding me loosely in his arms,

swaying me from side to side in rhythm with the music we could hear from his bar.

Speaking of bars, the one in his underpants was growing harder where he pressed against me, and my shocked gaze met his. He looked beautifully masculine in the darkness of the front of my shop, which I would definitely disinfect the area after he left.

EEK! I had sex in my store. How scandalous! Sonny danced with me slowly and I clung to his tattoo-covered body so as not to trip, and really, well, just because I liked the feel of his many muscles. He was so freaking hot I damn near swooned.

“Will you have dinner with me tomorrow?” he asked, and I bit my lower lip before responding.

“Are you sure?”

“Wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t sure,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Alright, then, yes. I would love to have dinner with you.”

“Good. I look forward to that.”

“It will have to be a little later. You see, I’ve, um, recently lost some of my working time,” I teased.

“I see, and is business booming, then?”

“Oh yeah. It’s great,” I told him honestly.

“That’s good. Delani, I have a favor to ask. I need you to stay closed on the 14<sup>th</sup>. I have some people coming for a tasting and I can’t have the bar smelling like a candy store—”

“I’m sorry, what?” I asked, stopping his gentle swaying.

I must have heard him wrong, at least, that was what I had thought. But no. Sonny repeated himself and it was worse the second time around. He spoke with such certainty that I would follow his instructions in this as easily as I had when it came to sex. The nerve of that man!

Sonny Delgado, bar owner, was asking me, Delani Whitman, to close my shop on the busiest day of the year

because of some little whiskey tasting with potential investors. And I was pretty sure he'd just fucked me to get his way!

"Let me get this straight. You think the smell of chocolate and candy might impede this *tasting*, did you call it?"

"Yes," he said, and gritted his teeth. Clearly, I struck a nerve.

*Good.*

"Delani, look," he grumbled, cupping the back of his neck as he spoke. "Chocolate is all fine and good, but I am trying to get my whiskey label off the ground, and I need these investors and their connections. A successful tasting hinges on my ability to produce the right atmosphere, striking the right atmospheric notes so they can really enjoy the complex flavors and true quality of the liquor."

"And you think my chocolate will ruin the quality of your bar?"

"No. I am not saying that. It's just one day—"

"Get out."

"What?" he asked, clearly aghast.

"Delani, when I said I need you to not be here on Valentine's Day, I didn't mean because of another woman—"

As if that was the only reason I had to be pissed.

"Get. Out." I repeated firmly.

I waited until he shrugged into his pants, ignoring his efforts to speak to me again before I locked the door after him. Only then did I slide to the floor and lean against the door, letting the emotional rollercoaster that was my day wash through me.

First, Pete's betrayal. Then Sonny's unexpected ardor. The man broke my pussy with how good he made me feel, but of course, he couldn't just let me enjoy that. Oh no. The most astounding orgasm of my life was followed up by the ugly truth.

He'd used me. And not just to sate his physical needs, but to coerce me into closing my shop for his cockamamy whiskey

tasting. Which was gross, by the way.

*So gross.*

But what did I expect? My experience with the opposite sex, while few, was enough for me to know I had the absolute worst luck when it came to men. That my sexy neighbor had suddenly developed feelings for me was preposterous. That I thought for one single moment our sizzling encounter was more than just a meeting of bodies was plain dumb.

*Yeah, right, Delani. Men don't take chubby chicks who make candy for a living seriously.*

Bullshit. I didn't really believe that, but really, could this day get any worse? A slip of paper was pushed beneath the front door, and I got up, dragging my legging on as I meandered over to it. I felt dirty and sad and just plain tired.

There I thought my whole curse of having no date on V-Day would be solved, but nope. Once again, I would be alone on Valentine's Day, and didn't that fucking suck?

I bent down to get the bright yellow paper, and my eyes almost fell right out of my head. A health inspection citation for improper disposal of trash? What the heck? There was a Post-It attached with a time and a winky face. Looked like the health inspector was coming by once again in the morning.

*Fanfuckingtastic.*





## Chapter Four

### Sonny

I spent the days following my erotic interlude with Delani in a real shitty mood. I tried to talk to her the following morning, but she was busy with the city health inspector, so I offered a wave and smile and asked if she was free later in the day.

She blew me off with a vacant smile and a terse ‘*don’t call me, I’ll call you*’ reply. I pretended it didn’t bother me, but fuck, it was like being elbowed right in the gut. Afterwards, I tried to focus on work, but halfway through my usual duties, I was pacing the floors.

“Bro, you need to chill,” Bear, one of my best friend’s and weekend bartender, said and pointed to a vacant stool.

His real name was David Antonetti. We met when I was working for a famous hotel chain, updating the bars in a series of their hotels on the west coast.

Bear was actually a multi-millionaire, having invested his trust fund before he finished school. He’d always let me in on the deals, and I had quite the nest egg myself. The man simply had a nose for making money. But rich or not, David enjoyed the work, and the customers loved him. Especially the ladies.

He was ridiculously good looking, all smiles and charm oozing out of his pores. Not that I usually had a problem with

that kind of thing, except for Delani. Man, I fucked that up.

I'd been waiting to catch her alone, but every time I stopped by her shop, Delani was too busy to see me. Her loyal employees, especially Bonnie, wouldn't let me anywhere near the back. They ran interference better than some professional football players, and I knew a couple of them.

Hell, there were dozens of professional athletes living in a twenty-mile radius of *The Whiskey Bar*, part of why I'd chose this location. I growled and ran a hand over my face. Fuck. Bear was right. I needed to chill.

But I'd been spending almost every night dreaming about Delani's sexy little body writhing against mine and wondering how long she was going to make me eat crow for my fuck up.

"Caterer bailed," Bear said, and my head shot up.

"What? When?"

"Nunzio says he can't do it, something about an unexpected trip. I don't know what the big deal is, we can just get a restaurant—"

"No. This tasting is too important. It needs a special touch," I growled, anger coursing through my blood.

Fuck that fucking prima donna chef, Nunzio. He thought he was the east coast's answer to Gordon fucking Ramsey, and the asshole wasn't half as talented as he pretended to be. Nevertheless, I fucking needed him for the tasting.

It wasn't about money. I had that aplenty. The Blair Group had connections money couldn't buy. The world of whiskey was a cruel and exclusive club, and I wanted in. Badly.

There was only one thing I wanted more and fuck me for jumping the gun and ruining my shot.

Yes, I realized now I was wrong to ask Delani to close her store. Arrogant. Bully. Whatever. I was stupid and selfish and so fucking wrong.

Besides, I didn't know why I was so worked up about the fragrance that sometimes came from her store to mine. I mean, I loved the smell of her shop. Craved it, even.

No, that wasn't true. I craved her. The scent of chocolate, so decadent and rich, was just one part of her charms. It permeated her skin. Making the sexy siren taste better than fudge. My cock twitched behind my jeans, and I closed my eyes, attempting to will the thing away.

I'd been walking around with a semi boner ever since I'd had a taste of the gorgeous woman. My hand was no fucking substitute and my dick deflated if I even thought about fucking anyone else. I just wanted her. Only her.

"I'm gonna go for a think," I growled at Bear.

He nodded, but his attention was on a group of soccer moms who'd come in to schedule a birthday party for one of their husbands. There were four private rooms at the back of the bar, each one big enough for twelve to sixteen people.

Once I realized there was a market for private, smaller get-togethers, I started advertising The Whiskey Bar as the place to host whatever it was you were celebrating. Birthdays. Anniversaries. Promotions. Retirements. You name it.

The door to the alley slammed behind me and I put both hands behind my head and exhaled. The smell of chocolate was so strong, it told me what I already knew. It was late afternoon. The store was closed, and Delani was inside, making those delectable goodies she shipped all over the globe.

I noticed the same red Subaru I'd seen the health inspector get out of earlier that day, still parked in front of Delani's shop. Didn't the man leave yet? I frowned and walked closer to the side door.

*"Okay, Mr. Oglethorpe, that's everything I can think of you might need to know,"* Delani's voice came through the door, sounding tense and uneasy.

My hackles rose, and I listened just in case, knowing that motherfucker had about ten seconds to leave before I broke the fucking door down. I admit I had a problem.

See, to me, the second Delani told me her pussy belonged to me, I was all in. The woman was mine. Even though she was

pissed, she was mine. This asshole had hung around all day, and from what I was hearing, she hadn't invited him to.

Not that it would have mattered. I could be a real fucker when I didn't get my way, and even if she told him to stay, I'd have been pissed. I'd been trying to go slow. To not scare her with my freaky ass possessive side, but this was where my patience ended.

I was not into sharing. Something my mother told me was because I was an only child. It was a tough lesson for others to learn. A born brawler, I didn't mind getting my hands dirty.

Besides, I hadn't had a good fight in at least a year. Not since a bunch of rowdy fucks picked a fight at the last location I'd been working. My fingers itched to pummel this degenerate loser, using his position of authority to hustle my sweet Delani.

*Whatever.*

"I told you to call me Brad, sweetheart," a male voice said from behind the alleyway entrance to the chocolate store. "And I can think of a few other things."

I heard intent in the man's voice and was already pulling the door to go inside, but it was locked. The sound of something being knocked to the ground was followed by Delani's emphatic, "*What the fuck are you doing?*"

*"Don't play hard to get, sweetheart. You're like all the rest. You know you want it."*

Blind rage fueled my next movements, and I took two steps back before using my shoulder as a battering ram. One hit and the door flew open, splintered wood rained everywhere.

"Get your fucking hands off her," I snapped, crossing the space to where that piece of shit had Delani backed against the counter.

He'd pinned her hands to her sides and was using his weight to hold her there, but the second he backed off, she reared back and punched the asshole right in the jaw. Her blue eyes flashed like sapphires in her anger, but once she locked them on me, I saw relief and something more elusive sweep across her face.

“Hey! That’s assault! You’re a witness!” the man screamed.

“The fuck I am,” I snarled and closed the distance, adding a left hook to the man’s injuries.

“Are you okay?” I asked her and she nodded, running into arms I hadn’t even realized I’d opened.

I hug her tight, kiss her head, and just hold her for a beat while she pulls herself together.

“I, uh, thanks,” she murmured.

“I will always come for you, my beautiful badass, Del.”

The piece of shit inspector picked himself off the floor, and before I could properly threaten him, Bear was there, dragging him outside.

“I got this, bro. You two need to have a chat.”

My big, burly best friend had connections to certain organizations that looked out for their own. I didn’t know much about them. It wasn’t my business. But I trusted him more than anyone else, and if he said he was taking care of that slime, then he was.

I turned back to Delani, who’d moved away from me and was rubbing her arms.

Fuck.

I felt like a complete asshole, and I wasn’t sure what to do. So, I started cleaning up the mess that prick had made. Anger had me vibrating out of my skin, and it wasn’t until I smelled the sweet, spicy, chocolatey fragrance that clung to her that I knew she was standing right beside me.

“Del?” I asked, eyes flicking over her in case I missed some injury or other.

“C-could you hold me for a moment?” she whispered, and the vulnerability on her face just tore at my heart.

I stood up slowly, not wanting to frighten her. Then she stepped into my space and wrapped her arms around my waist, burying her face in my chest. Fuck. I wished that asshole was there so I could hit him again. But only for a moment.

Once I closed my arms around her, all I could wish for was right there. Holding her was pure heaven, and I dipped my head to where her neck and her shoulder met, just breathing in her scent, and thanking God she was alright and that I could be there for her. That she trusted me to be there for her was everything.

She was everything.





## *Chapter Five*

### Delani

I prided myself on being a strong, capable, independent woman, but there was a moment when that weasel of an inspector had me trapped between him and the counter that I panicked. And that panic left me shaken.

After a week of upturned garbage pails, trash dumped everywhere outside the shop for which I'd received a citation, my mail being tampered with, and lewd messages, the classic heavy-breathing ones, being left on my phone, I thought Sonny Delgado not only hated me, but was exacting revenge in the usual frat boy style. Like a total asshole.

Even so, I'd never been so fucking happy to see anyone in my life as I was when he came busting through the doors like some sort of superhero to rescue me. My cheeks burned just thinking about it. The rage on his face was palpable, and when he punched that jerk, I just about forgave him for all the idiocy over the past week I'd been avoiding him.

I'd never played the damsel in distress, and yeah, I'd have likely gotten that creep out of there one way or the other. But I couldn't know for sure, and that was why I was currently standing in Sonny's arms, shaking like a leaf on a tree.

"Thank you for what you did," I whispered, and he tightened his hold on me for a moment before using his

forefinger to tip my chin upwards.

My gaze ate him up, loving that stubble he couldn't seem to get rid of and his deep olive-toned skin. Christ, he was so hot. His bad boy tattoos were beyond sexy, and his muscular body was temptation itself. He was like a walking cover model, and I admit, I spent most of my nights this past week replaying the way he'd filled me so well and brought me to orgasm quicker than BOB—*my battery-operated-boyfriend*.

“Sweet Del, I would never let anyone hurt you.”

I cleared my throat, stepping back. Sonny kept his hands on my waist, and I was thrilled he didn't want to let go. Was it wrong I craved his touch, too? Especially after all the hijinks this week. Maybe it was time to clear the air before I went and did something stupid with him. Again.

His fingers made circles on my hips where he'd lowered his hands, and I swayed closer. Like one of those toys where the metal balls sat on this big magnet, that was me. Rolling me forward until I was simply clinging to the man.

“I've missed you,” he whispered, so close I was sure he would kiss me. But first I had to get this out.

“I missed you, too, and I know it's my fault for not being adult enough to hash this out. But did you have to unwrap all my trash and mess with my mail?” I asked, needing to know.

“Wait. What?” he asked, and the shock on his face told me immediately Sonny was not behind either mess.

“That wasn't you.”

“No! Of course not. Do you really think I would do something like that?” he asked.

He looked both hurt and aghast, and I didn't blame him. I shook my head, realization dawning, and I knew he didn't do any of that.

“Shit. You're right. I'm sorry. I was so messed up this week after we—that is, after everything that happened.”

“I get it, Del. We moved fast, and then I went and fucked it up. Look, I'm sorry,” he said, and I could see sincerity

swimming in his deep brown eyes. “I should have never asked you to close your store. And I don’t even really know why I did. It was like I was focused on the tasting because I was trying to get you off my mind, and then I had you, and my fucking brain exploded.”

The sheepish grin on his lips as he explained in a rather adorable, bumbling way, how he’d been crushing on me, of all people.

“I thought you were with your ex. So, I left you alone, Del. It was so fucking hard, but I did. I just didn’t think I had a chance.”

“You should’ve told me,” I whispered, but I admired his restraint. He was a good man.

Former frat boy hotness aside, Sonny was proving to be more than just my sexy neighbor next door. Maybe there were good men in this world who still had scruples and morals. And maybe I’d found one for myself.

“Not my style, Del,” he replied with a sexy shrug. “I was gonna bide my time, wait for you to notice me.”

“Notice you? Are you kidding? I mean, look at you, Sonny. I noticed you alright,” I murmured.

I wasn’t going to tell him I didn’t think I stood a chance with a guy like him. I was cute. Pretty even. But Sonny was like sex on legs. Guys like that never noticed me. Until now. And did I mention, I was glad. His body and cover model face might have drawn my attention to him, but it was this right here—this honesty I wasn’t expecting that struck me right in the chest.

*Like Cupid’s arrow.*

“I’m glad you like what you see,” he said, voice husky as he dropped a kiss on my forehead. “Real glad, Del. I would have waited however long it took. Lucky for me, I was in the alley that day and heard you were free.”

“Then you came in here—”

“Yeah, I came in here, like a raging bull,” he growled, a hint of self-deprecation in his voice.

I laughed out loud at the imagery. Sonny had been rather horny that night, but so was I. Our coming together was the best I ever had, and I needed him to know I had no regrets.

“I am really glad you did. I have no regrets at all about what happened, Sonny, except for maybe what happened after,” I told him.

The look on his face, a heady mixture of need and regret, was enough to melt me into a puddle of goo at his feet. He was deep, this man. Deep, sexy, dangerous. If I wasn't careful, I'd lose my heart to him. But even acknowledging that, told me I was already too far gone.

“I have to tell you something, Del. After that night with you, I haven't been able to get you out of my mind.”

“Me either,” I said.

“But missing you would never mean hurting you in any way. I am sorry you thought I would stoop so low, but after what I said, I don't blame you.”

“No, I'm the one who's sorry. Damn. It must have been him the entire time,” I said, shaking my head.

“Tell me what he did exactly,” Sonny asked.

The confusion that was in his eyes a moment ago was replaced by concern and mildly reined in anger. We walked over to a small bistro set I had set up in the shop but instead of getting a chair of my own, Sonny sat down and tugged me onto his lap.

Now, I've never been a small girl, so this was new to me. Something inside me just unfurled and went all fuzzy at the feeling of this man holding me on his lap, like I was something tiny and precious. I was worried about squashing him, and I wiggled my hips to distribute my weight evenly, and Sonny groaned, closing his eyes.

“Baby, if you keep wiggling your sweet ass like that, this conversation is going to be really fucking short,” he hissed,

and I froze on his lap.

“Sorry,” I whispered, mouth forming an o as I felt the hard bar of his cock beneath my cheeks.

“Never apologize for being sexy as fuck, Del. But first, talk to me, then maybe we can do something about this,” he growled, flexing his hips so his cock pressed against my crack and nipping my earlobe between his teeth.

Liquid pooled between my legs, but somehow, I managed to tell him about the mail that had been missing, the trash, and the strange messages. Sonny frowned. He grabbed his cell phone out of his pocket and shot off a couple of texts.

“Just telling Bear what you told me. Don’t worry, Del,” he said, looking right at me. “That creep won’t bother you again.”

I nodded my head, believing him instinctively. Sonny’s hand was on the back of my neck, where he rubbed me in slow, massaging circles. My skin tingled where we touched and suddenly, my entire body seemed hyperaware of him.

He was so big. So masculine. He was just so much, and I wanted more. Craved him in a way I’d never craved anyone else. I leaned forward, my hands pressed against his chest as I gauged his intention. His dark eyes glittered, but he made no move to pull or coerce me forward.

“Take what you want, Del. I’m right here.”

My eyes flashed at him. How did he know what I was thinking? I wanted him. That was obvious. But I was never one to take. I always kind of meekly waited for a man to show interest before I garnered the courage to pursue him.

Sonny had pulled me onto his lap, and the now throbbing bar beneath my ass told me he wanted me. What had happened the other day was not a fluke. Yes, I saw it clear as day in his dark stare. He wanted me. And I was suddenly drunk with the knowledge.

Pressing forward, I turned my body, so I straddled his hips, then I claimed his lips in a kiss I’d been dying to give him ever since I’d kicked him out of my shop. No need to dwell on that.

He'd already explained it, and I totally understood. Sexual frustration could make you crazy, as I could attest to.

I'd fucked up a special order just the other day, injecting the wrong liquor into a dozen truffles one of my best clients had requested for his wife. Luckily, I caught my error and sent Jan the box of dark chocolate, blueberry, and basil truffles laced with bourbon on me.

She liked them, which was great. Plus, I got my customer's order out on a special overnight delivery at no extra charge. I hated messing up, but I was only human. And so was Sonny—a very hot, very hard human. While these feelings eclipsed anything I'd ever experienced, I was smart enough to recognize we were explosive together.

Right then, that was all I wanted. To explode into the stratosphere with him. My sexy, dark-eyed neighbor.

“Want you on a bed, Del. But I don't think I can wait,” he growled, his fingers in my hair, untying the net I wore for safety reasons.

A second later, he had my curls cascading down my back as I writhed on his lap. His tongue delved into my mouth, and I pressed my chest up against him, loving the friction and heat that came off him in waves.

“I don't have a bed here, but there's a sofa in the upstairs room. I use it for storage, and for when I do inventory,” I told him, gasping as his hands found their way up my blouse and pinched my nipples over the regular cotton bra I wore to work.

“A sofa?”

I nodded and yelped when he stood with me in his arms, my legs wrapped around his waist. I told him the code to the door pad, and he jogged up the stairs, kissing me the entire time. Once we were upstairs, Sonny lowered me to the soft gray cushions and began to undress me.

I felt beautiful under his rapt stare as he took off all my layers one at a time, whispering words of praise and unwrapping me like a present.

“Fuck, you are so beautiful, Del. Just look at you,” he growled, tugging my pink cotton briefs off my thighs.

My cheeks burned, and I wished I’d worn something sexier, but unless I knew I was dressing for smexy times, cotton was what I went with. And I told him so, but he just scoffed, tucking my underwear into his back pocket.

“There is nothing sexier than a girl in cotton panties. It’s like every high school fantasy come to life, baby. And I am keeping those. They’re mine now.”

“Are you kidding?” I giggled, but he wasn’t.

Still fully clothed, Sonny crashed his mouth onto mine and there was something deeply erotic in that. His clothes brushed against my sensitized skin, and I didn’t know what turned me on more, the feel of his denim covered cock pressing against my pussy, or the way his tongue worked my nipples.

“Fuck, baby. Look how hot you are. You got my jeans all wet with your delicious pussy,” he growled, sliding down my body until he was half on the sofa, and half kneeling at the apex of my thighs.

He didn’t wait for me to move or adjust or do anything before his tongue was filling me. Head back, I moaned long and loud as he fucked me with his mouth, plundering all my secrets with skill and want.

“Don’t you fucking look away, baby. That’s right,” he growled, sticking two thick fingers into my slit. “Eyes on me. I wanna watch you come all over my face.”

That did it. He barely touched me again, and I came apart all over him. Sonny’s grin looked feral as he lifted himself up, unzipped his pants, and unsheathed his glorious cock. Last time we had sex, it was dark, and after I sheathed him with the condom, I didn’t really have a chance to look at him. This was the first time I’d really seen his dick, and *ohmyfuckinggawd*, it was huge.

“See something you like?”

“Yes. You,” I growled, reaching for his cock, but he moved back, sucking air through his teeth.

“Uh uh. You do as I say, Del. That’s my rule.”

He reached out and put his massive hand over my pussy, teasing the hole with the tips of two fingers. Fuck. It wasn’t nearly enough.

“When we are like this, I own this pussy. And I’ll feed my pussy when I say so. Now, up on your knees,” he commanded.

I did as he said, climbing onto my knees on the sofa. It was small, now that I looked at it, and I wondered about logistics. But I should have trusted Sonny to have that all figured out. Pants still on but his dick out, he nudged me aside, sitting on the sofa. Then he pulled me over, settling me on top of his lap.

“Roll it on,” he grunted, handing me a condom.

I had to scooch back to do what he asked, and I gasped at what I saw. A dark, wet stain on his pants made my cheeks flame. I’d done that.

“Fuck, baby. You’re so fucking hot for me, aren’t you?” he growled, and he didn’t look mad at all.

He looked hot. His shirt was half open now and the tantalizing glimpses I had of his tattooed chest made my mouth water. He pulled me closer, lifting my hips until I could feel his latex sheathed head at my entrance.

Then he lowered me onto him, slowly, so fucking slowly. We both groaned aloud when he finally filled me, and for the first time in days, I felt like a whole person again. Warning bells went off inside me, but it was too late. Sonny had already started moving, and I fell into the rhythm guaranteed to change my life forever.

“Stay with me, Del. Right here with me,” he growled, and I nodded.

I didn’t want to be anywhere else.





## *Chapter Six*

### Sonny

After christening her storage room, I convinced Delani to come back with me to my place. I lived in a newly renovated monster of a house, a big old Victorian on a cul de sac not twenty minutes from where both our stores sat. It had everything I never had growing up, a three-car garage, indoor swimming pool, dining room, custom kitchen, expensive furniture some interior designer picked out for me—but it was missing something.

Looking at Delani, I knew exactly what that was, too. She offered me a smile, eyes widening as I pulled into the garage I'd just opened with a click of my remote. Damn, she was so fucking beautiful.

I didn't want to spend the night away from her. With the promise of a meal and some real talk, she agreed to come home with me, and I could have danced the whole way home. I didn't, of course. But I could have, and that made all the fucking difference in the world.

Delani looked perfect sitting in the front seat of my suped up SUV. I didn't drive sports cars anymore, living on the east coast, I felt big was the way to go. Besides, it came in handy when I had to make special trips to the distillery.

February was cold as fuck in New Jersey, but I turned on the heated seats and the trip to my house was comfy and cozy. Except for the uncomfortable bar inside my jeans. Fuck. I just came not a half hour ago, and I was raring to go again.

*Never before. Never like this.*

Delani was the only woman who ever made me out of control. At my age, I thought I was over that sort of foolishness. But this didn't feel foolish. This felt right. I took her hand in my mine and walked her inside.

"Your house is beautiful, Sonny," she said, and I could tell I'd impressed her.

"Thanks. Glad you like it, baby."

She was the first woman I ever brought back there, but I didn't tell her that. I didn't want her to feel any pressure to stay, though I was praying like hell she would. Once seated at the counter, I started taking out the makings of a nice meal. Steaks, some pasta on the side, and a nice tomato salad.

"Can I help?"

"Sure. You want to do the salad?" I asked, leading her to a cutting board and showing her the tomatoes and fresh basil I had in mind.

"Yes, chef," she replied with a wink, and my heart stuttered inside my chest.

This woman was fun. That was unusual for me. I never joked around with a potential girlfriend before, even if I thought she felt bigger than that. Delani started talking about food, and I asked her questions and was surprised to learn more about her.

"Wow. So you trained as a chef, but went into chocolate?"

"Yeah. I guess I just loved working with it. There's something wonderful about the different confections and flavor palettes I can work with."

"I thought chocolate was just chocolate," I said, letting my ignorance show and not minding a bit.

“Oh no, it’s so much more. First, I get all my cocoa from importers using certified fair trade cocoa farms. There is a terrible uproar over these places, where workers are abused, and no child labor laws exist. It’s tragic, really, so I try my best to be diligent and conscientious in where I get my products. I even get my produce from a successful New Jersey farmer. You know the guy, he started a whole farm to table company?”

“That’s crazy. Yeah, I actually went to school with him, Jeremy Kent.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, he’s a year older. But anyway, I had no idea about the cocoa farms,” I told her, and I truly was shocked.

“Yeah. It’s not all strawberry cremes and raspberry jellies. You know, last month my bestselling truffle was pistachio saffron.”

“Really? Pistachio saffron? That sounds amazing,” I told her, setting the table with our two plates.

“Thanks,” she whispered, sliding into the seat beside me.

We talked while we ate and shared a bottle of cabernet. By the time we finished, I was more than ready for dessert. The glimmer in her eyes after I placed both dishes in the sink was enough to tell me Delani felt the same.

“Thank you, Sonny. Dinner was great,” she said.

“The company was even better. You know, Del, I really like spending time with you.”

“You do, huh?”

“Yeah, I do,” I said, grinning as I cupped her face and pulled her in for a kiss.

She moaned softly into my mouth, and I swallowed the sound, drowning in the sweetness that was all her. Call me foolish or crazy, but I was already halfway in love with her. My grip on her waist tightened, and all I felt was her soft heat wrapped around me. Fuck. I couldn’t be slow and gentle this time. I couldn’t take anymore teasing. I needed her, skin against skin, in the middle of my big ass bed.

*Now. Right fucking now.*

I lifted Delani in my arms, loving her squeal of delight as I marched her to the back stairs, the top of which was where my master bedroom was located. Once inside, I closed the door with the back of my heel and dropped her onto the mattress with a bounce. Breathing heavily, I started unbuttoning my shirt, stopping when I noticed her staring at me like a deer in headlights.

“You can strip, or I’ll do it for you. I can’t promise that outfit will survive me though,” I said honestly.

Delani squealed again. She sat up and started taking her clothes off, but I was already finished, and she still had her pants on. That wasn’t going to work for me.

“Too slow.”

Then I grabbed the waistband of her leggings and tore them off her. She was bare beneath them, her cotton underwear still tucked safely in my back pocket. I couldn’t contain my excitement, and I fell on her in a tangle of caresses and kisses.

“Fuck, baby, you are so sweet,” I growled, licking a trail from her sinful lips to her pretty, pink pussy.

“Are you wet for me, Del? Is my pussy hungry for my mouth?”

“Yes, fuck, yes, Sonny,” she said, panting.

My sexy good girl knew the rules, though. She leaned up on her elbows, her beautiful baby blues locked on me. That was just what I was waiting for. I rewarded her with a long, slow lick. Moaning as her flavors burst across my tastebuds, I made sure to touch and caress everywhere I could reach before sliding two of my fingers into her tight heat.

I couldn’t get enough of her. After she came once by my tongue, I slipped on a condom and had her coming again in seconds flat. Her pussy was made for me, squeezing me just right. I loved how her curves cradled my hardness. So fucking soft and perfect. She was like a sensory feast, and I was starving for her.

“Ohmygawd,” she whimpered after who knew how many orgasms. “I think you broke my pussy.”

I laughed out loud, tucking her into my side as I tried to catch my breath. Then I gently pushed her back, hovering over her deliciously flushed body, and kissed her deep and hard.

“I better kiss it, and make it better, then,” I said, and I did.

Over. And over again. Eventually we slept, and it was the first proper sleep I had in who knew how long. Waking up to Delani was better than I imagined, and after we showered—together, which took a lot longer than my usual showers, not that I regretted a single second—I drove her to her place to get some fresh clothes.

It was fast, way fast, but everything inside me knew Delani Whitman was important. While she was inside her bedroom changing, I walked back and forth over the cute teal and orange paisley throw rug. I’d been terse and abrupt at the start of our relationship. Downright pissy, if I were being honest.

But I understood why now. And I needed her to understand, too. Whatever she thought, this was more than just physical for me. An idea started to form in my brain, but it was too soon to voice it. I needed to think.

“Ready,” she called out.

I spun on my heel, damn near falling on my face when I saw the sexy little minx in baggy chef’s pants with little hearts all over them and a skintight, long-sleeved red shirt. Her hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, and she’d put on some powder and lip gloss.

Fuck, she was so pretty. As always, the mere sight of her had me shaking in my shoes. The woman was so damn sexy. Kind, sweet, generous, and smart as a whip. I grinned, pulling her to me so I could kiss that gloss right off her mouth.

“Mmm. We better stop now, Sonny, or I won’t let you leave,” she replied, smiling up at me with her lips and those beautiful blue eyes of hers.

“Okay, let’s stay.”

“No,” she said, laughing as if I was kidding. “We have work. Come on, sexy man, drive me back to my store before I have to deal with an angry chocolate hungry mob.”

“Can’t have that, baby. Come on,” I said, holding her hand as we left her place.

We headed in to work together, and I walked her to the chocolaterie, dropping her off with a long kiss that only whetted my appetite for her.

“Lunch at noon?” I asked, mentioning plans we’d already made.

“Yeah, sure,” she said.

Her cheeks were pink with pleasure and I fucking loved putting that look on her face. I waited for her to go inside, and she huffed a breath and rolled her eyes, but something told me she was pleased by my protective, slightly possessive side. That was good because I doubted that would change anytime soon. Maybe in twenty or thirty years.

Oh yeah, I was making plans for the future. The beautiful woman might not know it yet, but I had no intention of letting her go. Not now. Not ever.

The sound of her staff clapping and wolf whistling made me smile as I crossed the alley to the bar. Bear was already inside, getting ready for the day. He paused when I walked in, eyebrows disappearing somewhere in the bastard’s thick hairline.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re smiling,” he replied.

“So?”

“So I take it things went well with the curvy little chocolatier next door?”

“Don’t fucking talk about her curves,” I snapped, throwing a bar rag at him.

Fucker.

Bear just grinned and caught it with a knowing look on his face. He followed me into my office. He sat down, playing with the rag while I hung up my keys and coat.

“Well?” I asked.

“Ah, that asshole won’t be back. He had a list of complaints half a mile long, but an uncle on the city council kept saving his job. Not anymore, though. Oh, and he’ll be eating through a straw for a couple of weeks, thanks to you and your little lady. Heard she packed a helluva punch.”

“Damn straight,” I growled possessively, pride filling me.

“Um, we do still have a problem, though. We still don’t have a caterer, and the tasting is in two days.”

“Two days? Fuck. When the fuck did that happen?”

“When you were pining your sorry ass over your girl,” Bear supplied.

I gave him the finger and rubbed a hand down my face, waving him out of the office. He left, his deep chuckle echoing in the room. Dick. He didn’t understand. He’d always had money, and yeah, I had a talent for making it, but this wasn’t about that.

I wanted my label to go big. I needed it to be a success. *Whiskey Neat* was the only thing I had ever done alone. No one. Not even Bear had been asked to consult on flavors or distilling methods. It was good. I knew that without conceit.

I stalked over to the window, pissed off and half a second from despairing. Then I caught a whiff of dark, decadent cocoa powder being mixed with cocoa butter, from conscientious sources, I reminded myself, and I grinned.

I had an idea. A good one. I just hoped my sweet and sexy Delani didn’t turn me down.





## Chapter Seven

### Delani

I was literally elbow-deep in my work, mixing ganache for my signature Valentine's Day truffles— *I called them Cherry Bombs*—when Sonny came into the back room. I wasn't expecting him until lunchtime, but seeing him made my heart pound and my pulse race. He was so damn handsome, how could I not get carried away when I looked at him?

“Hey! You're early.”

I smiled, just taking in how handsome he looked in his sexy jeans hanging low on his hips, his white shirt rolled up at the elbows, top button undone, and his short hair carelessly mussed. How did I ever get so lucky as to catch this sexy man's eye?

I had no idea. But I didn't want this to end. I just hoped I didn't get burned this time around. My love life was nothing to write home about, till now, and well, I was starting to think my feelings for Sonny might be a little more complicated than I'd originally assessed.

I thought being physically intimate didn't have to mean being emotionally invested. But I was having a real hard time separating the two. Especially right then, as I looked into his impossibly dark eyes and felt my chest grow tight and my heart stuttering.

“Del, I need to ask you a question,” he said.

Warning bells sounded, but I swallowed. Maybe this wasn't a bad thing. I felt excitement rolling off him in waves. Surely, Sonny had some good news he wanted to share.

*Hold on to your panties, girl. Let the man talk.*

“Well, what is it?”

“I know you are busy, like super busy. But I have a business proposal and I am hoping you will consider it.”

“Well, tell me,” I said, smiling at him.

He was practically vibrating with energy. Like my own personal sun. Ha! Sonny was my personal sun. I was a poet, and I didn't know it. Derry out front must have gotten to him, cause he was wearing a hairnet, despite the short hair, an apron, and rubber gloves.

He was still sexy as fuck. And I was dangerously close to losing my heart to him.

“No. Not here. At lunch. Come to the bar at noon, okay? I will have it all set up and we'll talk then,” he said, closing the distance between us.

I barely had time to gasp before he grabbed my cheeks and dropped a short, but hot kiss on my lips before running back out the door. Hot. Damn. The man was fine as fuck. My head was spinning and my body aching, but somehow, I was able to refocus on what I was doing.

An hour later, Derry, one of my employees, came into the back, where I was finishing the Cherry Bombs and putting the trays filled with them on the rack to set. She was an older woman with a cherubic face and gorgeously thick gray hair. She had the most beautiful complexion, and every day I tried to pry beauty secrets out of her, but she laughed it off as good genes. Anyway, I just adored her.

“What is it, Derry?”

“That man from next door bought about three hundred dollars' worth of chocolate before leaving, you know?”

“He did what?” I asked, eyes bugging out of my head.

“Yep. He was all smiles too, and he tipped me with a hundred-dollar bill.”

“No, he did not,” I replied, completely taken aback.

Sonny and I had this weird sort of standoffish thing going ever since I opened. He didn’t come into my shop, and I avoided his bar. I wasn’t a big drinker anyway, and whiskey wasn’t my thing.

I knew we were, *well*, I didn’t know what we were, actually. He didn’t exactly make announcements or ask me to be his girlfriend—*ohmygawd*, was I like twelve or something? I rolled my eyes.

“Well, maybe he was just buying treats for his employees,” I said and shrugged.

“Mm hmm. You know, he’s not a bad looking fella,” Derry observed. “Rich, too. Might make a woman a good husband someday.”

“Ohmygawd, Derry! We’re just, I don’t know, spending time together.”

“Is that right?”

“Derry! Yes. That is all. We’re not getting married. Besides, I am not his type,” I told her, though my heart was now going a mile a minute.

“He sure looks like he’s into you. A real Prince Charming, if you ask me,” Derry added, before going back to help some customers who’d just entered.

The old-fashioned bell I hung over the door rang every time someone came in. I just liked the old timey feel of it. Anyway, Sonny a Prince Charming?

*Hmm. Maybe.*

What girl didn’t dream of finding a handsome man to sweep her off her feet? I snorted and wondered if Prince Charming ever told Cinderella what a pretty pussy she had? Or what a good girl she was for taking his dick so well?

*My Prince Charming sure does.*

My face burned at the memories of the things we'd said and done last night. Sonny was a fucking rockstar in bed. Every time we were together, he brought me higher and higher, until I thought I'd never come back down to Earth.

Maybe Derry was on to something. I never thought I would find someone I trusted or wanted enough to be with them every single day. The more I thought about it—*about him*—the more I realized I couldn't picture myself without him.

Sonny Delgado was getting to be pretty important to me, and I knew it was way too soon for that kind of thinking. Once again, I pushed my inappropriate and potentially hazardous to my heart thoughts to the back of my mind, concentrating on my work instead. Work was safer.

I had an hour before I would see him again. Plenty of time to get my shit together. The next time I looked up, it was quarter to twelve, and I raced to the restroom to remove my apron and fix myself. I had cocoa powder on my cheek and sprinkles stuck on my shirt.

Good thing I had extras. Once I was dressed and refreshed, I called out to Derry that I was leaving for lunch and used the alley to walk to *The Whiskey Bar*.

The bartender, Bear, I remembered his name, was carrying a case of liquor at the same time I opened the door, and I almost nailed him with it.

"My bad!"

"Nah, you're good, girl. Come in. He's waiting for you in party room B."

"Party room B?" I asked, confused.

"Yep, go past the stage and the second bar, and you will see four rooms with little gold plates next to them with A, B, C, and D. Go through the door for room B, and you'll see our boy. Have fun," he said and wagged his eyebrows.

Strange guy. I thanked him and went to find Sonny, marveling at everything I saw as I walked through. There I

thought the place was just a stinky, cigar -smelling, men only place, but I was obviously mistaken. There were two actual bars inside. Both were made of natural wood with blue and gold sparkling epoxy resin and Acacia wood, beautifully crafted to create a waterfall effect that must have cost tens of thousands of dollars.

The walls were painted a matte bone color with tasteful artwork in frames every couple of feet. The ceiling was done with that industrial look, revealing beams and burnished metal accents. It was quite nice, actually. I found party room B with little trouble, but it was dark inside. I opened the door, stepping inside slowly.

“Hello? Sonny?” I called out just as the lights turned on slowly.

What I saw inside simply took my breath away. Sonny was standing, his arms spread wide as he revealed a spectacularly set table with a charcuterie board from a local deli featuring cured meats, cheeses, olives, and other goodies. There was fresh bread from the bakery down the street, some sliced fruit, and chocolate. Mountains of it. Beside each offering were tiny shot glasses filled with amber liquid in varying shades.

“Sonny, I mean, wow!”

“Good? It looks good?” he asked twice, and I finally understood what he’d been so excited about.

“Come here, baby,” he said, walking towards me and taking my face in his hands, kissing me deeply.

The man had this uncanny way of making me forget where I was every time he touched me. I mean, I was ready to take off my clothes and jump him after just one kiss, and judging from his lusty moan, he wasn’t that far off either.

“I can’t wait to get you home, Del. Gonna make you come so hard for me, baby. You want that, yeah?”

“Yes, Sonny, you know I do,” I answered, already wet for the blessedly insatiable man.

“Good. Lemme show you what I did here, ask you my favor, then I’ll give you what you want.”

“Blackmail?” I teased, eyeing him up and down.

“Nah, baby. I’d never withhold my body from you. I’m yours anytime you want me. You can say no, and I will make do. But I think you will like this.”

Sonny grinned and kissed me again, and I opened for him like a flower that’d been missing the sunlight. This was ridiculous. How could I miss him when we’d spent the night together? Besides, I just saw him a couple of hours ago.

After another moment of just holding on to each other, I eased my grip and wiggled to move back and he allowed it, brows furrowed and dark eyes churning with need. I knew how he felt.

Sonny led me to the table, and my stomach growled. But I wasn’t embarrassed. Not anymore. Not after what we’d done to and with each other. Sonny frowned though and fed me an apple slice, grabbing a small dish as he explained what everything was and the drinks beside them.

“I can’t believe you did all this,” I said, chewing on a cube of cheese.

“It was you. You’re my inspiration. Now here, sip this,” he instructed.

I could practically feel his excitement growing. It was contagious, but I had one minor issue I had never discussed with him. It was embarrassing, but I had to let him know the truth of it.

“Oh, um, I’m sorry,” I began, not knowing how to tell him this and feeling kind of silly. “You see, I don’t like whiskey, Sonny.”

He just grinned widely and grabbed my cheeks, kissing me on the lips and smiling the whole time like he couldn’t get enough of me. God, I didn’t know how he did it, but when Sonny Delgado looked at me like that, I felt like the most beautiful woman in the world.

“I figured as much, baby, and that’s why I made this just for you. Okay, well,” he added, eyes sparkling with mischief. “It’s something I’ve been contemplating lately. How to get women

interested in my label. Just try it for me, and if you don't like it, you never have to take another sip."

"Okay. For you, I'll try it," I said, magnanimously. Of course, I ruined the effect by giggle-snorting, but he just grinned and kissed my cheek, One hand on my hip as he grabbed the drink with the other.

"Excellent. This is not straight whiskey. It's a cocktail I made with you in mind," he said, grinning at me as he held the glass to my lips.

I tipped it back, taking a healthy swig, and was shocked at the delightful flavors bursting across my palate. The cocktail was light and fruity with a spicy sort of bite that was the whiskey itself. I'd always thought of that particular liquor as a man's drink, but this was actually quite refreshing.

"It's good!"

"You sound surprised," he teased, and pulled me closer.

He nuzzled my nose and dropped a quick kiss on my lips before moving on to the next drink and pairing.

"Now, of course, I would want something a little more sophisticated for the actual day, but I think I can manage, and the thing is Del, I couldn't have done this without you," he mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck as I took the next nibble.

"What?" I asked, almost choking on the bit of prosciutto and melon I'd chosen as my next bite.

"Delani, I know it is fast and you and I have a long way to go yet, but I think this is big. My feelings for you, I mean, and I was wondering if maybe, well, if you wouldn't consider being my date for Valentine's Day?"

I swallowed without actually choking. Barely. My pulse raced as I stared into Sonny's deep brown eyes.

"Are you serious?"

"About you, Del? Always," he said, and hope glimmered in his gaze so bright it warmed me like a fire.



“Please Delani. I have feelings for you I never thought I could feel for another person, and I want to be with you. I am sorry it’s got to be here for this tasting, and if it’s the venue, I mean, I swear I will make it up to you—”

“Oh no! Sonny, that isn’t it. I think this place is great. I’m just surprised you asked me,” I replied, biting my lower lip.

“Surprised? Why?” he asked, tipping my face up with his forefinger on my chin so I had to look at him when I answered.

“It’s just, well, I haven’t had a date for Valentine’s Day in a really long time,” I confessed, my cheeks blazing with embarrassment.

Sonny stayed silent for a moment. Then, his face broke out in a wide, panty-melting grin.

“I promise to make this a Valentine’s you won’t forget, Delani Whitman. Just say yes.”

I already knew my answer. I didn’t have to think about it. Without hesitation, I launched myself at him, trusting Sonny to catch me. And he did. Hell yes, he did. Maybe this man really was special. Maybe we were as good together as he said we were. It was early days yet, but I was willing to give it a try. To give us a try.

“Yes, Sonny. I will be your date for Valentine’s Day, but on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You let me help for the tasting,” I said, my own mind churning with a dozen ideas on how to add the right touches to his very important event.

“Del, you don’t have to—”

“I know that. That’s why I want to. What do you say?”

He pulled me into his hard body, and I wrapped my hands around his neck, watching that smile I was starting to really, really like tug at the corner of his lips.

“To you, baby, my answer is always yes. Come here and kiss me, Del.”

So, I did. I kissed my sexy as hell neighbor, mind spinning with emotions, but the one that was the easiest to identify was joy.

Sonny was responsible for that. And I could only hope I made him happy as well. The rumbling growl coming from his throat as he spread biting kisses along my neck told me I did. Looked like I was getting everything I always wanted. Business was good. My neighbor problems handled. And I had Sonny.

*It was gonna be a good Valentine's Day.*

*The end...for Now.*



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## *About the Author*

USA Today Bestselling author C.D. Gorri writes paranormal and contemporary romance and urban fantasy books with plenty of steam and humor.

An avid reader with a profound love for books and literature, she is usually found with a book in hand. C.D. lives in her home state, New Jersey, where many of her characters and stories are based. Her tales are fast-paced yet detailed with satisfying conclusions. If you enjoy powerful heroines and loyal heroes who face relatable problems in supernatural settings, journey into the Grazi Kelly Universe today.

You will find sassy, curvy heroines and sexy, love-driven heroes who find their HEAs between the pages.

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XOXO

Thank you and happy reading!

del mare alla stella, C.D. Gorri

<https://www.cdgorri.com>

*Be with Me*

# **Sons of Steely Ridge Book 4**

by April D Berry

## *Blurb*

Adi was trying hard to make a name for herself at work, a male dominated field, but still needed some extra to make ends meet. She found herself at a local biker bar and wasn't sure what to expect but decided to push through her uncertainty and fear, especially after making fast friends with one of the other workers.

Stone and the brothers of Sons of Steely Ridge were gearing up for the annual breast cancer awareness ride and to make some much-needed updates to what was once the clubhouse. After being tasked with finding a contractor, he is shocked to find the new girl from the bar making a presentation to win the bid.

Neither were on the lookout for love, and both were insistent on staying professional. But when worlds collide not once but twice, could they ignore the signs, or each other?

# *Note*

## **Content Warnings:**

Alcohol

Adult language

Sexism in the workplace

Open door intimate scenes

\*Due to graphic sex scenes and strong language, this book is not intended for readers under the age of 18.

April Berry ©2024

Don't steal my work. Seriously, a plague on the house of anyone who does...

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# *Dedication*

Dedicated to our international national treasure, Saam.

I hope I delivered your expectations...



# *Chapter 1*

## Stone

“Suck it!”

I clenched my fist, a low growl reverberating through my chest.

A knock on the door had me barking, “What?”

Tango, the club president, poked his pink bandana covered head in the door. “What’s your problem, fucker? I heard you down the hall.”

I flicked the pen I was holding across my desk. “Those fuckers at the city council raised the fees again for our permit.” I rubbed my buzzed head. I had gone bald once, but I was stocky with a bushy beard I wasn’t willing to part with, so I decided to at least leave a little on top to blend down to my beard.

Our annual ride for breast cancer research and awareness took a lot of planning. Even though it was January, we had to secure permits soon and we had a meeting coming up for the budget and goals.

Tango waved me off. “Everything has gone up. We’ll be fine.” He gripped his cut, grinning like an idiot.

I shook my head. “Were you just in Bash’s office?”

Tango smiled like the Cheshire Cat, and I rolled my eyes. They got together a few months back. He was head over heels for that lady. Being his right-hand man for so long, we both had our fair share of party days with random women before the club went straight.

The club was reformed but hadn't always been on the right side of the law. The last couple of years, Tango turned it around and we were legit, trying to be upstanding citizens of Steely Ridge.

We still had the club, and I was still VP, but it all had a different meaning now. Our titles were mostly for tradition, but we still honored the hierarchy. And the positions the brothers held at Steely Ridge Investments were given according to rank.

Bash came blowing into town and took a job with us and it wasn't long before Tango had her living at his place. It was oddly satisfying to see my oldest friend and brother so happy. I just hadn't met anyone that was worth putting on the back of my bike.

“Our budget looks great. Bash and I went over numbers.”

I grunted. “I bet you did.”

Tango stood so I did as well. He was taller than I was, but he was six-two; I was no slouch at six foot even and had at least twenty more pounds on him. “C'mon man. Let's get to The Rusty Spoke. Gotta grab my leathers. Meet you in the parking lot.”

Georgia didn't get cold like some places, but when you'd lived there your whole life, thirty and below was considered cold as shit. But even though I had a truck for when the occasion called for it, I preferred my bike even then. January and February were typically the coldest months for us, but I had good gear, and the bar wasn't far.

I put my jacket on over my cut, then donned my chaps before shutting down the computer and heading out.

After dealing with vendors and cranky clerks all day, a ride and a cold beer sounded great.

“Hey!” Tango shouted as he straddled his bike. “You didn’t tell the permits clerk to suck it, did you?”

I stopped and raised a brow. “If you even have to ask, maybe you should suck it!” I laughed as I grabbed my crotch. I wasn’t a hot head like him. I had enough sense to hang up before I said some shit like that.

Tango flipped me the middle finger before he buckled his helmet and fired up his Fat Boy. I loved that asshole.



## Chapter 2

### Adita

Staring at myself, I sighed. I was an engineer. With a degree. How the hell did I end up needing to serve drinks?

Oh yeah...I'd rather be a strong independent woman than let my parents marry me off to a nice Doctor from India. Trinidad would be great, but it's a much smaller population so harder to find.

For the most part, they were progressive, but they still had a sliver of tradition in them and just wanted what's best for me. Their marriage was arranged, and they seemed happy. But that was a different time. They let me choose my college and supported my career choices, but they cut off funds once I graduated because I wouldn't entertain their attempted matches. They wouldn't force me to marry, so they said, but they sure tried to sway me with the news of cutting off my rent money.

I dated plenty of boys they'd probably approve of, but none that gave me clitterflies. Mom always said you work at love and it's a choice you make every day. But I at *least* needed some kind of heat. Some kind of passion. A spark that I could hold onto when times got hard. Because one thing I knew about relationships, any relationship, is that there would be struggles.



Even though they weren't paying my bills anymore, it was fine. None of my friends' parents paid for their bills. It was just sad that I had a job in my chosen field but was still doing the grunt work as one of the youngest, and dickless, employees. I wanted to be at least a project coordinator, but senior project engineer sounded even better. That would take time and proving myself of course, but at this rate, project coordinator seemed to be a silly dream.

Hence why I now stood in a shirt that was not meant to be a crop top but hugged me so tight that my obnoxiously large breasts ate it up, showing the brown skin of my tummy. At least I could wear jeans and sneakers and not little shorts like some of the places I checked out.

I'd seen the other girls when I spoke to the owner of the Rusty Spoke about his job opening and he was very diverse with his lady employees, that was for sure. All shapes, sizes, and shades. But to my knowledge, I was the only one from Trinidad. Well, originally. My parents were Trinidadian, and I was born there, but we moved when I was a baby.

The swinging door to the small locker room for the employees flew open and a pretty brunette with curvy hips popped her gum and greeted me. "Hey, you must be Adita. I'm Rickie."

I gave her a nervous grin and took her hand in the offered shake. "Yeah, but my friends call me Adi. How long have you worked here?"

"About a year. It's not bad. The clientele is mostly a bunch of dudes who ride bikes. But they're harmless and tip really well." She leaned in close, and her big brown eyes popped as she raised a brow. "Truth be told, I make more here than my day job."

I gasped. "You have another job, too? This is my first time taking a second job, but I need the money and this place was the only one I could get to when the shift started." That, plus nobody else would hire me. Who knew a degree makes you overqualified?

She tossed her bag into a locker and slammed it shut. “Well, probably for the best because like I said, easy and quick money. Plus,” she said as she tied her half apron over her skintight jeans with lots of tears, “the eye candy ain’t too bad.”

An awkward chuckle left my throat. I had enough issues on my own. I didn’t need some motorcycle man getting me in a tizzy.

Rickie patted my shoulder then winked before she left the locker room. I blew a breath through puffed cheeks and followed her out.

When I spotted her across the room spattered with round wooden tables, she waved me to the bar. Peanut shells lay on some of the tables as well as the floor. It was a typical bar. Certainly nothing like a nightclub.

Loud classic rock blared from the jukebox and different sports and shows were on the TVs in the dimly lit space.

I put my chin up and headed to the bar to meet Rickie.

“Why don’t you shadow me for a few, hon? When you’re comfortable you can take some tables but for now, just stay with me and we’ll work ya up to it. Sound good?”

The bald man behind the bar looked like he could body slam an MMA fighter and had tats the length of both arms. But when he looked up, he gave a warm smile and his eyes lit up. “You the new girl?” His voice was gravelly.

I nodded, trying not to show fear.

“Don’t worry. Rickie will show ya the ropes. And me and Tank over at the door make sure none of these fools get too handsy. You let me know if anyone messes with you.”

“Thanks. I’m Adi.”

The man reached over the counter and delicately took my hand once I stuck it out. “Pipes, love. You just let me know if you need anything.”

I smiled and let out a relieved sigh. So far, everyone was nice.

After helping Rickie with a few tables, she asked if I wanted to grab any of my own. It wasn't very busy, so she told me to start with just two so I could ease into managing multiples.

There was no hostess in a place like this, so men were scattered around. There were a few women wearing not much more than my work outfit, desperately working for the attention of the men they sat with.

I had never been around bikers, but the books I read with bikers in them often portrayed them as aloof and disrespectful of women so that all made sense to me. But I looked over at the bar and Pipes shot me a toothy smile and tipped his head at me. Okay, so they're not all bad.

I grabbed my pad and tucked a tray under my arm in case I found glasses or bottles to pick up on the way to the bar.

The group of men at the table in the corner has just settled in. I noticed them as they walked in and had only caught the back of them as they filed past.

Each had a jacket and chaps on but were working their way out of the jackets when I walked over. They all had leather vests on with little patches all over, much like the other men in the bar.

One had his back turned to me, but he was leaning his elbows on the table, so I got a good look at the back. *Sons of Steely Ridge*.

I'd heard something about them a few years back, but from what I recalled it probably wasn't a good reason to be in the news. Looking over my shoulder, Pipes waved me on encouragingly and Rickie leaned against the bar grinning.

I cleared my throat, wishing I hadn't. That surely gave away my nervousness. "Hi, I'm Adi. Can I get you fellas some drinks?"

The man with the pink bandana wrapped around his head put his fingers up. "Four beers, bottle please."

The man with his back to me turned, his dark eyes raking over me, starting at his line of sight which was my crotch.

But instead of running to get Pipes, I watched as his heated gaze trailed up until it met my eyes. He had a thick beard, and his head was covered with a black bandana. Even through the beard, I saw his jaw ticking.

He was seated but appeared to be fairly broad. Not in a, “I work out ten hours a day and only eat protein,” kind of way. More like a, “I eat tacos and drink beer but can kill you with one hand,” kind of way.

*Shit.*

*Clitterflies.*



## *Chapter 3*

### Stone

I stared up with my jaw locked so I didn't look like an idiot with my mouth hanging open.

Her eyes darted away briefly before she looked at me again. "Did you need me to grab something for you?"

I could think of something I'd like her to grab, but I wasn't familiar with this mysterious beauty and had enough sense to not blurt that out. Before I could form a decent response, a steel-toed boot met my shin under the table.

"Fuck!" I turned to look at Tango who just grinned back, shaking his head. Turning back, I managed a smile. "No, just the beer is good."

The smell of vanilla tickled my nose as she turned and walked away, her black curls bouncing with each step, along with the cheeks of her ass in those skintight jeans.

"Are you listening?"

My head jerked toward the table. "To what?"

Tango cocked his head. "To me, fucker. We're here to talk about the ride."

I rolled my eyes and turned my body a little so I could look at him but still look back without drawing too much attention.

“Just go talk to her and get it over with so we could get on with it,” Bear grumbled.

“Why, got a hot date?” I asked, to take the heat off me.

Bear rubbed his hand down his beard. “Not yet, but I got my eye on someone. But I can’t do shit if I’m stuck here with you all night.”

Mac pulled out his computer and started it up just as Adi came back with our drinks. She leaned between me and Bear, turning sideways to reach over and put the bottles on the table in front of each of us.

She put mine down last and looked down with eyes the shade of my favorite cognac that was dark and spicy with a slight hint of sweet on the end. *I bet she tastes the same.*

Her bottom lip rolled in, and I was suddenly jealous of her teeth, wishing it were mine digging into the soft flesh. I shifted in my seat, hoping the growing bulge would stop.

Her head dipped a little and she looked away again. “Anyone need an appetizer or food?”

“We’re good for now. I’m Tango by the way. And that’s Mac, Bear, and that idiot is Stone.”

I looked over at him and grinned. Oh, he was gonna get it later.

“Cool. Again.” She put a hand to her chest, “I’m Adi. I’ll be by in a bit, but just holler if you need me.” Her eyes darted back to me briefly and her tongue darted over that plush bottom lip I wanted to take a nibble on before she walked away.

Tango patted his hand on the table making the bottles clank. “Okay. Let’s finish talking about the ride and look at the budget for renovations to the clubhouse—I mean office building—so I can get home to my woman.”

For years we used our current building as the clubhouse. That was before we went straight. Years of partying and questionable business left some areas in disrepair. But we were growing in leaps and bounds and needed to fix those issues

and open up some space for more employees. We also needed to get some of the old rooms looked at for office space.

You'd think it would be as simple as throwing a desk in, but apparently some folks didn't want to work in what looked like a seedy hotel room.

"We need to get some estimates with contractors. Stone, can get your head out of your ass long enough to do that?"

Rolling my eyes, I turned fully toward him. "I'm on it. Got interviews with a few contractors this week. My issue is the damn ride permits."

Mac chimed in. "I can dig up some dirt if you need me to."

Bear smirked but Tango shot it down. "We're not there yet. I'll go to the city council meeting and rub some elbows. Just take care of the bids for the building."

We finished our beers and everyone else got up in a hurry to take off. I took my time getting my gear back on. Everyone else had started to pile out but I was contemplating my next move. I watched Adi as she gave her order to Pipes.

She had a full tray and was trying to manage it as she walked to the nearby table. When she was done passing out the drinks, I walked over to her.

"Adi," I said as I tapped her on the shoulder.

She turned and her eyes went wide. "Can I help you?" she asked in a customer service voice that didn't quite match the rigid expression.

I was a bold man, but I also could read the room and she was tense. Whether it was the new job or me, I couldn't be sure. So instead of testing the waters, I simply held my hand out with some cash for her. "I just wanted to be sure you got this. I don't recognize all the patches in here." *Lies*. I knew everyone. They'd never swipe the money from these ladies or steal from the Spoke.

She tucked the tray under her arm and took the cash with the other. "Thanks. Have a great night." She gave a forced smile then headed over to another table.



“Stone,” Pipes called as I started to head toward the door.

Turning to walk over, I put my arm across and shook my brother’s hand. “Hey man. Pretty busy for a Monday night.”

He smiled and gave a slight nod. “Mmhmm. Don’t scare off my new girl, alright?”

My hand flew to my chest. “What? I was just paying her.”

He leaned on the bar and tilted his head for me to do the same. “I’ve known you a long time. She’s not one of us. Girl just needed a break. Let her make her money in peace.”

Glancing over, I soaked her in. The nerves definitely weren’t just because of me from the look on her face, but if she needed the money I didn’t need to interfere or make her uncomfortable. “She’s something. But I won’t mess with her.”

I shook his hand once more then headed to my bike outside. The cold winter air was welcomed as I needed to cool off. But I said I wouldn’t mess with her. *What the hell was I thinking?*



## *Chapter 4*

### Adita

Yawning as I power walked to my cubicle in the overly beige office space with entirely too many windows, I managed to force a smile to the few people walking down the hall. It had only been a week at the Rusty Spoke and the cash at the end of the shift was great, but I was exhausted.

I had worked three nights and was scheduled to work Friday and Saturday, only having Sundays and Tuesdays off. It being Friday at the day job and having worked late nearly every night, I was looking forward to at least sleeping in tomorrow.

The sun was shining, and the fluorescent lights overhead were glaring.

“Out partying last night, Adi?” Chad asked as he strolled by with a coffee mug in his hand. His blue suit fit him perfectly. He was exactly what you would expect with a name like that.

Fighting the urge to roll my eyes, I smiled. “Just working late.” He didn’t need to know it wasn’t for a project here.

He must have assumed it was, because his smug grin fell, and he straightened his shoulders. “Prepping for today then? I have a great pitch ready. Good luck to you.”

When he walked away, I finally let my eyes roll as I pulled my flash drive from my bag and popped it into my computer. I

had worked on the special project a few days, ever since we got specs for the building.

Someone was coming today to review our designs and there was never a guarantee that our company would get the deal, and the competition to be the one with the winning design was fierce. The more contracts we landed, the better chance we had at moving up.

I had only landed a few smaller jobs, so it was still not enough to be noticed. But this one seemed to be larger and I was confident in my plans for the space. I also had to watch my back like a hawk. The way the cubicles were set up, anyone could easily see what each other was working on.

I'd be damned if one of these suckups stole my work.

Looking over the blueprint, I leaned in close. I wish I had time to tighten up a few things, but it was still decent. Locking my computer, I stood to go get coffee from the break room then went back to my desk. I had just enough time to knock back the cheap but strong drink before my calendar alarm notified me of the meeting in just fifteen minutes.

I pulled my laptop off the docking station and cleared off my desk before making my way to the break room. My best suit was simple. Black slacks, black blazer, and I paired it with a pale coral shirt. Tucking my laptop under my arm, I closed the button on my blazer and tugged at the bottom for good measure. My hair wouldn't cooperate this morning, so I slicked it back into a high ponytail and let the curls do their own thing. They bounced a bit as I strode into the conference room with all the fake confidence I could muster, my chin up high.

But when I looked over to the head of the table, I stopped in my tracks then nearly dropped my laptop as someone plowed into me from behind.

"Adi, what's your deal?" Chad whisper-screamed in my ear.

Trying not to turn and slap him across the face, I straightened my blazer again and regained my fake facade of

control. Placing my laptop on the table, I was about to sit when a large hand appeared in my face. I turned.

Stone was dashing in a dress shirt and slacks. The white shirt stretched over his broad chest and hugged his huge arms. “Allow me, miss. Seems some men forgot their manners.”

Thank God for my complexion; he likely wouldn’t notice that my face was on fire. “Thank you, sir.” Oh, that felt nice. *Sir.*

Others were piling in, and Stone went back toward the front and took a seat next to Mr. Lowell, one of the partners. His hair was short and buzzed. I hadn’t seen it before because he had a bandana on.

“Everyone, this is Mr. Stone. He’s with Steely Ridge Investments and in charge of the buildout at their existing office building. If you could all get your specs ready and Chad, why don’t you start the presentation?”

Chad and Andrew were my competition. Andrew wasn’t much competition if everyone did a blind presentation but the fact I didn’t have a dick always screwed me. Chad was a prick, but he was decent. The fact that *Mr. Stone* knew I was working a second job also didn’t bode well for me. He’d need someone who was available to get the job done. Which, I could. But clients wanted designers to be at their beck and call. It also wasn’t lost on me that he hadn’t been back to the Spoke since Monday. He was probably avoiding me since I acted like an idiot.

Chad went on with his presentation, cocky and smiling at the end. He unplugged his laptop and passed the cord to Andrew with a friendly pat to his shoulder. I was sitting across the table, but they never did the manly camaraderie moves with me and that was perfectly fine.

Andrew completed his presentation, and he was very professional, but even Mr. Lowell didn’t look wowed. He unplugged his laptop and leaned across to hand it to me.

Trying hard to appear calm, I cleared my throat as softly as possible while I pulled up my slides. I had spent the whole

presentation not looking over at Stone, or Mr. Stone, but when I started talking, he startled me with a, “Mmhmm.” Glancing at him, he was leaning back in his chair, running his hand down his thick beard. He hadn’t made any noises during the other two. I couldn’t tell if it was a good thing or bad thing.

Swallowing hard, I kept going but halfway through, I realized I started talking really fast. But it was too late. If I corrected it now, it would seem obvious I was flustered. I was blowing this. Not that I had a shot in hell, but I was just making it worse and probably giving Chad something to joke about later.

Once I was done, I unplugged my laptop and sat back in my chair. I kept my back straight and my chin up. I may have just made a complete fool of myself, but I would do it with dignity.

Mr. Lowell spoke up. “Thank you. If you will excuse Mr. Stone and I, we need to discuss—”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll take the third design,” Stone said with a light smack on the dark cherry wood table.

Andrew kept a straight face, but his eyes winced. Chad’s brow furrowed and his jaw ticked. My heart raced and I kept waiting for someone to say something else because I surely hallucinated that.

Mr. Lowell shrugged but grinned. “As you wish, sir. I’ll have the contract drawn up. Adi, make sure he has your card to follow up, but I’ll provide his info to you,” he said as he made some notes.

“Um, I never got business cards, sir,” I said quietly.

Mr. Lowell’s head jerked up. He leaned to the phone in the middle of the table and buzzed his assistant. “Amy, order Miss Shivana some business cards immediately and do express shipping please.” He released the button. “Surely an oversight.” He looked at Stone. “I’ll have the contract drawn up and Miss Shivana will send it for your review by Monday.”

Stone stood and walked toward me, so I stood as well. He held his hand out, so I put my hand into his. Once again, I was glad my brown skin kept my blush from being seen.

“I look forward to working with you *Miss Shivana*.”

*Why was his voice so gravelly and sexy?*

“Yes, sir. I’ll be in touch as soon as the contract is ready.”

I released his hand then grabbed my laptop. “I’ll be at my desk sir. Lots of work to get started on.”

Mr. Lowell stood and nodded. “Yes, you do. Congratulations, Miss Shivana.” *Oh. It’s not Adi, now it’s Miss Shivana?*

I put on my fake show again as I left the conference room and docked my laptop. Eyes all stared as I made my way to the restroom. I played it cool until I got into a stall. Once I closed the door, I did a silent happy dance, pumping my fist in the air and shaking my hips.

I got the bid!

Oh God...I got the bid. With Stone. The man that had interrupted my sleep in my dreams all week. I had to be professional.

Don’t mess this up, Adi.

I left the stall and washed my hands, using the extra time to simmer down. I was so hyped up, but I still had a whole workday to get through.

Flinging the door open, I ran into a wall. It was actually not a wall, but a Stone.

“Excuse me,” he said softly as he gripped my shoulder, keeping me from falling on my face.

Frozen, I stared at my hand that was pressed to his chest. He was warm and firm. And he still smelled like leather even though he didn’t have any on. My mouth went dry.

“Adi?” he said as a huge hand covered mine.

I slipped my hand from under his and tugged on the bottom of my blazer. “My apologies, sir. I was rushing. Just very excited to get to work on you—your project!” *Oh my God stop talking, Adi.*

“I look forward to it. Have a nice weekend, Miss Shivana.”

I nodded then hustled around the huge man, scurrying to my seat. Glancing over the cubicle, I noticed Mr. Lowell meeting Stone in the hall and walking him out.

A few minutes later, Mr. Lowell came toward my cube. “Great start, Miss Shivana. You’ll need to plan to visit his office next week once the contract is ready to sign.”

“Absolutely, sir. Thank you.”

I had to go to his office. And likely be alone with him. *Oh shit.*





## *Chapter 5*

### Stone

It was torture not going to the Spoke all weekend. But Mac checked with Rickie and found out Adi was working. I didn't think I should show up and make her nervous again. I was also working on how I'd handle her being in my office to bring me the contract.

Mr. Lowell assured me she would hand deliver it once I approved the draft.

"Hey, I thought your meetings were done last week," Tango said as I went to fill my coffee mug.

Putting the carafe back on the warmer, I turned and sipped the hot black coffee. "They were."

He raised a brow and crossed his arms. "Okay. Then why are you all dressed up?"

Looking down at my dress shirt, my cut over it today, I shrugged. "No reason."

Sweetie, Tango's mom, opened the break room door and popped her head in. "Hey, someone's here to see you."

Tango turned to walk toward the door, but she put her hand up. "Not you, hon. Stone."

My heart sped up, but I tried to keep my cool. “Show them to my office, please.” I gave her a toothy grin. Sweetie had battled cancer for a while but was in remission and was tired of hanging out at her house alone, so she started coming to work for us as an admin and greeted clients and guests. With Tango’s dad being gone for a few years, it was no wonder she needed something to do with her time. We had all envied the relationship they had and were torn up when he passed. We all made a pact to always take care of Sweetie as she was once the prez’s old lady, now the prez’s mom. Her hair finally started growing back in, but it was still a pixie cut which suited her heart shaped face just fine. It was a darker shade of blonde now, too, but she was a striking woman. Although, I had known her too long to see her as anything other than Tango’s mom.

“Meeting? Did I miss something?” Tango asked as I strolled past him.

“No. Just the contract for the buildout. I got it. You have plenty to do here.”

Tango followed me out and walked with me back to my office. The door was ajar, and Adi was sitting across from my seat at the desk. Her hair was again pulled back with unruly curls flowing from a ponytail. Her back was straight, and she was dressed to the nines in a black suit.

My chest swelled at the sight of her. Thoughts of that ponytail in my hand as my other gripped her hip and—

“Well, hello, again,” Tango said as he pushed past me, pulling me from my daydream.

*Shit.*

Adi stood, gripping a leatherbound notebook. She put her hand out as she took a few steps to meet Tango. “Hello, sir.”

He shook her hand then crossed his arms as he looked over at me with a smirk. “What can we do for you?”

I cleared my throat and walked toward her then motioned to the chair. “She is leading the rebuild for the offices.” I looked back at Tango. “Would you like to see the plans?”

He relaxed his arms then took the other seat next to Adi. She tipped her head then opened the notebook. “Here is the contract. I can notarize that for you, and you have perfect timing since we need a witness,” she said as she gave a professional smile in Tango’s direction.

He leaned back in his chair and grinned, folding his hands in his lap. I rolled my eyes. “*He* is the COO. I’ll get one of the girls,” I said, but Tango cut in.

“How about Bash? I don’t think it’s appropriate for Mom. But Bash isn’t technically related to me, *yet*.”

Adi straightened in her seat. “My apologies, sir.”

Tango waved her off as I pinged Bash to come in. “He’s running this show. This asshole is my right-hand man. And he has a great business sense, so I trust he chose the right person for the job.”

I didn’t miss his slight eyebrow raise as he said that, but I had my poker face on. I was going to keep this strictly professional and needed her to feel confident in that.

A knock came quickly since Bash’s office wasn’t far from mine. She pushed the door and poked her head in. “Need me to sign something?”

Tango’s face lit up and he stood, motioning for her to take his seat. “Here, we need a witness for this contract. Meet Adi. She’s going to be here leading the buildout.”

Bash’s green eyes shined behind her glasses as she ran her fingers through her red hair. “Good to meet you. It’ll be nice having some more estrogen around.”

Adi pulled a pen from her bag that was resting next to her chair. “I look forward to it.” She put the contract on the desk. “Who should sign?”

Tango pointed to me. “That fucker is fine.”

Bash turned enough to swat Tango in the gut and rolled her eyes. “Stone is the CFO. He has permissions. Tango probably doesn’t even know what he would be signing.”

Adi's cognac eyes looked back at me. She pushed the paper over and leaned, pointing with her pen and showing me where to sign. Her warm vanilla scent wafted to my nose, but I did as I was told then pushed the forms to Bash so she could put her signature where the witness was. Adi then signed several places and stamped it.

"I'll get you copies sent and we will retain the original." She stood and put her hand out. I took it and low in my gut something stirred. Her hand was so small and soft but felt perfect in mine.

Bash stood and Tango followed with his hand on the small of her back. When they got to the door, she turned once more. "My office is two doors down in case you need anything while you're around. The boys stay busy some days but I'm usually here during business hours."

Adi smiled and stood. "Thanks. I'll be in and out but good to know I have someone to show me around."

Tango started to follow Bash but said, "Stone, don't be rude. Show the lady around. She needs to see what she'll be working on."

I grinned and he shot me a quick bird before he closed the door.

"So, want to see the place?"

She grabbed her bag from the floor and put the notebook inside then put the strap on her shoulder. She was taller, sporting heels with her power suit. "Excellent. I'm excited to work on you—I mean it!"

I stifled a laugh, but the slip of her tongue sent even more racy thoughts of her into my mind. I'd have to cool it. She was going to be working for us and I told Pipes I'd not mess with her. I still was trying to figure out what exactly that meant. Because I was a man of my word but something about her was special and surely, I didn't agree to never pursue her...



## *Chapter 6*

### Adita

As if I wasn't awkward enough, my own mouth betrayed me. At least it was just him and Tango and Bash had left the room. Actually, that may have been worse. He was the only one that caught my mistake. He clearly coughed to keep from laughing but I saw him fighting it.

Still, he stood by the door and waved me out to take me on the tour, so I put my chin up, clinched my thighs briefly as I straightened my blazer, then walked to the hall and waited for him to show me the way.

He strolled down the halls, showing me where Bash's office was, then the breakroom, and several other offices. As we walked, the scent of leather and bergamot trailed behind him and I was thankful we were already walking. The friction of my own thick thighs was as good as clenching them together.

Looking him over as he showed me around, I wondered what it would be like to have his big body over me. He was stout and strong with a wide frame and a confident swagger. I had my big girl heels on today, but he easily had six or seven inches on me barefoot. Suddenly images of me with no shoes with my bare legs dangling over his broad shoulders popped in my mind and I had to fan myself.

“You alright? Can I get you a water or something?”

Of course, *he turned around right as I was imagining his bearded face in between my thighs.*

“Sorry, the suit is a thick material. Great for winter, but once inside it’s quite warm.” *Good save, Adi. Good save.*

“I’m happy to get a drink and you are welcome to take that off. We’re pretty casual around here if you hadn’t noticed.”

I unbuttoned the blazer and flapped the lapel a few times. “Thanks. I’ll be fine. I’m normally partial to warm weather. Must be nerves.” Did I just fucking say that? *Think, Adi, think!* “Truth be told, this is my first lead project.” *That makes sense.* And was true.

He waved me ahead, so I passed him, getting even more hints of his warm scent. “Really? Your blueprint was great, and your presentation made those guys look like chumps.”

I couldn’t fight the grin on my face. “Well thanks. It’s tough being a woman in the industry.”

He grunted as he flipped a switch and a new hallway appeared. It had been out of use a while from the looks of things.

“Business is booming so we need to convert this area. Nobody’s really been down here for a year or more.” His hand met the small of my back and my mouth went dry. “Watch your step.”

I carefully walked, glancing around and peeking in the spaces. “Um, what were these spaces before?”

He cleared his throat, rolling on his heels to the balls of his feet as he gripped his leather vest. “Well, this used to be a clubhouse, so the members stayed here pretty often.”

My mind raced as I thought of the books I’d read. “Clubhouse? So, you guys are a motorcycle club for real?”

A deep sigh came from Stone. “We’re a club. But not like you think. Not anymore.”

I shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant. “It’s none of my business. I’m just here for the buildout, sir.”



He grunted again. If he didn't stop that I'd have to stop by my apartment before I went back to the office.

"So, I got the grand tour. I'll have the crew out this week if that's fine with you."

His mouth turned down for a second, but then he gave a curt nod and motioned for me to head back down the hallway toward the main offices. I tried to walk inconspicuously but the heels had my hips swaying and after having a desk job so long, my ass had filled out the pants. Did I purposely wear them? Of course not. I had limited options. I had to get a second job to make ends meet. Which, if this went well, maybe I wouldn't have to keep it long.

He walked me to the front door and held it open for me. "Thanks for bringing that out. I guess I'll see you this week sometime."

His hand was held out and a soft grin hid behind the thick beard. I wondered what it would feel like to just grab it.

"Adi? You alright?" he asked, his hand still out.

"Oh," I said, taking his handshake. "Yes. I'll email you when the crew will be out, and I'll meet them here." *Why did his handshake make me all tingly?* I needed to get out of his overpowering presence.

"Okay. I uh—"

"Hello, again," Sweetie sing-songed as she scooted behind her desk. "You outta here?"

I smiled at the sweet woman as my hand fell from Stone's. She talked my off ear when I first came before she led me to Stone's office. "Yes, ma'am. But I'll be back later this week with the crew."

She smiled after she took a sip from her mug. "Well, you stay warm, hon. See ya soon."

I smiled once more at Stone, then quickly shuffled to the car, hoping to keep the hip sway to a minimum.

Once inside my car, I cracked the window. I had to cool off before getting back to work.



## Chapter 7

### Stone

Two weeks had passed since Adi had been in my office. When she brought the crew out later that week, I escorted them back to where the work would be taking place then made myself scarce.

I was keeping an eye on things with our surveillance videos. Did she happen to be visible on them a lot of the time? *Sure*. I couldn't help that. Did we happen to end up in the breakroom at the same time occasionally? Yes, but not to run into her so much as seeing her head to the breakroom made me realize how thirsty I was.

“So, we're stalking now?”

I jumped from my chair at Tango's voice. “What?” I turned and hit the power button on the screens. “No. I'm keeping an eye on the workers.”

He stood in the doorway with his arms crossed. “Why don't you just take her out and get it over with?”

“What?” I shuffled papers on my desk and fixed my seat so I could ignore his accusations and get back to work. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Do you think I'm blind? I've known you since we barely had hair on our balls. You don't just think she's hot. You're

smitten.”

A nervous laugh erupted from my throat. “Smitten. Since when do you say smitten?”

“Since you started acting like a little bitch. Just talk to her. I’m tired of you wandering around with your puppy dog eyes.”

I threw my hands up. “Okay fine. I like her. But she’s working for us *and* at the Spoke. I promised Pipes—”

“Excuse me,” a soft voice said behind Tango.

My jaw clenched and my chest heaved. *She did not just hear me say that.*

“Oh hi, Adi. How’s the build going?” Tango asked as he unfolded his arms and casually grabbed his hips.

She stepped around him and said, “Coming along nicely. Just a heads up that there’s some inclement weather possible the next few days so depending on that, the crew may have shortened days. I hope you understand.”

I cleared my throat. “Of course. Upgrades are no reason for anyone to get hurt. Just do what you think is best.”

Adi tipped her head then headed back out. Tango craned his neck to watch her before he walked over to my desk.

“You’re a smooth mother fucker, you know that?” He grinned.

Running my hand over my short hair, I blew a breath through puffed cheeks. “I don’t know what’s happened to me, man. I’ve never been such a fumbling idiot around women. Hell, I’ve always been the charmer.”

“You’re a club VP. It’s not like it’s hard to get a woman in that position.” Tango cocked a brow.

“You know what I mean. I could have any of them or not have ‘em. Didn’t matter. And never cared if they thought one way or another. But I want *her* so damn bad, and I can’t have her.”

Tango’s brow furrowed. “Why not? Besides the fact she’s too good for you and all.”

“I know you don’t mean that, but she is. And I told Pipes I wouldn’t mess with her.”

Tango slapped his hands together. “Well, I can handle that. I own that bar. I appreciate Pipes keeping an eye on the ladies but...next problem.”

“She’s working for us,” I said with a wave of my arm.

Tango crossed his arms. “So, you got a problem with me and Bash?”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s different. She works for us *here* and that was a totally different situation.”

“Not really. Probably worse than you going after Adi. She works for a company that’s doing a short-term job for us. She isn’t an employee of SRI.”

Leaning back in my chair, I ran my hand over my face then down my beard. “She’s not a club bunny, man. She’s a woman with a real job, a degree, her own place.”

Tango rubbed at the short scruff he had on his face. “Did she tell you all that?”

I stared across. He knew she didn’t tell me. Mac was good about research, especially when there were no privacy settings. Which Adi really should do a better job of managing. He found everything about her in five minutes with a few keystrokes.

Tango leaned on the desk. “I respect whatever you think is best. But you’re smitten. What was it you sang to me when I was in denial?” He stood back up and squinted his eyes as he thought. “Oh yeah. Stone and Adi and sitting in a tree,” he rang out as he bounced his shoulders, “k-i-s-s-i-n-g.”

“You look ridiculous,” I deadpanned. Grown biker, with black riding boots, a long-sleeved black shirt, his cut, and his pink bandana he always wore for his mom, dancing around like a little girl.

“I don’t care. I’m the president.” He laughed and headed to the door. “I give it two weeks.”

“Goodbye, Tango.” I pointed to the door.

I grinned a little once he left. Then I stopped myself. No. Wouldn't happen. Pipes was a good guy for looking out for her and even if he hadn't, Adi was out of my league. Even though we were straight now, she wouldn't be caught dead with the likes of me.



## *Chapter 8*

### Adita

It had been a few days since I overheard Stone and Tango talking about someone. I wanted to know desperately if it was me, but I couldn't ask. Especially at the office.

I did my best to avoid him at the job site, but he was everywhere. Today apparently was no different.

I had snuck into the break room a little later than lunch time, hoping to miss anyone. I was standing at the counter shoving a veggie wrap in my face as fast as I could when the door swung open.

Out of reflex, my head whipped to the door and of course Stone was walking in. He paused and the edges of his mouth seemed to turn up briefly, but then it disappeared into another professional smile.

My heart flutters simmered down as I worked to finish swallowing down the huge bite I had taken.

Panic set in; I hadn't chewed it up enough and I couldn't get it to go down. I slammed my hand to the counter and tried to cough but nothing happened. I reached for my water, but it didn't go down either and instead dribbled down my chin.

"Adi?" Stone said as he came toward me.



I still couldn't swallow it down or cough it up, and before I knew it, strong arms wrapped around me, and my feet were lifted from the ground.

After just three hard pumps to my rib cage, a ball of veggie wrap flew from my mouth and landed a few feet in front of me.

I sucked in a strained breath, wheezing as my lungs struggled to fill. My hands were wrapped around my own throat, and I hadn't even noticed.

Stone put me on the ground but didn't let go. "Steady now. You're alright. In the nose, out through the mouth."

As I started breathing normally again, I had a fleeting thought that it was unfortunate I was choking, and it wasn't even on his meat.

A chuckle erupted from my throat; my hands dropped from my neck to rest over his. But once the warmth of his rough hands were under mine, my brain started working again. I jerked my hands away.

He opened his arms and I stepped free, missing his heat against my back.

He came around so he could face me. He leaned a little to come to my height, and still wasn't eye to eye. "Are you okay?"

*No. I want to die now.* "Yeah, thanks." I ran my hands down my front then looked down. "Shit. I mean shoot!" *Oh God how can I be making this worse?* "Got a little on my top. Guess I need to take it off." *Just shut up, Adi.*

Stone's eyes went wide and dropped to my breasts. I couldn't help but wish my top was off if it meant he'd keep looking at them like that.

My cheeks warmed but instead of embarrassment it was from the heat he turned on inside of me.

He cleared his throat and made his way to the counter. I thought he was going to get some coffee as he seemed to drink it all day. Instead, he turned with a napkin in his hand and as

he started to bend down, realization hit me, and I leaned down to swipe the disgusting chunk from the floor.

As I did so with zero grace, I managed to grab it with my bare hand but didn't notice how close he was and when I lifted my head, I nailed him right between the eyes with my hard noggin.

He grunted but didn't curse or proclaim ouch. Instead, he cupped my cheek and looked into my eyes. "That was a good hit. You alright?"

The heat of his breath danced over my face. He smelled even better up close. In fact, his beard seemed to smell good. I just wanted to grab it and taste his mouth.

"Adi," he said with a low gravelly voice. His thumb brushed lightly over my cheek.

"I—I." But the door flew open, and Bash stopped.

"Hey. Tango was looking for you," she said as she looked at Stone.

His eyes didn't move for a few seconds, boring into me, making me forget she was there. But then he dropped his hand and stood, reaching out to help me up.

"Tell him I'm coming."

His hand seemed to hold mine even after I was up off the floor, but he finally let it go and grabbed his mug off the counter, filled it, then smiled as he left the break room.

Once the door clicked, I felt the mush in my hand and ran to the trash to toss it then washed my hands. I was thankful I hadn't tried to grab his hand with that one and was silently cursing myself.

"He's a great guy," Bash said as she pulled a small bag from the fridge.

"Oh, he seems like a great employer." I didn't even realize she was still there with me.

Bash's giggle was cute and didn't match her normal quiet demeanor. "He's okay to work with, but I meant he's just a

good guy.”

I turned and grabbed my wrap, tossing it away. I’d not be eating that again for a while. “Oh, okay.”

“He likes you,” she said plainly.

My stomach flipped. “No. He’s just being polite.”

Bash walked closer. “I live with his best friend.” Her eyes were serious behind her glasses. “He likes you.”

My chest filled and I tried to fight the goofy smile that was spreading on my face.

“It’s okay to like him back.”

My eyes widened. “What? I do. I mean—I don’t. I mean... He’s a nice guy.” *Shut up, Adi.*

Bash giggled again then waved as she left the breakroom.

*Was it that obvious that I liked him?*



## *Chapter 9*

### Stone

#### *Stone*

Tango's sneaky ass told me I had to show up at the Rusty Spoke tonight to go over the ride and some odds and ends. I argued we had time to go over it when I was standing in his office, but he said Bear, Mac, and a few others needed to be there, too.

I had been trying to avoid the Spoke, so I didn't make Adi feel some kind of way. I was even more suspicious when I walked in from the cold and saw Bash at the table with the boys.

Nothing against her. She's the best thing that happened to Tango. But we never had her around for club business.

As if sensing the apprehension about having her there, Tango looked me square in the eye and asked, "Is there a problem?"

I pulled my jacket off and sat. "Nope. You're the boss."

"You damn right, I am." He took a swig from his beer then put his arm around Bash. "The lady is heading up the next fundraiser, so I wanted her to announce it." He kissed her temple. "Go ahead, babe."

Bash's cheeks were as red as her hair, but she pushed her glasses up her nose and blew out a breath. "Well, it's a little short notice, but we're going to be hosting a Valentine's Bike Bash," she says with a chuckle, "here at the Rusty Spoke!"

Some ladies in the tables around us clap and chatter, but the men all grumble. Just as I run my hand down my face, someone bumps into my shoulder. My head and half of my body whip around ready to snap, but I freeze when the smell of vanilla hits my nose before I see her.

"Sorry," Adi said. "It's been a long day." She passed beers around, placing one in front of me.

"I don't know how you do it. But the offices are already coming along great."

She grinned, her head tipping down before she put her chin out proudly. "Well, I appreciate the opportunity. It's not one that comes easy for women in my line of work."

A bang on the table made me jump and Tango's booming voice says, "You can flirt later. We need to get this shit done because it's only a couple of weeks away."

I turned back to apologize to Adi, but she had already moved on to the next table. "Fuck you, Tango. I was just praising her work. We'll pull it together. But are we planning a ride for February?"

Bash jumped in. "More like a party for riders. We can't predict the weather and since the winter is the wet season in Georgia, probably best not to plan to have hundreds of bikes on the road if ice is a possibility."

For over an hour, we plan out how to circulate the event, the fees, how we can get swag fast enough for those who show up, and Bash insists on some cutie patootie game shit.

After we all had our assigned tasks to get done in the next couple of days, everyone started leaving. I had half a beer left and was trying to nurse it since I had to drive. Mac stayed behind with me to finish his as well.

"You guys need anything?" Adi asked as she hustled over from another table.

Mac leaned on his elbows and smiled up at her. “I’m good, Adi. But hey listen, do you have plans on Valentine’s Day?”

*Is this fucker crazy?* I turned and couldn’t stop the glare I shot him, even if I wanted to. My fists balled and my nostrils flared as pretty-boy grinned up at her with his million-dollar dimples. He was the one who helped me find out everything about her and dig into the company she worked for.

Although, I didn’t claim her as mine. In fact, I made it a point to let the guys know I promised Pipes and didn’t want her to be uncomfortable since she was working for us. But that shit applies to them, too. I guess I’d have to clarify that for him once she was away from the table.

She squirmed, glancing at me briefly before answering, “Work at the day job and then work here.”

Good. *She’s busy, asshat.*

“Well, that’s cool. Bash planned a fundraising event here that night. Guess we’ll see you, then.”

Adi gave a customer-service smile then turned to head to the bar, her curly ponytail bouncing to the rhythm of her ass as she did.

I reached across the table and grabbed Mac’s collar. “Do you have a death wish, asshole?”

Mac didn’t flinch. Instead, he glanced at my hand then brushed it away as if it were peanut shells on the table. “Calm your tits, Stone. I was just seeing if she had a date. Ya know, since you’re too pussy to ask.” He kept watching me as he sipped his beer.

I released him and settled back into my seat. “Well, you shouldn’t have done that. I’ve told you already, she’s off limits. And just to specify, that means all of you, too.”

“I wouldn’t dare lay hands on someone else’s old lady.”

“W–what? Old lady? I *just* said I can’t even date her, you moron.” I slammed down my beer, only remembering after why I wasn’t drinking it fast.

“Not yet. But we have eyes.” He put his beer down and stood, stretching before he grabbed his leathers.

“Who is *we*? What are you talking about?” Fucking Tango. That’s who *we* is.

He was getting ready to ride out but still replied, “All of us. And don’t forget what you asked me to do.” He cocked a brow. “You have *never* asked me to check on a woman. Only club shit.”

“She *is* club shit.” I rolled my eyes. “She’s working at the clubhouse. Office. Whatever the fuck it is.” *Maybe the over-explaining was tipping him off.*

Mac let out a loud, “Ha!” Eyes from around the Spoke looked over, including Adi and Rickie’s.

Looking up at him, my jaw ticked. I was the king of quick comebacks and funny one-liners, but I was at a loss. She had me flustered. “My hands are tied. Just drop it.”

“But are they?” He stepped closer to the table and leaned down. “Seriously, Pipes was trying to help and that’s cool of him, but other than that, I think it’d be more dishonorable to deny your feelings for each other than to keep a fucking promise to a bartender.”

My jaw hung open as Mac slipped his laptop into his crossbody and walked out.

*Feelings for each other?*

My eyes found her, and she was looking at me until she knew she was busted. Then she clamored to grab her tray and head off in another direction.

*Did she have a thing for me?*





## *Chapter 10*

### Adita

I managed to steer clear of Stone all week. But I was still questioning what he had said. The only problem was, I wasn't supposed to have heard and maybe he wasn't talking about me. But after what Bash said and all the little comments from the other guys, I could only assume he was. It would be unprofessional to confront him after eavesdropping.

Luckily, I had work back at the office and the guys from my crew were handling things at the jobsite. Not that it mattered. All I could think about was Stone.

“Miss Shivana.”

I nearly jumped from my skin. As I gathered my wits, I cleared my throat and smiled at my boss. “Mr. Lowell. Lovely to see you.”

“Why are you here, Miss Shivana?”

Trying to keep a poker-face as I thought hard and fast about why he was asking, I finally gave up. “I had some paperwork to catch up on, sir. The build is going nicely, and the crew should be done within the week.”

“Then why are you not there overseeing? I have it on good authority that Sons of Steely Ridge have their hands in a lot in

this town. We need to show them we'll take the best care of them."

Oh, I'd take care of Stone, alright. *Shit! Get it together for this conversation, Adi.*

"I've been in constant contact with the COO and CFO, sir. I can assure you they are more than pleased with the build and the progress."

Mr. Lowell's lips thinned. "Paperwork is something you can manage later. During business hours, I expect you to be the representative of this company." He walked off before I could offer any rebuttal.

I was a salaried employee so it wasn't like I could demand overtime. And he wouldn't be happy to learn I moonlighted as a server at a biker bar.

"Can't hack it with the big boys, I see."

Rolling my eyes at Chad, I look up through my lashes with a scowl. "I'm doing just fine. In fact, we are ahead of schedule even with the crew missing a day because of the roads. Is someone worried about a little competition for that window office next to Mr. Lowell?"

Chad smirked then walked away. What a dick. I finished the work I really did need to get done, then noticed the time. I had to hustle if I was going to be on time to the Spoke.

Even though I was exhausted half the time, the extra money really helped. And Rickie had quickly become a good friend. Most of my friends from school had all gotten married and started having babies or had equally demanding jobs so we just didn't have time to catch up besides a few calls and texts here and there. But Rickie was at work most nights.

Pipes smiled as I walked past to put my things down and Rickie was in the locker room applying some lip gloss. "Hey girl. Should be slow. Weather sucks so most of the guys won't be in."

"Great," I say dryly. "I need the cash."

Rickie walked toward the door but put her hand on my shoulder and stopped. “If it’s dead, I can cut loose early if you want to try to stay and see if you can get some tips?”

“You don’t have to do that. Don’t you need it, too?”

She shrugged. “I’m okay actually. I don’t mind. My feet are killing me anyway. I’ll give it a few. Who knows, maybe it’ll be busy as shit.”

I smiled as she left. It sucked to think about leaving now, but ultimately it would be hard to manage both jobs for too long, and I’ve wanted to be an engineer my whole teen and adult life.

If the current contract went well and I landed a few more nice ones, I actually could be in the running for that window office.

I imagined waving to Chad from my fancy desk in that office as I walked from the locker room after I changed to the bar. The idiotic smile I was sporting quickly melted when I looked over and saw Chad, Andrew, and two other guys from the office.

My heart sped up and I turned to run to the back but slammed into someone. Squeaking as I nailed what was as firm as a wall, I briefly looked up to see the beard I kept imagining between my legs.

I heard Chad’s stupid fake laugh and remembered why I was bolting, but Stone’s hands were at my shoulders, steadying me. Instead of retreating, I grabbed his sides and spun us around, using him as a shield.

“Adi, is everything okay,” he asked in the panty-melting voice.

“Um, I–well–”

“Adi, I thought I saw you. Funny running into you here,” Chad said as he glanced around Stone. His eyes roamed the place, and his mouth was in a horrible scowl. “You hang out *here?*”

Judgy mother fucker.

“I—”

“Oh wait, I just noticed the apron. So, this is why you don’t have time for your work. Tsk, tsk.”

My jaw clenched and my face was hot. Once again saved by being brown. “Chad, this isn’t your business. What are you doing here?”

Stone’s grasp loosened, but he turned slightly so he could see us both. “Yes, Chad. What are you doing here?” He crossed his arms.

“Why don’t you mind your business?” Chad said with disdain dripping in his tone.

This idiot didn’t recognize Stone. He also didn’t realize he was a preppy asshole in the middle of a biker bar, insulting a VP.

Stone turned his back to me, and the overwhelming smell of leather and gasoline filled my nose. His back was so broad I couldn’t even see around him.

Even so, I could see several men stand up and make their way over to where we were standing.

“I’m sorry,” Stone said politely. “What was that you said?”

Andrew’s voice came from the other side of the small circle of men. “C’mon Chad. This is a bust. Let’s go somewhere more...well, *more*.”

A slew of preppy-boy laughs came but quickly stopped. Peeking around Stone’s huge arm, I saw a few of the familiar bikers in their faces. I couldn’t help but smile.

Once they were gone, Stone turned to face me. “What a dick. Ex?”

“Oh God, no!” Gross. “I work with them. You actually met two of them and chose my project over theirs.”

“Hm,” he said as he stroked his beard. “Those fuckers all look the same to me.” He turned fully to me again. “But then why run?”

*Shit.* “Because,” I said with a defeated breath. “He’ll tell my boss. I’m just glad he didn’t recognize you because that would really have been bad.”

“Why? You aren’t allowed to have another job?”

Shrugging, I answered, “The policy and procedure at my job is vague about outside jobs but does have a morality clause which leaves it wide open to be fired.”

“Are you serious? They’d fire you for making ends meet?” He stepped closer. “I’d pull the contract so fast it would make their head spin.”

“You can’t do that,” I said breathily. “It’s a contract.”

“I’d take their ass to court and drag it out for years just to show them they can’t treat you that way.”

My heart fluttered. “You’d do that, for me?”

“Yes.” He cleared his throat. “There’s a lot I’d like to do, but—”

“But what?”

“Eh-hem.”

Looking around Stone, Rickie was standing, tapping her pen on a receipt book. “Hey love, it looks a little slow. Why don’t you cut out early?”

My brows pulled together. She told me I could take the shift. I cocked my head at her, and she pointed her pen at Stone and nodded her head.

It finally clicked. She was trying to get me to go hang out with Stone. “Rickie, can I talk to you in the locker room for a minute?”

Stone’s face was still as serious and heated as it was moments ago. It felt like he was peering into my soul. It was invasive...and hot.

Once the door closed, Rickie grabbed my face, and her wide eyes were inches from mine. “Adi, stop fucking around. Take off and go hang out with him.”

“Wut?” I asked through my smushed cheeks. “I—”

“You like him. He likes you. Use this little drama to parlay it into your ‘how we got together’ story. It’s perfect.”

“But I work for him.”

“Well not forever. And you both have googly eyes and the whole bar is over it.” She pulled my face even closer. “Stop thinking with that big brain of yours and start thinking with your heart...and your lady bits.” She chuckled.

“You’re right. Fuck it. I may have just lost my other job anyway so what the hell.”

She let my face go then hugged me tight. “Go get ‘em, girl.”

I grabbed my bag and my coat and walked back out and headed to the bar. “Pipes, can I take off?”

“Sure thing, Adi. Hey, Stone,” he called out. When Stone turned around, Pipes yelled, “Can you see that this lady gets home safe. The roads are getting bad.”

Did they all plan this? No. They couldn’t have planned on douche canoe showing up and threatening my day job.

Stone walked over to me and pulled my coat from my arms then helped me work it on. “It’s cold out. Why don’t I drive your car home for you.”

Pulling my hair from the collar of my coat, I asked, “What about your bike?”

A low growl came from him as he leaned closer. “You’ll be on the bike soon enough.”

Sweet baby cheezits. I wanted to just grab his beard and eat his face off.

“But it’s not safe right now. It’s been drizzling and the temps have fallen a lot in just the last hour. C’mon,” he said as he put his hand out.

My heart pounded in my chest and suddenly I didn’t care about anything but the way my hand fit into his huge one. It was warm, and practically engulfed mine.

I'd like to engulf something on him for sure. Oh my God...I may be about to do just that.

I clenched my thighs then grinned over at Rickie before I started walking, hand in hand with Stone, out to the car.

With my keys out, I unlocked it, and it opened my door. "Why don't you warm it up. Be right back."

With a nod, I cranked the car and nervously wrung my hands together. I played with the radio, trying to find something he may like and landed on classic rock. I listened to a lot of different things, but ever since working at the bar, I came to really love the music they played most often.

After just a couple minutes, Stone opened the back door and threw a few things inside before he climbed into the driver's seat.

"Where to?"

My apartment was small and not very cozy. Plus, I had nothing besides water from the door of the fridge to drink. I had spent so little time there since I started the extra job. I ate a lot of fast food or boxed meals lately and didn't bother to keep anything good stocked to drink.

But wait. Was I just assuming he was planning to hang out with me? Was he just being a nice guy and dropping me off? Pipes did ask him to get me home safely. And even though he looked all tough and gruff, he only exhibited kind and gentle behavior to me.

"I'm such an idiot."

"Did you forget something inside?" he asked, pressing the brakes.

I waved my hand. "No. Never mind. It's not far." I rattled off the address and he pulled out of the parking lot.

We drove a few miles. There was already slush gathering on the streets. The thing about Georgia is there wasn't really snow, but we got ice. And only the major highways and roads got salt. Neither of which were anywhere near home.



I tried to keep my lady bits in check since he was just being a nice guy and getting me home, but the close quarters were holding in his scent. I couldn't help but glance over at his beard. At least I could have a great mental picture for myself later.

As we rounded a hard turn about a mile from my place, flashing lights appeared and Stone gently slowed the car.

A fireman walked over to his window, and he rolled it down. "Evening folks, we have a tree down and a transformer out. The road is blocked."

I leaned up. "For how long?"

The fireman raised a brow. "Until it's cleared and safe, ma'am. You can try turning around and getting back onto Mulberry to take you back around, but not sure how long the power will be out."

Stone tipped his head. "No worries, man. Thanks for working out in this weather. I'll turn around."

The fireman nodded then walked away and Stone turned the car around.

"We can go hang at my place if you want. It's just a couple minutes. Or I can drive you back to the Spoke."

I'd much rather get trapped at his house than the bar. "Your place is probably a better idea if it's not far. If the power goes out at the Spoke it'll be hard to stay warm."

He didn't look over, but I swore I detected a smirk. Maybe I was meaning more than a possible fireplace to heat things up but did he?

Once we got to his place, I could find out.



## *Chapter 11*

### Stone

Was it possible that the universe was really helping me? I was bummed that she said to drive to her place and wished for a reason to take her home.

I just hoped nobody was hurt by the fallen tree. And I felt bad for the workers out in the cold. But I'd donate extra to the breast cancer ride or something to make up for whatever gift I'd been given.

I did offer to take her back to the Spoke, but she opted for my place, where we could stay warm.

I drove the mile and a half over to my house, which was on the same street as Tango. It wasn't quite as big as his, but not tiny by any means.

It looked like an old farmhouse but was two stories and had a detached garage for my bike and truck.

Adi leaned toward the dashboard and looked it over as we pulled up.

"This is a nice place." She was still looking around with wide eyes.

I parked the car then walked around and opened her door. I put my hand out to help her up and she took it. I couldn't help

the rumble in my chest. But every time I touched her, I didn't want to let go.

She stood; her lips parted ever so slightly, her tongue darting across her bottom lip. Her eyes went to my mouth and my chest swelled with a deep breath. As it left me, my breath turned to a puff of white mist in the cold air.

“Why don't we go inside?” I asked, my voice much deeper than I intended.

She pulled her hand from mine and tucked her bag close to her chest with both arms. “Sure.”

*Shit.* That was short. “Let me just grab my things from the back.” I walked back to the other side and grabbed my riding gear out then locked the car and waved her to the porch.

After unlocking the door, I reached inside and turned the light switch by the door to brighten the entryway and living room just to the right of the entrance and motioned for her to go inside. “Ladies first.”

She gave a tight smile, then stepped inside, still clutching her bag close. She craned her neck to look around.

I locked the door behind me out of habit then shoved my hands in my pockets. I couldn't help but look over her round ass in the jeans she had practically painted on.

She looked over her shoulder and blinked a few times before her body turned and her brows drew together. “Is this some sort of game?”

“Game? What are you talking about?” I'd never been accused of such a thing. I never had a reason to play games.

“I'm just trying to make sense of you. I've caught you looking at me lots of times, but then hear you make promises you won't mess with me. Why?” She took fast but short steps closer. Even though she was at least half a foot shorter than me, she was a little scary. “Is it because I'm not from here? Like, ‘oh, I'd never mess with her because’—”

“Stop.” I stepped in closer and leaned my head down so I could be closer to eye to eye. “Is that what you think of me?”

She shrugged, her bag still in her hands, and let out an exasperated breath. “I don’t know. Why else would you just stare but make it a point that you won’t mess with me?”

“First of all, I knew you were listening, and you heard the other stuff I said. So don’t start acting like this now. Second, I said I wouldn’t mess with you because Pipes was protecting you and you’re too good for someone like me.”

She slammed her bag to the floor and her eyes met mine, full of fire. “How *dare* you try to decide what’s best for me?” She put her finger in my face. “I already have parents, I don’t need another. And Pipes is nice, but he surely doesn’t get a say in who I choose to be with!”

Normally nobody would have their finger in my face long enough to get out a full sentence, but I was paralyzed.

“So that’s it? You have nothing to say?” She threw her hands up. “Perfect. You know what, just give me my keys. I’ll go back to the Spoke.”

That jolted me to react. “No,” I growled as she reached for the keys in my pocket. “You’re not leaving.”

“I will walk home if I have to, and you can’t stop me.”

She turned but I was still holding her wrist, so I jerked her back, causing her body to crash into mine.

“I can and I will.”

She tipped her head up and snarled at me. “Why? Why keep me here if you don’t even want me? Thanks for the ride but—”

I slammed my lips to hers and dug my fingers into the small of her back. Her body was tense but as I worked my tongue into her mouth, her muscles relaxed, and she melted against me. My hand released her wrist and wrapped around her, holding her close and she gripped my jacket.

My cock twitched in my pants so I broke away. “Adi,” I said in a breathy rumble.

“Stone,” she replied as she pressed herself closer. “Don’t stop now.”

She stretched to reach my mouth again, but I grabbed her shoulders. “Wait. I need to say something.”

“Right now?”

I laughed. Her needy tone was adorable. But before we continued, I had to clear this up. “I need to tell you I was a fool. A fool trying to be a decent guy, but still a fool. I should have just told you I wanted you the moment I first saw you at the Spoke. And you’re right. It’s up to you to decide who to be with. And I want you to be with me.”

Her eyes sparkled as she studied my face. “I know I’m not a cool biker chick, but I can’t stop thinking about you. I want to be with you, too.”

I pressed my forehead to hers. “No offense to the girls, but you’re way cooler than any biker chick I’ve met. Or any woman for that matter. And I’m sorry I didn’t just come out and say that.”

Her hands threaded through my beard. “I’ve wanted to do this for a while now.” She gave me a small peck on the lips. “And I can think of a way you can make it up to me. All the foolery, I mean.”

All the blood in my body rushed to my lower torso, and I was so hard it almost hurt. I threw her over my shoulder and stomped up the stairs as she squealed. My hand rested tightly on her ass to keep her from falling off as I bound up two stairs at a time. I needed the bed to worship her properly and all the protection was in the nightstand.

“Stone!” She laughed as we rounded the corner, and I dropped her on the bed. She giggled as she got her bearings and I grabbed her ankles, yanking her to the edge of the bed.

“You sure you want to do this? We don’t have to. I meant what I said and it’s not just about this.” I pointed to the bed. “But I won’t lie, I really want this, too.”

She sat up. Without a second thought, she began pulling my belt off and unbuttoning my jeans. I pulled my jacket off and then my cut, laying them over the nightstand as she worked.

I leaned down and pushed her jacket off; she peeled off her shirt before popping my dick from my underwear and putting her warm mouth over it.

My eyes rolled back at the feel of her plush lips around me as her tongue dragged across the bottom. “Shit, Adi.” I clenched my teeth at the sensation she was sending to my balls. “This isn’t what I meant, but dammit. That feels so good.”

She moaned as she took me in deeper, her hands pushing my underwear and pants down further. Her hand ran up my stomach, so I grabbed the hem and pulled it off.

Her hands set fire to every place they touched on me, a tightness forming in my balls. I didn’t want to finish like that the first time, so I grabbed her ponytail and pulled her back.

She panted and looked up. “Is everything okay?” Her cognac eyes stared up at me through hooded lids.

“Too good.” I let her hair go and pushed her down on the bed and worked her jeans off. “I need to get you where I am.”





## *Chapter 12*

### Adita

In a flash, my recent fantasies were coming true. My legs were spread over Stone's broad shoulders and his beard tickled my inner thighs.

My hands gripped the comforter as his hot tongue lapped through my folds and found my clit. He hummed and moaned as he worked me over with his mouth, licking and sucking me into oblivion.

His thick fingers entered me, first one, then another. "You're so perfect, Adi. I've wanted to taste you since the first time I saw you."

A soft mewl passed my lips as he closed his mouth around my clit, sucking gently as he dipped his fingers in and out. My body was nothing but nerves building into thousands of tiny explosions as he gave one more good lick as he sucked, and my orgasm fired off with an intensity I'd never experienced.

"Stone, oh, I—" was followed by a series of words or sounds I couldn't even make sense of.

I was catching my breath in quick pants as he kissed his way up my body. When he made up further, he tugged at the fabric on my bra. "Lose this," he growled.

I suddenly got a second wind and hustled to lean up and unhook my bra. He pulled the straps from arms, anything but gently, and pinned my arms to the bed by my wrists. His mouth found my nipple; my eyes closed, my core aching for him.

“Stone, I want to feel you inside me.”

He growled again, only worsening the need. He released my wrists and leaned over to the night table. After quickly sheathing himself, his mouth found the other nipple and I writhed below him, my body searching for its desire.

“Stone, please,” I begged.

He climbed the rest of the way up my body and found my mouth. My hips moved under his big body, still not satisfied with the emptiness he hadn't filled.

After a long, slow kiss, he pulled away and he gently opened my eyes. “I want you to look at me as I fill you up. You need to remember this moment, because this is the moment I'm claiming you as mine.”

I gazed up at him, my heart clenching at the softness of his voice and the sincerity in his eyes as he spoke. “I'm waiting impatiently for just that.”

Without breaking eye contact, he pushed himself inside slowly. Even though I craved for him to be inside, I also didn't want to rush that moment. It was hot, but it was also sensual, and almost...loving. It made my heart swell as my center ached for another release.

When he was pressed to the hilt, he dropped his mouth to mine. Our tongues danced as our hips rocked together. His hands ran up mine again, his fingers threading through mine as they reached up over my head.

My legs wrapped around him, but his body was so wide I couldn't get my ankles to cross. But the feel of his weight and size overpowering me was blissful.

“You feel too good, Adi. I want this to last forever, but I don't think I can last much longer.”

I squeezed his fingers tighter. "I'm ready." I tightened my legs once more as best I could and rocked my hips fast as he met my pace.

My channel tightened and he let out a moan that sent me over the edge. As I cried out and my body stiffened, he grunted, pumping harder several times before his grip loosened on my hands.

He held himself off of me but was still laying over me. I whimpered as he pulled himself out, but I knew it was best with a condom so as to not have any accidents. Still, with the loss of him inside me, I needed him more. I pulled my hands away from his and wrapped them around his shoulders, pulling him down closer to me.

"I don't want to crush you, Adi."

"That's dumb. It's a bed. You can't crush me. I want your weight over me for a minute."

He chuckled. "Yes, ma'am."

As he rested over me, I dug my face into his thick beard. When he finally pressed himself up again, I reached up and grabbed it. "I just want to play with this all the time."

"You can do whatever you like."

He gave me a peck then excused himself to clean up and brought me back a warm washcloth. After he wiped me up, he pulled the covers down, so I slid under and he got in next to me, pulling me close.

"You're mine now," he said in my ear as he cuddled me from behind.

"I'm sorry. I think you're confused, sir. You are mine," I shot back.

"Fair enough. I'll do or be whatever you want."

I ran my hands over his. "Well, good. Because you may have to take care of me after that fucker tells my boss about tonight."

Stone kissed my shoulder. “Don’t worry about that, Adi. Just rest. You’re gonna need it because I’m not done with you.”

I clenched my thighs but then rolled to face him. “Oh yeah. I’m ready when you are.”



## *Chapter 13*

### Stone

“Place looks great, Bash,” I said as I put my arm around Adi at the Spoke. She had to work, but probably wouldn’t work there much longer.

After we finally hooked up, I went back to her office and demanded Chad be at the very least written up for stalking his coworker and threatened to pull the contract and help Adi if they even thought of reprimanding her for having another job.

Needless to say, Mr. Lowell had done his homework and knew SRI had our hands in a lot and could make his business fall to the ground.

So instead, we signed another contract for a different building we wanted constructed, and she got the lead on it. Along with a nice new office.

“I had a lot of help from Rickie and Adi,” Bash said with a smile. The whole place looked like a bottle of stomach meds exploded, but it was Valentine’s Day and pink ribbon was the theme for breast cancer awareness, so it worked.

“Hey,” Pipes shouted from behind the bar.

Adi rolled her eyes. “Thanks for your help, Pipes. The pretty streamers look great.”

“Yeah, because none of you could reach.” He winked at her.

I scowled at him, and she slapped my arm. “What. He shouldn’t wink at you.”

She grabbed her tray then came back for a long kiss. “I don’t care who winks at you because I know who’s going home with you.”

“About that, what time you get to leave this party?”

“When it slows down, I suppose. Rickie knows I won’t be on much longer and she needs to cash. Why?”

I grabbed her hips and pulled her close. “Because I want you on my bike, then in my bed as soon as possible.”

She had already ridden once. It would have been more, but the weather was shit and she deserved to be comfortable. But the only thing that compared to her legs around me on the bike, was her legs wrapped around me in the bed.

“Well, why don’t you help me get these guys to donate and we can hustle them out.” She stood on her toes and gave me a peck and grabbed my beard with her free hand. “Because I can’t wait.”

The End

## *Note from Author*

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed the story and appreciate your support to the charity. If you liked my submission, I hope you'll follow me and check out some of my other work!



## *About the Author*

April Berry is a romance author born and raised in Georgia. She still resides there with her husband, son, and daughter. When she's not creating fun stories with happy endings, she loves to bake, read, snuggling with her various fur babies, and binge-watching series!

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# *Pretty Weeds*

**A Tavers City Story**

By Becca Fogg

## *Blurb*

Violet *hates* Valentine's Day. As the coven's woefully single, resident screw-up, she's forced to walk the ward lines each year while everyone else enjoys a loving good time.

*But this year is different.*

When a strange newcomer rolls into town, Vi has to bring her along on her annual torment to show her the land.

Perhaps if Vi had actually been doing that, instead of watching Brynn's backside, she wouldn't have cracked one of the ward's moonstones.

Can they fix it before something gets in ... *or out?*



## *Note*

***Content Warnings:*** This book contains cursing, a minor amount of violence, dominance by the love interest, and a moderately spicy FF relationship.

# *Contents*

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## Chapter One

*Crotch ... range ... sing?*

*Wok ... form ... angling?*

The handwriting on this note is a step down from chicken scratch. The paper tears at the edge while I twist it to see the words better in the moonlight.

I don't understand why the High Witch felt the need to leave me a note. Jay and I are the only single people in the coven. Like every year, I assume we've been assigned to walk the perimeter and check the moonstones.

Because it's fucking *Valentine's Day*.

I hate Valentine's Day. It's nothing more than a commercialized, sanitized holiday meant to line retailer pockets and ...

*Deep breaths, Violet ...*

Anyway, thanks to being the only uncoupled witches, Jay and I are annually sentenced to walk the ward line of the coven's protected property. I didn't bother to ask if we're assigned to patrol; I know we are.

The task isn't difficult, per se. The worst I've ever come across is a stone that's fizzled out.

The coven grounds sit on 17 mountainous, wooded acres. That's wonderful for privacy. It is not wonderful for maintaining our protective circumference. We'd normally split into six pairs so it isn't so cumbersome, but not tonight.

Because it's *Valentine's Day*. Gag.

My shoelace snags on the brush and comes undone. I pause to retie the bow.

And procrastinate a bit.

Standing, I set my hands on my hips and deeply inhale the cool night air. The moon's just past full and still kicks off crisp, residual energy.

My feet slip on the muddy ground while I resume my climb. I'm wearing hiking boots—skies know I'll need them tonight with the rain all afternoon—but I'd rather not destroy them before I've started. I dressed for the weather and exercise, in my stretch black jeans, "Get Lit" full moon tee, and zip up jacket. I've even plaited my thick, wavy hair into a complex braid to keep it off my face.

And to procrastinate some more, of course.

Although now I'm late.

It's a miracle I found the note the High Witch left. I nearly skipped checking the box at the bottom of the mountain.

I may have, kind of, been procrastinating again.

And sincerely debated blowing it all off and hoping Jay doesn't go nuclear.

*Yeah right.* If pettiness were a drink, Jay would be salt water—which is why I love him.

Nothing like a night of tedious exercise to emphasize where you are on the coven's pecking order.

At 26, I'm also a "youngster witch." I may have been casting and chanting since I could stand unassisted under the moon, but I don't hold a candle to someone like High Witch Miri Sinzel.

The two-story cabin comes into view on the hilltop. We're forbidden from driving anything with a motor past the ward line, so I've already been hiking through the woods for a solid 20 minutes.

Yes, that's right—Jay and I will have the distinct displeasure of hiking part way down a fucking mountain and, when we're



exhausted in the middle of the night, slowly climbing up to the cabin.

The screen door hinges scream and the front door swings easily.

“Jay?” I call out. The expansive great room echoes my voice. It doubles as a meeting or party room for our 80-strong coven.

The door was unlocked. He has to be here.

*Right?*

No one can get past the ward line. It’s impossible. The protective circle has safeguarded our land for over 50 years and I’ve never heard of something getting in.

Except, we patrol it for a reason. It isn’t just the High Witch’s power trip.

*Unless—*

“In here, Vi!” Jay finally replies.

My heart rate settles at his voice. We keep a lot of valuable, powerful objects in the storehouse. A breach could be catastrophic.

His voice came from the kitchen. With any luck, he made coffee for two and the night will get a skosh better.

Jay’s a good guy, attitude aside. His dating stories are always 10 times more impressive and hilarious than mine.

Besides, I stopped trying years ago. What’s the point?

No one ever leaves Tavers City, and few witches choose city living. Those that move here tend to pick the coven based in Canary Pointe, on the outskirts and among the tract homes.

Witches don’t usually like the chaos of the metropolis or the commute for meetings out here.

Not me though. I’ve got Annie and my job at Parsens, such as it is. It pays well and I get to see my best friend all day, so why would I choose something else?

When I pass through the hallway into the kitchen, I find Jay and a woman I've never met before. Hair so dark, it's black is bound into a high ponytail and emphasizes bright green eyes.

Joggers are emphatically *not* sexy, except when she's wearing them. Between the way the pants curve against her thighs and the fitted tank and sports bra, I have to remind myself that staring is inappropriate.

Shit, those thighs. I bet her—

“Vi, this is Brynn Hathaway,” Jay says, and it snaps me out of my perusal of our newcomer. I don't think he noticed because he never pauses. “Brynn's new in town. You moved in with your aunt?”

The woman in question grasps a teardrop citrine hanging from a gold chain around her neck and swings it side to side so that it's impossible to do anything but watch her do it.

“Great aunt,” she replies, and the alto tones in her voice are sultry and sexy as fuck. With my luck, she's already tied to someone, but I don't see any binding jewelry so perhaps not?

Except that when her focus is on me, it's an annoyed glare. The woman—Brynn?—assesses me with clear disapproval of my drooling.

“Hi,” I say and double-check the scrawled note. “Was I supposed to meet you?”

“Yes,” she growls. “An hour ago.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. I can't read the note.”

“And it never occurred to you to clarify your instructions?” she presses.

Her tone is tight and full of reproach. I get that she had to wait an hour, but Jay is great company. There's no need for the dramatics.

“Giving Miri yet another reason to chastise me is low on my to-do list,” I say, and Brynn gives a little smile then hides it away. “You ready to go, Jay? I'd like to get back sooner rather than later.”

“That’s what the note’s about, Vi. I’m relieved of duty. You’re walking Brynn around the perimeter and teaching her the land.”

I groan. “Tonight? Seriously? The renewal festival is tomorrow. I want to be done and go home for some extra rest. You *know* they’re gonna make us clean up.”

“I don’t mean to be such a burden to you,” Brynn snips. She crosses her arms, and it crushes her breasts together in a way that must be intentional. It draws my gaze right to her neckline again.

“Don’t take it personally,” I reply and avert my eyes. “I don’t want to walk with Jay either.”

“Hey, I’m fantastic patrol company,” he objects.

“Sorry, Jay. You know I love you. It’s just a shitty job on a shitty day.”

“Sure, sure, Violet. You got this?”

“Yeah, I’ll talk to you later.”

Jay disappears, and I’m left alone with the stranger in my coven lands.

I stare at the floor and debate how to approach this. I don’t like being in charge of other people. Everyone should be allowed to do whatever they want.

“Eyes up,” Brynn snaps.

My gaze latches onto her and narrows.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me, Violet. Don’t drop your eyes when we’re talking. It’s rude.”

Her gaze burns into me. It’s intimidating and aggressive, and I have to tamp down the thrill it shoots up my spine because there is no circumstance where I’ll be giving in to *that* temptation.

Brynn might be fun for a quickie, but I am not interested in someone that aggro.

“Oh, fuck you very much,” I spit. “You don’t decide where or how I look.”

“No? Even when it’s to ogle my chest?”

“I wasn’t ogling!”

“But you admit you were looking.”

“Are you saying you don’t want me to look?”

A slow, knowing smile spreads on her full lips, and one corner tips up. She approaches and, despite being only a few inches taller, seems to tower over me in a way that leaves me edgy.

When she speaks, her voice is low and sinister.

“You’re acting like a weed and not a pretty little flower, and I’m a very good gardener.”

*A weed and not a ... what? Does that mean she wants to kill me?*

*She’s welcome to pick me however she likes.*

*No, none of that, Vi. Get this night over with.*

I dismiss her with another wave of my hand and respond.

“Now that we’ve gotten the hobby portion of our introductions out of the way, can we start the patrol? My feet already hurt a little and I’d like to be able to watch the last episode of *Survivor* before I fall asleep tonight.”

She harrumphs but motions to the door.



The cool night breeze brushes over my skin like the skies themselves have blessed me.

I love walking our land. It’s unpolluted and idyllic, and there’s nothing better for the mind or complexion.

The dense woods break occasionally into clearings and meadows, but mostly the ward line runs in an oval down the mountain. It encircles the tents and stone rings so that all of

our ceremony spaces are protected along with the repository at the cabin.

It isn't difficult terrain exactly, but the craggy surface can get so steep that we have to climb at places.

My shoelace has come undone again, but I don't bother to retie it. The laces are too thick and I can never knot it right.

Brynn and I walk in an awkward silence. We can't see the line itself, only the gently glowing stones indicating its presence.

Still, her head swivels this way and that, like she's constantly scanning for dangers that can't exist on this side of the ward line.

She must know this if she's an experienced witch. Even animals inside the boundary are unable to attack those connected with the land.

It irks me that she won't walk beside me. She doesn't know our territory—she's an interloper here—yet she insists on acting like she needs to look out for me.

Every 18 feet, another stone glows in the bright moonlight. This is our entire function—walking in a line along the moonstones, making sure they're connected to both the last and the next and also charging in the moonlight.

We're a good half hour from the cabin when we hit a steep area and have to lunge sideways to get down the face.

Brynn, however, seems totally unfazed. She casually strolls along as if slick rock and mud are barely a concern.

She gingerly hops from grassy space to grassy space like some kind of sexy, lithe fairy. I want to hate her for it, but it's a little fun to watch.

That is, until she abruptly stops short.

I may or may not have been distracted by watching her ass when she does.

I knock into her, and she manages to stay upright, but of course I'm not so lucky.

My ankle rolls, the pain lancing up my calf, and my foot slips straight out. My legs fly in opposite directions and gravity forces me into a half split while I land pussy-down on wet leaves. I put my arms out to brace my fall but painfully strike stone.

*Perfect.* A night of walking with a sore ankle and crotch.

“What did you do now?” Brynn asks.

“I fell. Calm down, B.”

She tilts her head at me as her jaw clenches. She makes the barest move toward me but stands her ground and fists her hands instead.

“It’s *Brynn*,” she says through gritted teeth.

“Could have fooled me.”

She hovers over me, those shapely thighs and that nipped waist teasing me in the night. Moonlight strikes half her face and leaves the other side in shadows. She has this menacing smirk that makes me both wary and excited.

She snakes a hand to the nape of my neck, grips the braid from the scalp, and jerks my head back.

Brynn leans over me, the citrine pendant knocking against my chest and her grin so close, her breath warms my lips.

“I’m Brynn to you, little weed. You can have my nickname when you’ve earned it.”

I try to wriggle free of her hold, but she stands firm.

“I have no interest in earning it,” I spit back.

She chuckles, and my face burns bright. I’m sure my cheeks are red, and it’s not from the crisp night.

Her eyes are so dark in the night they’re the deepest navy.

“Oh, but I think you do,” she purrs. “I think you need someone to tend you. Maybe then you’d have properly tied your boots. I’m not carrying you the rest of the way. If you’ve sprained your ankle, you’ll have to solve the problem yourself or deal with the consequences.”

“I don’t need you to do anything for me.”

“No? You can’t even tie your own shoes.” She releases my head, and I stretch my neck to shake off her touch.

“What I need is a bubble bath and a movie.”

“Fresh out of those.”

“Again, I did not ask you to provide it. Are you always this self-centered?”

Brynn huffs and sinks to the ground with her knees on each side of my injured foot. She spreads the sides of the boot and prods at my ankle. It’s a little sore, but I don’t think it’s broken.

After palpating it a moment, she tries again and watches me for a reaction.

Satisfied I won’t die of a twisted ankle, she digs her knee into the toe of my boot to lock it in place. She yanks on the crisscrossed laces to sharply tighten them.

Like before, she hovers over me on the ground. She’s barely touched me until now, but watching her use long, deft fingers to take care of me warms my chest.

Steady, efficient hands retie and then double knot the bow. She gives a final jerk on the loops to make it impossibly tight.

When she glances up, a sly smile spreads across her face.

“I think you’ll live,” she informs me.

“Thanks. I was waiting for your confirmation.”

Brynn rolls her eyes and stands. She pivots and starts back down the mountain.

My hands are gross and wet leaves stick to my legs, but when I attempt to get up, I’m frozen in place.

Because under my hand, cracked in two and icy cold, is one of the moonstones that formed the ward line.

And its illumination is dim.





## *Chapter Two*

“I’m going to be in so much shit,” I whine.

Brynn yanks harder on my wrist to haul me up the mountain. The cracked moonstone swings in her other hand for momentum while she drags me to the cabin.

“Then make haste,” she replies.

“Dislocating my shoulder will slow us down.”

After my initial panic attack over breaking the stone subsided, reality crashed into me like a fireball.

There is a gaping hole in our ward line.

The land isn’t protected. Things can get in—and take our stores out.

To make matters worse, tomorrow is the festival to purify and renew the land. If anything gets in that shouldn’t be here, not only will the coven have to deal with the damage, but we may miss the blessings for a whole year.

And, possibly worse, it’ll prove to Miri yet again that I deserve to be a lowly coat room attendant.

At least I haven’t started crying yet.

“Miri is going to punish us for weeks,” I bemoan.

Brynn swings around to me.

“If you’d bothered to tie your shoelaces, we wouldn’t be in this mess,” she spits.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. If you hadn’t stopped, I wouldn’t have fallen.”

“If you’d been watching the trail and not my ass, you’d have seen me stop.”

“Watching your ass means I should be aware when you stop.”

“And yet you didn’t see the stone.”

“I didn’t fall on it on purpose!”

“This is pointless. We fix the stone quickly and no one will be the wiser,” she growls and resumes dragging me along.

When I first spiraled, she gave this momentary frown like she was unhappy I was upset. Now, though, she’s more focused than a double dose of ADHD meds.

Brynn forces me up the mountain, and a brisk yet interminable ten minutes later, she’s charging through the house. She heads directly for the storage room at the other side.

“How do you even know where you’re going?” I ask.

“I had an hour to wander around, remember? Jay showed up only a few minutes before you.”

“Why would he show up if he was relieved of duty?”

“He couldn’t read the note.”

Blood vessels burst in my skull. *No this bitch did not.*

“So you believe and excuse when Jay can’t read Miri’s handwriting, but when I do it you act like I’ve committed a capital offense?”

The storage room door flies open so fast that wind from the door whips her hair. She whirls me by the hand into the crowded warehousing area. Wire shelves lined with opaque plastic create winding corridors.

The insulated metal structure is easily the size of a suburban strip mall. Aside from the open area near a stone worktable and drawers for tools, the aisles are egregiously small and leave little room for my futile flailing.

The overheads flicker, but they're bright enough to see where we're going. They also cast creepy as fuck shadows. It's bad enough to have the jarred organs out, but to have them subtly illuminated is more Halloween than Valentine's Day.

Dust clogs the air while we disturb the sediment merely by walking through.

"There's no point in rehashing it," Brynn says. "Let's find the replacement stone and be done with it."

I harrumph at my companion but squeeze my way to the workstation where the card catalog is.

Yes, that's right, the High Witch really likes her old-school systems. We've tried to have her upgrade to digital several times, but she always defers. My theory is she's worried we'll find all the stuff she has hidden if we make a meaningful attempt to clean it out.

The drawer groans in its tracks and my fingers fly over the cards until it comes to the right entry.

*Moonstones, prepared—Quantity: 2*

*Quadrant 3, Aisle N, Bin Gamma*

Truth be told, I'm relieved there are any moonstones at all. They're incredibly difficult to come by. They could have lost their charge by now. They fade so quickly, and I wouldn't be surprised if the ones in the bin are dead. Someone is supposed to check all of the expiring stock monthly, but I'm often that someone, and well ...

No sense defeating myself just yet. We'll retrieve the moonstones. It'll charge enough in the night to survive the daylight.

No one needs to know about our little mishap.

Brynn follows behind me for once until we make it to the correct aisle. She skims fingers over the boxes and bins while we search for the right location.

"There," I inform her.

"Fucking finally," she mutters.

We both reach for the shoebox-sized plastic bin.

When we each get hands on it, I yank it to take control.

This is my coven and my mistake.

She might not even have clearance to be in here.

Except that Brynn fucking Hathaway also tugs on the box.

“I’ll take that,” I say and pull it to myself.

“That’s not a good idea,” she replies and tugs it back.

We trade back and forth like that for a solid twenty seconds before I get frustrated. I try to tear the box out of her hands, but she swings me around and slams my back into the shelves.

Metal and bin contents rattle from the force of the shove. Her hand grips my throat tightly while she pins me against the sturdy vertical shelf supports.

She might have the box gripped under one annoying arm, but she lifts her knuckles to force me to look her in the eyes.

Golden starbursts around pale-green irises are emphasized when her pupils dilate in the dim light.

Brynn is irate, her eyes wide and her fingers on my neck firm.

But having her this close, with her hand on me, makes my heart race. My breathing sprints to catch up, and I can tell she senses it.

The grip shifts ever so slightly, so that it’s less for choke and more for control.

I swallow against her fingers, and her gaze dips to my lips.

Her proximity prompts a new series of fantasies that involve using the worktable in a way I’ve never thought about.

I bite my lip, and she leans closer. Her forearm rests against my breasts.

But she never breaks that intense eye contact.

My heart jackhammers beneath my ribs, and I consider for a minute that she might actually kiss me.

*Do I want her to?*

No. Fuck her and her animosity.

But also ...

This woman is a force. Fierce and beautiful, with a body that makes me want to lick and suck every inch of her. I'd definitely enjoy kneeling for her.

"We don't have time right now," she murmurs but seems to be saying it more to herself than me. Her fingers slide up to my jaw and she forces my chin higher.

Brynn presses a gentle kiss on my lips, and my eyes sink closed to enjoy the feel of it.

Energy crackles between us, even in the brief encounter.

"Hmmm, such a sweet girl under my thumb. I'd bet good money you're a thing of wonder when you come."

The barest whimper escapes. My skin is alive, my muscles tense and anxious for her to return for more.

Every breath is a plea for her to continue.

My exhales on her hand feather over her skin to convince her to kiss me again.

"Fuck, little blossom. I love watching you bloom. Let's fix the stone and you can show me to your place."

I manage the barest nod despite her hand on me.

She releases me, and it's like I'm more confined than before. I want to touch her, to taste her. I barely got anything from the kiss. The pull toward Brynn is like nothing I've ever experienced.

She raises a knowing eyebrow but doesn't comment further.

In the worst kind of foreshadowing, the box's latches are already disenchanting. She pops the lid and curses.

Dust plumes as she drops the top onto a shelf.

The container is empty. At the bottom, there's another note in the High Witch's neigh indecipherable handwriting.

*Lent ... to?*

But the rest is blank. Brynn leans over and squints at the awful handwriting.

“This is impossible,” she says with a grunt. I snatch the paper from her hands and hold it up to the weak fluorescents, hoping that it’ll give away more clues.

But when I raise it to the light, hidden text peeks through the thin page.

I add my own curse.

“We have to visit the Crone Coronada.”



Whenever someone says they have to visit the Crone Coronada, everyone in the conversation shudders.

The crotchety woman is easily the oldest person I’ve ever met. Maybe it’s her preference for mismatched patterns and colors and pungent incense, but I always seem to have a headache after I’ve been to see her.

If the High Witch lent our only charged moonstones to her, then it should be as simple as asking for them back.

*Should be.* Hilarious.

Brynn insisted on driving. She’s got this aggressive, demanding tone that I like despite myself.

Or maybe I’m just desperate to get laid.

*Fucking Valentine’s Day* convincing me I need to fornicate. This is societal conditioning at its worst.

Admittedly, I get the sense I’d enjoy screwing around with Brynn every other day of the year, but that’s beside the point.

The Coronada’s shop on the edge of the city is as stereotypically witchy as she can make it. Between the boarded-up windows, random menacing gargoyles, and overgrown plants, it has the aura of a place that is uninhabited and forbidden in the moonlight.

She waxes poetic to anyone who will listen to explain her genius marketing by making the non-magical population “feel the experience.” I’ve always thought she simply wanted an excuse to avoid dusting an entire shop’s worth of compacted tchotchkes.

The bell on the door jangles and the musty air has a pungent hit of burning sandalwood and roses.

*Fantastic.* The Coronada’s embracing the “holiday” spirit. Granted, she is a businesswoman, so I suppose I should have expected that.

“Come in, girls,” the Coronada says, her voice craggy. “Come tell me what an old witch can do to assist on this lovely eve.”

I’m busy rolling my eyes when Brynn reaches for me. She continues her habit of dragging me by the hand through the shop. It isn’t that large, but it’s still disconcerting to have someone lead me around. As if she senses my discomfort, she braids our fingers together and her thumb massages mine.

We pass glass shelves covered in all manner of vials, bottles, books, and figurines. Three different incense burners scattered through the shop convert the pleasant woody half of the aroma into overwhelming.

In the corner, the Coronada stirs a bubbling cauldron tinted with swirls of bubblegum pink and lavender. Today’s caftan is a mind-bending combination of chartreuse cartoon hearts being stabbed by bloody daggers.

“Yes, what can I—” She cuts off her words and jettisons the comically large wooden spoon in the cauldron. “*Ah.* What has Miri sent me today?”

Brynn and I exchange a glance. She squeezes my palm.

“We’re here to retrieve the moonstones lent to you,” she says.

*Smart.* Not attributing it to the High Witch but also making it clear what we need without saying why.

But the Crone Coronada is unimpressed. Her eyes tighten as she tilts her head.

“Your mistress told me I could keep them until the summer. The festival is tomorrow. Has something happened?”

*Here it comes.*

“The moon is very full tonight on our land,” I jump in to say. “If you’d prefer to only part with a single stone, then that would still fulfill our purpose.”

“I can charge them myself,” she says sharply. “I also maintain them, girl. I don’t need a minder. I’m old, not senile.”

*Shit.* I realize that if we borrow a stone from the Coronada, we’ll have to replace it eventually. I haven’t the faintest idea where to find a prepared moonstone. We still have the cracked rock stored in the bin for safekeeping, but I’ve never been particularly good at mending.

“Of course not, Coronada,” Brynn says. “We come in the utmost respect.”

She grunts at that and eyes us both. Scrutiny and skepticism coat her expression. She considers us like this for a long moment, and her eyes sink to our joined hands. A knowing smile crosses her face.

“You may have them back to charge on the coven’s land, just as soon as you provide a temporary replacement.”

“A ... what?” I stutter.

“A replacement. Can’t be leavin’ my shop unprotected.”

“Right, of course,” Brynn says. “We unfortunately aren’t prepared and apologize. What can we provide in exchange? Your safety is vital to our community.”

That’s laying it on a little too thick. She doesn’t know the Coronada’s place in our ranks. She’s basically the wacky aunt of the coven.

The lack of familiarity is obvious, even to the Coronada.

“I don’t trust you, girl,” she says, poking a grizzled finger at Brynn. She nods to me. “You though—you I know.”



“Born and raised Silverthorn coven.”

“Lauren’s girl.”

“Yes.”

“She still have that limp?”

It’s a trick question. The Coronada cured my mother’s limp three weeks ago—which means she’s testing me. She could be figuring out if I’m a shapeshifter or some kind of mimic.

Which means she doesn’t trust me either for some reason.

“Not since your tonic,” I inform her. “Thank you for helping her. You know my mother; she’s more likely to complain until the moon sets than fix it.”

The old woman delivers a lopsided grin and nods crisply. “Fine. I’m sure you want to be on your way. The wards around the shop aren’t complex. If you can bring me an amethyst, it’ll do in a pinch.”

That’s not so bad. We probably have some at the cabin.

“Yes, Coronada,” I say.

She draws her head back and the grin spreads into a Cheshire smile.

“You know where to find a nine-inch, wish-kissed amethyst, girl?”

I gasp out a *what?* before I can stop myself.

“Amethyst is the only commercially available stone that can replace a moonstone, but to allow it to hold a charge, it must be wish-kissed. I’ll need at least a nine-inch specimen to fill the void left by the moonstone.”

“Where are we supposed to find a wish-kissed amethyst, let alone one that size?”

“Ask Miri. Unless you cannot?”

She sits back on her stool and crosses her arms.

“She wouldn’t want us to bother her on Valentine’s Day,” Brynn tries.

*“Mhmm.”*

“Look,” I add before Brynn can sink us further. “It’s clear we need a charged moonstone. We wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t urgent. Please tell us where we can find the amethyst for a trade.”

The old woman ponders my request and eyes Brynn with suspicion, but ultimately gives a belabored sigh and answers.

“The fae keep them locked away. A dragon might, but I only know of one in the city and he’s exceedingly possessive of his hoard. You’ll have to retrieve one from the gnomes, I regret to say.”

I curse under my breath. “There must be another option.”

“Afraid not, girl. May luck be with you.”

This time, it’s my turn to usher Brynn out of the store. When we get to her car, she swings me around to press me against the side of her sedan.

At first, I think she wants to kiss me again—which, all systems go—but instead, she frowns.

“Why do I have the sense that the gnomes won’t agree to releasing an amethyst?” she asks.

“Because they hate us. They resent that we ward the land at all and think the forest should be available to the community.”

“Joy. Then how do we get the rock?”

“Well, first we stop at my apartment for supplies, and then we break into their storehouse to steal it.”



## Chapter Three

My key slides into the lock on my apartment door.

And refuses to turn.

*Shit.*

I twist the metal to no avail.

Did the super lock me out? I paid my rent! The asshole is always leering at me, no matter how many times I not-so-subtly hint he presents zero appeal.

Metal ridges dig into my hand as I frantically attempt to spin the tumblers.

This is so fucking embarrassing. Brynn's probably going to think I've been locked out regardless.

The woman in question stands behind me. I can sense her eyes scanning the hallway of my apartment building. I don't know what danger she thinks she'll find on a fifth-floor walkup, but kudos to her for having far more diligence than I do.

I exhale hard, remove the key, blow on it, and try again.

Still, it refuses to turn.

I take my anger out on the key, forcing it to yield.

*Hell key sent to torture me, you will succumb!*

Stupid fucking slumlord property manager and his cheap ass locks.

"*Shhhhh,*" Brynn murmurs behind me. Her hands skim around my hips, her left hand sliding up to press wide fingers against my belly and her right tracking down my arm.

She presses her front to my back, holding me in an embrace with her chin on my shoulder.

“Be gentle,” she chides.

Her fingers wrap around mine and gingerly twist the key. The teeth connect and the bolt slides open.

“There. That wasn’t so bad, hm?” she says.

“You’ve had to deal with a landlord special before, I take it.”

“Not necessarily. You’re easily frazzled. The key wasn’t in the lock completely.”

“It was!”

“Calm, little bloom. We’re inside. Show me your apartment.”

“Thought I was a weed,” I mutter under my breath.

Suddenly, the weight of having her in my space comes crashing down. Her earlier promise ignites the warmth in my belly, and her touch on my stomach and hand amplify the effect.

Brynn seems to sense my stall because she winds our attached arms around my waist and steps forward like she’s leading me in a dance.

We clear the apartment door but she never releases me. Out of my line of sight, the door swings shut.

No, instead, she sways us side to side while her hands roam. Firm, insistent fingers tease up my body and palm my breast. The other hand ventures lower to sink between my legs, if over my pants.

The stretchy cotton is both too thin and too cumbersome. I want her to strip me down right now, Valentine’s Day or not.

My head drops back onto her shoulder, and shivers ravage over my skin as she sucks on my neck. She rumbles her appreciation and I feel it in my bones.

Brynn Hathaway is my impossibility. She came out of nowhere. I shouldn't trust her. I don't really know her.

And yet, I never want to leave this moment.

She spins me in her arms until I fall into the worn couch.

"We have business now, Violet. I don't want you in trouble with your High Witch. We can play after."

Smirking, I crawl off the couch and on all fours to where she stands in the middle of my living room. The cheap carpet and ratty rug barely register while I sway my hips to tempt her.

When I reach Brynn, I kneel at her feet and sit back on my heels.

"We have time," I inform her and stare the dare at her.

"We really don't."

The fabric of her joggers slides easily under my fingers. I drift my digits up the inside of one leg then wrap my hand around her perfect thigh. I inch forward and wait for her to tell me to stop.

But she doesn't.

Brynn peers down at me with a small smile on her face and hooded eyes like gray pools of desire.

I sink my face between her legs and nuzzle her with my nose.

*Fuck, she's divine.*

Without breaking eye contact, I nip at her crotch.

"We. Have. Time," I inform her.

She sinks her fingers into my braid and excitement jangles around in my system.

But she uses her grip to push me away instead of encouraging me more.

"We don't," she laments. "But we will soon. Protect your land. Fulfill your commitments. There is time when all is safe. Gather what we need to retrieve the amethyst and let's move on."

I stick out my tongue at her, but it only makes her wink.

Sighing, I stand and leave her to wait in the living room. My duffel is under the bed, and I'll need the lock pick set I'm shit at using and some pepper spray ... clean linen strips and a velvet bag to protect the rock ... a few random charm vials ... rope in case we have to scale a wall.

Who am I kidding? I can't scale a wall. I only have the rope to use for luck binding rituals that never seem to work.

And I'm no good at organization. There's a reason my BFF packs for us both before vacations.

As I hurry around the apartment, I have this niggling sensation that I'm missing something. I'm sure I am. Whatever it is, though, it's not important enough for me to remember in the moment so it can't be mission vital.

Brynn waits patiently in the living room, rooted to the spot I'd left her in.

Annoyance at her rejection simmers in my thoughts. With my B&E duffel over my shoulder, I walk straight past her and force *her* to chase after *me* for once.



By the time we make it to the docks, the moon's already swung upward to crest the night sky.

The gnomes own the entire shipping area so we'll have to find a discrete way to approach the warren of warehouses on the east side of Tavers. They also run the city's imports and exports trade, right down to "employing" every customs inspector. It's not like I can just dial up an informant.

No witch I know has been inside a vestibule granting access to gnomeland, let alone into the maze of corridors that chase between several different abandoned-looking warehouses.

There's a distinctively mafia-esque feel to the compound. Beefy guys in dark suits with jacket bulges patrol the area. We don't chance driving directly in, so Brynn parks at a tourists' recreational boating parking lot and we approach on foot.

I'd like to say we scaled a roof and peered over the side with binoculars like sophisticated thieves.

But, well, we aren't.

I've never broken into a gnome facility before. Few people have seen actual gnomes in person. They use hired guards. All I know is that they keep their most important stuff hidden away, probably behind an uncrackable vault.

We crouch on the pitted road behind a dumpster across from a building being patrolled by a pair of goons. I do my best to pretend that the reek of rotting fish, banana peels, and an unidentified sickly sweet odor doesn't make me want to retch.

"So, how do we get in?" Brynn asks.

"Hell if I know. Any ideas?"

She harrumphs. "This is your city. You don't know it's denizens?"

"First, no one says *denizens*. Second, the gnomes are incredibly private. They don't allow outsiders."

"Oh no?" she replies and nods to the door.

There, a bulky guy in a dark suit and white button-down approaches an entryway with a woman under his arm. When the door cracks open, there's a thick velvet curtain on the other side, and it's manned by a mean-looking brute with a black eye and a nose with five different angles on the ridge. The pair disappear inside.

"We are absolutely not seducing a guard to get inside," I say.

"You've tried to seduce me several times."

"Once is not several times."

"You've been throwing off pheromones since I met you, Vi."

"I have not!" I shriek, and she shushes me.

"I'm vetoing seduction," I say and give a final slice of my hand. "The only men I like are lanky nerds with good hands and better tongues."



“I’m not suggesting we actually sleep with him. It’s a means to gain entry.”

“They hate witches,” I note.

“We can disguise ourselves.”

“There has to be a better choice.”

But we circle the main building and come to the same depressing conclusion as before—we have no idea how to get inside.

“Where would we find a gnome looking for a threesome?” I grumble.

“Well, there’s that bar one block over.”

“You don’t have to know everything.”

“You snuck past the bar the same time that I did.”

Brynn and I skirt around buildings and stick to the shadows to work over to the bar she claims exists.

When we turn the next corner, light streams into the street from the rowdy bar. Inside, guys in white shirtsleeves clink comically large flagons of beer that spill all over the floor with each strike.

“Please don’t make me,” I whine.

“If you have a better idea, I’m open to it.”

“I have a rope.”

“I don’t think scaling the building will help.”

“No, it’s to ...” My voice dies before I can make an inappropriate joke. “It’s an idea.”

“How is rope going to help us?”

“Gnomes are collectors. They like trinkets and expensive items, but there’s one thing they like most of all.”

Silence hangs between us while I wait for her to guess the answer.

She gets frustrated and spits a, “*What?*”

“Information.”

“And you think we have something to trade?”

“They hate witches. We are witches.”

Brynn grunts at that. “Sounds like they’d attempt to torture us for that information. I doubt the High Witch would approve of us being taken hostage by hostile gnomes.”

“It’s better than trying to seduce one!”

“Enough of this.” She huffs and marches over to the back of the building.

“No! Wait, Brynn,” I whisper as loudly as I can without drawing attention.

My literal partner in crime never pauses. She checks both ways before crossing the street and flattening herself against the stone face. Black paint flakes off, revealing smooth limestone underneath. I chase after her in the dark.

Not ten seconds after we disappear into the shadows, a car navigates the turn. Headlights slice through the night, even in the intense moonlight, but we remain hidden on the opposite side of the street.

Maybe luck is on my side tonight after all.

A gnome in a gunmetal-gray suit exits the nondescript sedan and heads into the bar.

*Weapon.* I sigh inwardly. Literally anything lethal would’ve been good to pack in my B&E duffel.

“We have less than 40 seconds to move,” Brynn warns.

“Or what?”

“The patrol comes by. Honestly, you pay attention to nothing.”

“Well, we’re here. What now?”

Brynn leans against the wall and braids her fingers together.

“Up,” she instructs.

There, on the second floor, is a darkened window.

“I’m not going in there sight unseen.”

“If you don’t, we’ll be caught in 35 seconds and be prisoners anyway. Either we make it inside without notice or you get us caught. *Up.*”

Grumbling, I brace my foot in her joined hands and hoist myself up the wall.

I am not ninja enough for this garbage.

But when I wedge my fingers on the windowsill, the frame won’t budge.

“It’s stuck,” I whisper down to her.

There’s a precarious moment where it seems like only air supports me while she wavers this way and that before passing me a Bowie knife.

“Where did you get a dagger?” I squeak.

“Just get inside, Vi.”

The blade fits nicely between the stone exterior and the wooden casing. I pry the edge deeper then drag the steel against the stones’ uneven surfaces to work the window latch open.

“Faster, Vi,” Brynn warns.

“Going as fast as I ... *There!*”

The window swings out. The knife thuds against wood when I toss it inside. I grip the ledge and shimmy my way up the side of the building.

After rolling in, I whirl to the opening and stick my body halfway out.

Brynn takes a few steps away, then with three lunging strides, she rushes at the wall, plants a foot on the brick, and vaults several feet into the air.

*Why was that fucking sexy?* She literally climbed in my window.

Well, not *my* window. But kind of.

In the corner of my eye, the patrol rounds the corner of the building.

*Right, focus for now, Vi.*

Brynn curses and nearly pulls me out the window while trying to scramble inside.

We roll through. Brynn lands on top of me and we make a sound not all that different from the knife against the wood boards. It's a miracle neither of us was stabbed in the process.

We're awkwardly piled up in the dark room, with only the moonlight streaming through the windows.

"You like being beneath me too much," she murmurs, but there's a smile there.

"You're the one who keeps trying to top me."

"Trying?"

"You've yet to succeed, despite my offers."

A throat clearing makes both of us freeze.

There, on a rumpled bed, a burly guy in a white tank top and gray sweats sits on the edge of a bed. His hair is disheveled from sleep but his eyes are clear.

And there's a revolver in his hand.



## Chapter Four

“Not that I mind two beautiful women breaking into my room, but what are you doing?” the guy with a gun grumbles.

The firearm remains pointed at the ground. He doesn't seem angry so much as tired. His shoulders are slumped and there are bags under his eyes.

He's coated in shadows, though.

*Flashlight.* A flashlight would be great right now.

I suck at thievery.

“Six shots,” Brynn whispers to me.

“What?” I mutter back.

“She's tellin' ya' how many bullets are in my gun,” the guy interjects. “I'd rather not have to clean up a couple of bodies. Tell me what you're doing before I decide it's worth the effort.”

I debate going for the mace in my duffel. With my luck, I won't find it in the bottom, will have to dump all the contents, and probably spray myself in the process.

“I didn't know gnomes have enhanced hearing,” Brynn says.

We reorient ourselves so at least we aren't sprawled out on the floor, but he shakes his head at us before we can stand.

“Most people think gnomes are only a foot tall and wear pointy hats. Do I seem to be a foot tall ta' you?”

No, he's definitely not that.

If he stood, he could probably reach the ceiling. No red hat in sight. The only similarity is the spray of facial hair that's

closer to a five o'clock shadow than a beard.

He raises a bushy eyebrow. It was a rhetorical question, but now I feel like he wants an answer.

“No,” I stutter out. “You seem more like a giant than a gnome.”

Our mysterious third barks a laugh at that. “Aye, that I do. Hundreds of years of propaganda and bribes to the sprites will do that. Most of the non-magical population is clueless. I can assure you I’m proportionate in all ways.”

I roll my eyes, but he isn’t bad to look at. Broad shoulders and forearms like he’s spent his life swinging a pickaxe. His nose has been broken, much like the rest of the gnomes, but somehow it suits his wider face and square jaw. It’s like he needs an imperfection to seem less uncanny valley.

For someone who regularly strikes out on V-Day, tonight has been ... interesting.

“Thanks for the clarifying info,” Brynn says. “What do you want to let us leave?”

*I have already vetoed seduction, Brynn.*

Even with him.

“I’m not sure, truth be told,” he answers. “I’ve never had someone break into my room while I’m sleeping. I’d think you were here to pursue me but ya’ haven’t made a pass. You’re also not dressed how I’d expect a honey pot.”

“Hey, what’s wrong with the way we’re dressed?” I say, my voice going shrill and making Brynn shush me.

“You look lovely, woman, but I’d hope there’d be a lot more skin if you were here for sex. What do you want? I’d like to go back to sleep.”

Brynn and I exchange a glance, silently arguing how to play this. She clearly wants to pick up the earlier plan, and I am *not* willing.

The guy stomps a foot so hard, the floorboards rattle.

“The truth,” he thunders.

“We need something,” I spit out before my partner-in-literal-crime can beat me to an excuse. “Your storehouse is the only way we know how to get it.”

“*Vi!*” she hisses and shoves my shoulder hard enough that I fall over.

Brynn locks eyes with the guy, and he glares back.

Before I know what’s happening, she dives for her Bowie knife.

The guy on the bed springs into action. Two steps and his foot stamps down onto the blade the moment Brynn sets a hand on the handle.

He flicks his foot, and the dagger jumps into the air.

She launches after it, but he snatches it first and she falls helplessly against him.

Brynn Hathaway, the most dominant woman I’ve met in a good long while, crumples at the big man’s feet insolently.

He grips the hilt of the dagger and uses the rounded pommel to lift her chin.

“Your name, woman,” he demands.

“Brynn.”

“And her?”

“Violet.”

“Brynn and Violet. Such lovely, feminine names for breaking and entering. I like it. Show more skin next time and I might let you keep the knife.”

She harrumphs, but it only makes him smile. It displays even, white teeth with pointed canines. He notices me watching and tongues a chip in one side.

“Down, fella,” Brynn says. “Are all gnomes this hard up? We’re thieves, for fuck’s sake.”

“Pretty thieves. Now, Brynn and Violet. I’m Edo Akevan. For the thousandth time, what do you want?”



In the corner of my eye, Brynn's hands move in incremental changes.

"An amethyst," I admit and shift to draw his attention. "We need an amethyst."

"Amethysts are easy to come by," Edo says.

"Has to be wish-kissed and at least nine inches."

"I've got—"

Brynn surges forward, cutting off his words. She presses a small object against his gut. There's a flash of light, but I can't see what it is.

"Finish that sentence at your peril," Brynn says. He tilts his chin to peer down at her.

"I like you," he says.

"I dislike you."

That makes him throw his head back and bellow a laugh.

"You need me, little changer. Don't gut me yet."

"Will you make a trade?" I ask.

He studies me for a moment. His eyes skitter over my hair, likely wild and pulled from the braid, and then examines me from head to toe before coming to rest on the bare skin at my waist.

Brynn growls at his perusal, and her jealousy gives me a sudden spike of pleasure.

"Aye, I'll trade with you, witch. What I ask from you will be much more costly than an amethyst."

Brynn moves only a fraction of an inch, but he's there to snatch her wrist and thrust it away. She hangs in the air for a moment, still trapped in his hold. The chain with its talisman dangles freely from her neck.

They murmur between themselves, but I can't hear it from so far away. Whatever he says to her leaves her resigned, though, and she relents.

He lets her fall to the ground with a thump.

Brynn massages her wrist but remains tight-lipped.

“Now,” Edo restarts. “I will trade you. Are you willing to pay the price?”

“Depends on the price.”

“I want a favor.”

“No.”

The word spills from my lips without thought. I can’t make that kind of promise to a gnome. They hate witches. He could ask for anything.

“No? You’re the one breaking in, woman. I hold the cards here. I could fire off a shot and a dozen brothers would rush the room. How do you think they’d react?”

“But you haven’t,” I note. “If you were going to do that, you’d have done it by now.”

“Still an option for me, love. That leaves you far worse off with no chance at your prize at all.”

I cross my arms and pout my frustration.

“You gonna kick yer feet too?” he says with a chuckle.

“Come closer and we’ll see how hard I kick.”

“Oooh, feisty.” He looks down to Brynn. “I see why ya’ like her.”

“Can we move this along?” Brynn asks. “Not that stabby flirting isn’t fun, but we are on a timetable.”

They both turn to me.

“I’m not giving you an unconditional favor,” I inform him. “I’ll offer a favor that cannot require me to physically or mentally harm myself or others and which cannot require me to work against my covenant.”

“Wait—” is all Brynn gets out.

“Done,” Edo proclaims. “Come along, ladies. We have a stone to collect.”

\* \*\*

“This was a shit idea the first time and it’s shit now,” I bemoan.

My pants keep rolling down and force me to constantly hoist the crotch up. Between the low-slung waistband and the knotted midriff shirt, I feel incredibly exposed. My duffel swings haphazardly from my shoulder.

If this ruins the design on my favorite tee, I will *rage*.

Perhaps it’s also my askew hair, which I’ve unbraided and made a futile attempt to finger comb.

I suppose we’re intended to look like we’ve been rolling around in bed with Edo all night. A thick arm is wrapped around each of us, and the calloused hand on my bare waist is more fun than I should allow.

Brynn’s tinted gloss is smeared across his jawline.

The two of us stagger against him, both to make it seem like we’re drunk and also because he’s that much taller than us and it’s hard to walk with him draped around us.

She giggles—that’s right, *Brynn giggles*—and leans across him.

“*Try* to look like you’re happy, Vi,” she whispers.

“We can go back to my room and I can make you happy for real,” Edo adds.

“It’s a challenge to decide which of you is worse,” I reply.

We pass another mobster who’s jettisoned his jacket and kept his holster on. The guy nods to Edo.

“Are you some kind of big deal?” I mutter.

“Don’t worry about it,” he replies. “I’ve got respect. That’ll get us into the vault for what you need.”

More mobsters pass but no one stops us.

A few even make crass comments.

If they care that we’re witches, then it doesn’t show. They may not know. Lower level supernaturals can’t always detect

the magical signatures in those around them. Some of the guards we pass are human.

The stronger the magic, the more sensitive you are. I've always been a B student in that area, which is plenty to get by unless heavy magic is being used.

The atmosphere grows stuffy and cold, although we never move down stairs.

Edo leads us through winding caverns until we reach a secured room. Inside, crisscrossing steel bars like a jail cell protect the interior.

"Edo!" the guard says jovially. "Been a minute."

"Yup. Just promised my friends here they could see the vault. You know, something to remember me by."

The guy smirks and takes the clipboard from a cubby attached to the wall. He scribbles while he monotones the rules to us.

"No touching. No taking. *No sex of any kind.*"

He eyes me particularly, and I can't help but be a little insulted. The disguise is decent, but not that egregious.

"You got it, Carey," Edo replies, apparently oblivious.

He shuffles us in our three-wide formation into the cell.

If this has been an elaborate plot to trap us, then he's succeeded.

But, shockingly, Edo proves reliable.

The big guy leads us past stacks and shelves not all that unlike our own at the cabin.

*Unlike* ours, there isn't a speck of dust to be seen in the sterile, concrete-encased room.

"Here," he says and turns down an abandoned aisle. We come to a large series of sliding doors.

"What size do you need?" he asks.

"You know what size we need," Brynn grumbles.

“I want to hear you say it anyway. It’s fun. Ask me for nine inches.”

I sigh. “Please give us nine inches and some cyanide.”

Edo shakes his head and chuckles, but he releases us to punch in a code to the drawer.

As he does, I reflect on how there was absolutely no circumstance in which we could have done this without him. Even if we could have gotten through the entrance, we’d never be able to pass the guards, find this room, get past the door, figure out what drawer we need, and plug in the code.

I begrudgingly admit that Edo has earned his favor.

The man in question withdraws an oblong rock roughly nine inches long. Flecks of purple glitter on the surface.

When I reach for it, he holds it out of my reach.

“*Ah ah*. Still have to add the wishes.”

“Excuse me?” Brynn grounds out.

“The wishes fade once the intention of them are gone. Most people’s wishes aren’t as permanent as they think. In fact, it’s best that multiple people add to the charge.”

I could argue with him over it, but I’m tired and just want to go home.

“What happens to our wishes?” I ask.

“Nothin’ much. It isn’t gonna curse ya’. You just have to feed it a real wish, one with intention.”

Brynn snatches the rock from his hand. She holds it half an inch from her mouth to whisper her wish.

“May our evening’s purpose be fulfilled.”

She places a small kiss on the stone, and when she does, the shimmering purple briefly flares in an eruption of color.

She hands the rock to me.

“May our evening end happily,” I add and peck a kiss on the surface. A similar effect illuminates the stone.

Edo leans over the rock in my hand. He hovers close, his face inches from mine as he breathes against the rough surface.

“May I find the two of you again,” he murmurs and adds his own kiss. The stone illuminates his smirking face.

After carefully wrapping it in the linen scraps, I nestle it in my duffel bag.

At least I remembered something to protect it with.

Edo ushers us out of the bars and quickly escorts us through the winding halls.

As we reach a side door, a siren goes off.

We both whirl on him.

“Ah, one thing,” he says. “There are cameras in the storeroom and I’ll be tellin’ ‘em you spelled me.”

“Shit,” Brynn spits. She grabs my wrist, jerks me through the door, and we sprint out into the cool night.

As I glance back, the ridiculous, six-foot-five gnome gives us a cutesy little finger wave.

## Chapter Five

The Crone Coronada barely glanced at us when we returned to the shop. She tapped one end of her spoon onto the glass countertop beside the cash register.

“Leave it here,” she muttered. Once the stone was on the surface, she smacked it with the spoon and it morphed into a much smaller, smooth stone with a gentle glow.

Brynn and I didn’t question it. We exchanged a glance, snatched the stone, then disappeared out the door and never looked back.

I was expecting more fireworks, truth be told. Some additional task the Coronada conveniently “remembered” she also needed to be done. I’m sure she’ll find some way to blackmail us with our errand.

After all, we still haven't repaired the moonstone we cracked. It remains in the box in the storage room.

The moon crests the sky while we trudge to the site of my unfortunate fall that caused all of our issues.

When we arrive at the shadowy spot, the stones before and after the break still pulse in the night.

At least the ward line survived, albeit with a gap the entire night.

Everything seems to be fine. If something untoward had invaded, there'd be signs of chaos. Destroyed trees. A destroyed cabin. Hell, footprints would've given it away.

But the ground is pristine, marred only by the comical swipes in two directions where my feet slid out from under me.

We stand in the spot and scan the woods. Brynn's scrutiny is intense, her head straight and her ears clearly open and searching for anything out of place.

Not that she'd know. It isn't her land. But I appreciate the effort.

"Get to it, Vi. I want to be done for the night," she says.

Dropping to my knees, I smooth the area where the moonstone should be. In a perfect world, I'd measure the exact 18 feet needed between each one, but it only needs to last until tomorrow when I can come back with a tape measure.

*Tape measure!* Why didn't I take that from my apartment?

I begin the chant, the humming phrasing more of a song than verse. My index finger stabs into the dirt to build the three-dimensional glyph that will both produce the links of the ward line but also create a protective barrier around the stone from external attacks.

If only it also protected from my clumsiness.

The air thickens and static lifts the hairs on my arms. I can tell Brynn senses it too. Her chin dips, her focus drifting to my movements while she keeps her lookout.

When the moonstone connects and clicks into place, the ground shudders and a wave of magic cascades away in waves. It flows over Brynn and it's like she flickers in the moonlight. I've never seen anyone react that way to a ward, but also, I've never seen an uninitiated member of the coven pass the wards.

She's inside the lines. It shouldn't hurt or eject her. It wouldn't have let her in at all if she had ill intent.

"Let's head back to the cabin," she suggests.

"You don't want to finish the patrol?"

Brynn shrugs. "The ward has been open for hours. If something wanted to get in, it would have done so by now. I don't see any signs of a problem. Do you?"

"No."

"You know how to search for intruders on your land?"

*Scanning spell.* Yet another item I keep in my cache at the apartment and didn't bring.

I absolutely suck at breaking and entering.

"We have to go back for supplies," I admit.

The trek to the cabin is easier. Maybe I can simply breathe more freely now that the ward is enclosed again. There's less stress to be sure. My feet ache from running around all night, but it isn't cumbersome anymore. I bounce on my toes as we cross the trimmed grass around the porch.

No lights burn in the building, but that's to be expected. There's no one here. Everyone is still off enjoying their *Valentine's Day*.

And for some reason, I've enjoyed this one. Brynn might be heavy-handed, but she can be fun in the right circumstances.

Especially when those circumstances are squeezed into skin-tight black jeans.

Once inside the cabin, we head directly for the storage room. Searching spells are kept bottled by the dozen. With any



luck, one of the references explains how to repair a moonstone.

We split in two. I check the catalog for the spell and find the pink vial, while she retrieves the cracked moonstone and pulls a book off a shelf to search for a repair.

Liquid in my glass vile shimmers pearlescent in the dull overhead lights. I dump the contents into one palm, repeat the incantation, and clap my hands together. I know I've done it correctly when my palms heat.

*Excellent.*

With my fingers splayed, I throw my arms apart as forcefully as I can manage. Pink shimmer implodes from my spread hands, my position the epicenter of the blast that rockets through shelves, walls, and doors. It rattles the contents, hits the exterior of the cabin in less than half a second, and charges in all directions.

Brynn wobbles and grabs onto her necklace. She plants her feet to avoid being knocked over.

She really needs to be inducted, like yesterday.

The energy sizzles in my mind, and I sense it when the spell rolls over small animals and insects. The wave rams straight into the egg-shaped ward line and fizzles.

*Good.* Nothing amiss.

"All clear," I inform her. At least nothing got in that shouldn't have.

"Well done," she replies. The book is open in her hand, her face lit in a half smile and the rock halves on the worktable. "Because you're never going to guess how we fix the moonstone."

"Don't suppose magical superglue is an option?"

The humor in her expression dies.

"Did we seriously spend the whole night dealing with that decrepit crone then pimping ourselves to a gnome when you knew how to repair it all along?"

“What? That can’t be the answer.” I splutter. I rush over to her, but she snaps the book shut with only her finger to hold the place on the page.

“Oh, but it is, little weed.” She holds the tome open and taps on the entry with her index finger. “Care to explain this?”

“I didn’t know how to fix it. I was trying to be funny.”

“You failed.”

“No kidding,” I spit back. I scan the words for my own certainty.

*Moonstone repair: stone-compatible bonding agent, held as tight as possible, then a standard binding spell is chanted. Follow setting instructions of adhesive and stone will be ready to accept moonlight.*

“No shit,” I whisper. “Hey, I was right!”

“It’s not a celebration to accidentally get it right.”

“I’m taking my wins where I can.”

“Do you have any kind of adhesive here?”

The polished concrete squeals under my rubber-soled shoes. I march straight up to the cabinet beside the work table and pull open a few of the small, plastic drawers. After a handful of tries, I brandish the tube of B3000 like it’s a weapon. The two-part tube has been used before, but there’s plenty remaining.

Brynn snatches the object from my hand and reads the instructions.

“Apply liberally to each area to which adhesive is applied. Seal tightly for a minimum of five minutes. Cure time: 30 minutes.”

“That’s not too bad,” I reply.

“You have a vise or clamp of some kind?” she asks.

I search and search but can’t find a single clamp. I know we have them, they’re essential for building charm boxes, and yet none are present.

“You’ll have to hold them closed,” Brynn says. She winds the crimp at the end of the tube so that a generous amount of goo slops onto one half of the stone.

“Me? Why me?”

She stabs the other side against the applied half then twists them to fully coat it. Decadent brown eyes examine the rock closely then peer at me.

“Because I’m going to be busy.”

Brynn thrusts the stones at me. I don’t want it to cure wrong, so I fidget with it so the halves are properly aligned and then squeeze them until adhesive squishes out the side.

“Good girl,” Brynn purrs with a smirk. My eyes blow wide and drop to the floor. When she says it like that, I’ll do anything she asks.

She pecks around in the work station and produces a paper towel. I hold the joined halves out so she can wipe off the excess glue.

“Stay perfectly still now,” she informs me.

Except that Brynn doesn’t keep me company.

She disappears out the door. I call out to her, but she ignores my pleas.

I want to chase after her. I debate doing it.

But she told me not to move. I don’t want to break the stone again.

I also want to prove I can do this right and follow her instructions. I’m desperate for her to repeat what she’d just said to me.

*Good girl.* Yum. Delicious fun.

When Brynn returns, she has a black hobo purse slung over her arm. She hums her approval that I’m still standing strong, and my face warms.

“You’ve been good tonight,” she informs me. “I was worried when we set out, but you’ve done well.”

“I broke the stone, lied badly to the Coronada, and forgot half the supplies we needed to steal the amethyst. I had to give a gnome a favor to save myself.”

She clucks her tongue at me.

“Do you know what I see when I look at you?”

“A little weed?”

“No. A flower in bloom. Even weeds can grow to be beautiful. Dandelions and daisies. Many gardeners consider wild violets to be a pest.”

“I can be pretty annoying.”

“You did well tonight, Violet. Don’t sell yourself short.”

I roll my eyes.

“You did. Yes, the stone was broken, but you were able to find the replacements and, failing that, negotiated with the Coronada for a substitute. Your honesty won you favor with Edo, even if you had to grant him a boon to achieve it. One day, we’ll discuss making foolhardy promises, but for now, I think you need to give yourself more credit.”

Brynn plops her bag onto the worktable behind me. I can’t see what she’s doing unless I twist my whole body, and I don’t want to chance the halves separating.

“Don’t move, Violet,” she says again, and the command in her tone makes my spine straighten.

Brynn circles around me. Her fingers skim over my body. They trace the top of my ass then glance over my hips.

Around and around, Brynn stalks me in a circle.

It’s the barest of touches, but the connection is intense. I force my hands together in front of myself, the stone between them, and it takes all of my effort not to release the halves and turn toward her.

Brynn chuckles darkly while she prowls. I stop watching her specifically and instead let my eyelids droop so that I only catch the movement in my peripheral vision.

It creates a dangerous edge that adds an intoxicating shot of adrenaline to the warmth in my veins.

I should feel safe with her, she's saved my ass several times tonight, yet every alarm bell in my head alerts at once.

If Brynn is the big bad wolf, she's welcome to eat me.

My hair still cascades over one shoulder. I never bothered to rebraid it after the fiasco at the gnome's hideout.

Behind me, Brynn stands close—so close her hips brush against my ass and her breath is on my neck.

Black coats my vision. I close my eyes to focus wholly on her and the stone.

On how she waits patiently for me to respond.

On how her proximity is a dare to move that she doesn't want me to take.

I don't. Won't. I've had the whole night with her to tell me to listen.

She pecks a light kiss on my shoulder.

“So fucking good for me, Violet. How should I reward you?”

Firm, insistent hands wash over my waist. I love having her behind me like this. It's like she's there to brace me while I face the world.

Wet lips return to my skin. She nibbles at my ear and sucks on my neck. The urge to drop the stone halves is so strong, it has a life of its own, but there's no way I'm giving in now.

Brynn circles around in front of me. She tilts her head as her gaze wanders down my body.

“I'm going to touch you more. Tell me I can,” she murmurs.

I groan in response.

“Not good enough, Vi. Use your words and tell me I can make you come.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Please touch me,” I whisper.

“Good fucking girl,” she growls.

Her touch again is light. She flicks my hair over my shoulder and out of my face.

She walks her fingers over my shaking arms. I’ve been holding the stone closed for at least five minutes at this point, and my muscles quake, but there is no circumstance where I’ll let go before she tells me to.

Her hand ventures south, and she cups my core. Her fingers slide over me, and my arousal blooms under her attention.

“I’m going to take the stone now,” she says. “When it’s secure, I expect you to strip down for me and sit on the table.”

I nod, but she frowns.

“Yes, Brynn,” she says.

“*Yes, Brynn,*” I parrot back.

With a small smile, she takes the stone from me. She turns the object over in her hands, but it stays fused together.

I watch as Brynn places it carefully on a wire shelf. She removes her phone from her pocket, sets a timer, then sets the phone beside the rock.

“We have 25 minutes. What should we do, Vi?”

She eyes me, and it takes a few seconds for my brain to register what she’d said only a moment ago.

My boots get stuck and I have to hop around to get my pants free of my legs.

Brynn only stands back, her arms crossed but a hand cupping her face, while she poorly hides a smile.

As she instructed, in only my bra, I sit up on the worktable.

Is this a sacrilege? Probably.

Do I care? *Hell fucking no!*

The beautiful woman in front of me unwraps thick, wavy tresses from her hair tie. She combs her fingers through it a few times then rewraps the ponytail. Her hair is so dark, it almost looks purple.

The stone table is cold under my bare thighs and ass, but I barely feel any of it.

Brynn Hathaway is absolutely stunning. Brilliant, alight eyes are intense and predatory. They almost seem unreal, as if they could be every and any color and I'd never realize they'd changed.

“Show me what’s mine,” she instructs.

My eyebrows tent, and she smirks.

“Open your legs, Violet,” she demands, and the bite in her tone shoots fun, little jolts of electricity over my nerves.

I spread my legs, obscenely displaying my pussy to her.

She smiles at the tableau I'm presenting for her.

Brynn takes three tentative steps forward until she stands between my knees.

*But still, she doesn't touch me!*

This woman is going to kill me with anticipation.

Again, she skims those fingers over my skin, but this time, I'm bare and the sensation sinks into my bones.

My companion for the night hooks a finger into a bra cup and pulls it down so my breast spills partway out. She licks her lips, then her eyes lift to meet mine.

This Brynn is different. She's greedy with her gaze. I can practically hear all of the obscene thoughts in her mind.

When I turn my head to the side and present my neck to her, she attacks.

Brynn's mouth falls on my skin. Blunt teeth scrape against every nerve ending. She nips and sucks my neck and shoulder until I'm certain I'll be covered in hickeys, then she moves down to suck my nipple into her mouth.

A gasp escapes me, and my hands fly to her. One grips her ponytail and the other cups her jaw while she lathes my breast.

The gentlest of pushes encourages me to sit back against the wall. The surface behind me is no less cold or hard than the table, but I barely feel it.

Brynne sucks and licks her way down my body, pausing only to tongue my hip bones. My legs are still spread for her. I couldn't have closed them if I wanted to; I love her being between them more.

Her mouth moves to my core, and I immediately suck in a breath. Her tongue is hot and rough, her eyes black pools, and the thought of her between my thighs makes me wetter than I've ever been.

She wastes absolutely no time licking up every drop of arousal I have. I quake and my muscles are weak, but still my nerves are as taut as a bow.

When she circles that talented tongue over my clit, I let out a long, low groan.

I can feel her smile against my legs and prop my feet up on the shelf under the stone surface for more support.

Brynn, never removing her face, gropes around on the stone table. She locates her purse and pulls it onto the floor.

Out of the bag, she withdraws a curved, deep-purple vibrator in a clear case. It's shiny and clean, and the smooth plastic has a wider end that makes me pause.

The latch snaps open, the sound loud in my ears. She polishes a few small water droplets off it, so I know she washed it when she disappeared.

Between my legs, Brynn runs the toy over my soaked cunt then raises it to her lips. As she licks it, bright sigils flare to life along the length.

The show she puts on leaves me shaking with need. She fucks her own mouth with the vibe then thrusts it through my lips.

And Brynn watches me with rapt attention during each pass.



The vibrator sinks slowly into me, and I drop my head back. My nipples are hard peaks, so tight its painful, and she hasn't even turned the thing on yet.

My pussy is full, the wider end causing conflicting sensations of discomfort and pleasure. It's not bad exactly, just not what I'm used to.

That is, until she presses a button on the end of the vibrator and it buzzes to life.

*And holy fuck ...* I see literal stars. The intensity lowers but still, it rocks me to my core.

For several long minutes, Brynn fucks me with the vibrator only, changing the intensity in waves that make me worry I'll pass out if I don't come.

The sigils are warm and energized enough they may as well brand me in her name.

I whisper and beg to climax.

*Please let me finish.*

*Please make me come.*

"Please, I need it. I need it so bad," I whimper.

She doesn't listen. Instead, Brynn studies me while the vibrator impales me alone.

The woman between my legs braces a finger underneath the vibe and pushes them both into my cunt, and I squirm in joyful discomfort.

She tilts the toy upward, and it rides the line of the most exquisite pleasure and pain.

A tear falls down my cheek.

"Shhhh, Violet. You're doing beautifully, baby. The timer will go off any minute and you can come."

I nod, and knowing there's an end point helps salvage my resolve.

Brynn toys with me for a long time, longer than I thought possible. Her fingers play over my clit and tease me to the

edge of oblivion but then abruptly stop before I can get there.

My knuckles turn red and white from gripping the edge of the stone table, and it's like I'll fall off the Earth if I let go.

Liquid pools between my legs and I know that it's soaking into the surface.

Sex magic can be so powerful. I spare a thought for the binding that will come when the timer—

*Ring, ring, ring!*

The phone shrills, and I slump against the wall.

“Fucking finally,” I breathe.

Brynn leaves the toy inside me to shut off the alarm.

When she returns, she doesn't kneel between my legs again.

No, instead, she leans over me to kiss me. My cum is salty on her lips, but I don't care. I'll do just about anything she asks right now.

The vibe plunges in and out of me until I worry I'll pass out.

“*Hmmm*, so beautiful. Just as I thought,” she murmurs.

My body is wound so tight it's like I'll snap if I move.

Brynn seems to sense I am truly at my end.

She ratchets up the intensity on the vibe and sucks my clit into her hot mouth. Her tongue rolls in a circle.

I scream as the orgasm slams into me.

The impact is so intense that the garbled combination of words don't make any sense.

I've left my body. I am everything and nothing all at once as the pleasure implodes inside.

Tears fully stream down my face as I wrestle with the sensation. It's so unlike any orgasm I've had before.

Whatever she did with the vibe, I'm gonna need more of that.

I collapse onto the table. My head lolls, and my vision goes black for a few seconds.

Under my hand, Brynn positions the repaired moonstone so that my palm covers it.

“Say the words,” she instructs me, and I mutter my way through the spell. The stone sparkles to life.

Brynn moves to leave, but I snag her wrist before she can.

“Stay,” I tell her. “I want to make you feel like this.”

She smiles down at me then kisses my temple.

“I’m going to put the stone under the moonlight to charge, do a little cleanup, then I’ll be back.”

I attempt a nod, but, despite the extremely uncomfortable table, sleep consumes me.



“*What do you think you’re doing?*” The High Witch’s shrill voice cuts through my sleep.

I wrench into a sitting position then grip my forehead as the world spins.

“What happened?” I ask.

“What happened? *What happened?*” Miri screeches.

“Not so loud,” I groan.

“*What happened* is I discovered you passed out on the worktable in only a bra. Do we need to discuss masturbating in work areas, Violet?”

“Where’s Brynn?”

“Who?”

My eyes finally focus, but a search of the room does not reveal my night’s lover.

My clothes are neatly folded at the end of the table, though.

“Brynn. The new girl,” I add.

“What new girl?”

“Forget it. I’m getting dressed and going home.”

“If you think you can brush off this incident, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“Can you punish me later? I’m hella hung over.”

“Tell me about the patrol first. Did you and Jay find anything untoward?”

“Me and Jay?”

“Yes, child. Did you get drunk? Please tell me you finished the patrol.”

“Everything was fine. We didn’t let anything in.”

“Good. And the changeling?”

“Change ... ling?”

“Yes. Honestly, Violet. If I can’t trust you to babysit the property, then what should I do with you?”

“Nothing odd ...”

My words die as my brain finally revs up and recognizes her words.

She expected me to patrol with Jay.

And her notes to us were to warn us about a changeling.

*You need me, little changer. Don’t gut me yet.*

Edo’s words didn’t make sense at the time, but I didn’t think too closely about them.

Brynn is a fucking changeling.

*That absolute bitch lied to me!*

And made me come hard enough, I passed out.

But that’s beside the point.

Or is the entire point.

I squeeze my eyes shut and then open them as wide as they can go.

My High Witch assesses me, the tired disapproval clear in the tight-lipped frown and set jaw.

“Go home and get some rest, child,” Miri instructs me. “We have a long night ahead. You can make it up to me after the ritual is complete.”

There’s no sense complaining. As per usual, I’d expected to be on chore duty anyway. At least I’m not being punished any more than I would otherwise for being the coven fuckup.

For a moment, I mourn Brynn’s disappearance and subterfuge. There was something about her that made me feel fractionally less like I had to atone and more like I could get it right—no matter what “it” was.

As I stagger out of the cabin, down the mountain, and find my car still waiting for me, I can’t help but dwell on whether the night actually happened or was a figment of my imagination.

\* \*\*

A week passes by, but Brynn Hathaway consumes my thoughts.

The second I got to my car, I woke Jay up and bribed him with yet another unspecified favor to cover for her presence.

Not that he knows why, nor did he care with what I’d offered.

*Changeling.*

Changelings are outcasts. People think they’re evil, but all of the research I’ve done suggests they’re simply an unknown.

What was a changeling ... No, what was *Brynn* doing on our land?

I’ll never know. She disappeared. I can’t find one speck or hair left behind to scry with.

It makes a weird sort of sense. She probably got in where the break was.

I replay the sequence of events again and again in my mind—she stops short, I fall, and I find the moonstone.

They aren't that delicate.

I bet I didn't crack the rock at all, that somehow she did and Jay caught her in the midst of an attempt to steal from our storehouse.

Except, she didn't take anything as far as I can tell.

For whatever reason, I'm not even mad at her. I'm too busy missing her.

On day eight post-Brynn, I turn the key in my apartment lock and miracle of miracles, it actually swings open on the first try.

There, in my kitchen, Brynn Fuckin Hathaway bustles around the miniscule countertop.

The aroma of tomato sauce and melting cheese fills the air.

"Oh good, you're home. The lasagna's almost done. Real lasagna. Not that store-bought shit in your freezer."

I stare at her for several long seconds before my brain can reconcile the image of Brynn cooking in my apartment.

This will either go very bad or very good. Best not to provoke her until I know what she wants.

My keys jangle as I drop them into the little bowl beside the front door. I leave my laptop bag and step out of my shoes.

"I like my frozen lasagnas," I say.

"They're shit and your taste is shit."

"Considering you are my taste, that's probably fair."

"Ouch. Does that mean you're still mad I licked and left?"

"More that you never told me you were a changeling."

She freezes, the tongs in her hand halfway through coating lettuce in dressing.

"Is that going to be a problem for you?"

"You lying or you being a changeling?"

"Either. Both."

“I want to know why you were here first. And why you’re in my apartment.”

She sets down the utensil and skirts around the kitchen island.

Brynn stands close enough I can smell the soft, candy like, floral scent of her perfume.

“There’s no aunt,” she admits.

“No shit.”

“I wanted to raid your storage and Jay walked in while I was trying to figure out where things were.”

“And you thought, *Hey, let’s fuck with Vi’s head. That’s a night of fun?*”

“No, not at all, little bloom. I just ... Jay caught me and it rattled me. I wasn’t expecting anyone to be there because of the holiday. I thought if I told him I was taking the patrol, he’d leave and I could go about my business.

“And then you walked in, and it made me mad. You were there, this beautiful, sharp woman, alone on Valentine’s Day, needing someone to keep you company. I’d already sold the lie about my great aunt to cover for my presence.”

She straightens the hem of my shirt and steps closer.

“There’s something about you, Vi. Something I can’t resist. I’ve tried to stay away. Even watching you breathe in your sleep is fascinating. I don’t know why, but I need *more*.”

I peer up at her, and her eyes hold that wide, uncanny intensity I’d doubted and disregarded. Iridescent purple rims, deep ocean-blue irises.

“Do you want me to leave?” she asks and drops her hands. Brynn, always so overbearing, tucks her shoulders like she’s ready for me to reject her.

*Do I want her to?* No.

I should. Everything I’ve read says that it’s a bad idea to let her stay.

I can't trust her. There's no reason to.

Except, she leans forward and places a soft kiss on my lips. It's sorrowful and repentant, and it slices my hesitation in half.

She deepens the kiss, her arms wrapping around me, and the play of her lips is gentle and encouraging.

Brynn proves she's earnest by showing me.

She's sweet and considerate as she kisses the breath right out of me.

"I'll make it up to you," she promises.

"And if you can't?"

It's an honest question. I don't know how to trust her again, even if I want to.

"I'm not used to being around others long-term, but I'd like to try."

Several long moments pass, but I can't muster another answer.

She seems to sense my internal conflict.

"I want you, Vi. *You*. I know I can't keep you through lies. I know I have a lot to make up for. I know you have no reason to trust me. All I can do is promise you that I'll work hard to earn you."

I examine her. Her dark hair is tucked into that familiar ponytail that I've thought about every single night.

Often with my fingers between my legs.

She's dressed in more leggings and yet another tank and sports bra.

And stupidly, I like seeing her in it.

Gone is the domineering air.

I'm sure she could pull it out, but right now, she's yielding the position so I can make the choice on my own.

That she's stepped away and isn't trying to force it seals the decision.



“Tell me about the lasagna,” I reply.

Brynn smiles, and it’s this infectious flash of white teeth.

Do I trust her?

*Absofuckinglylutely not.*

But pasta is a good start.

**THE END**

**(for now)**



## *About the Author*

Becca Fogg is an American author who primarily writes spicy fantasy. She lives in New England with her husband and two children. When she isn't writing scandalous plot twists and pant-worthy spice, she enjoys escape rooms and reality competition shows.

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# *The Mental Breakdown*

Calla Claire



## *Blurb*

Join Willa, a heartbroken baker, as she enters the sizzling arena of *The Mental Bakeoff*— a brand-new baking reality show that promises a fresh start. Little does she know that her bitter past will rise up like yeast in the form of Miles Compton, a celebrity judge and her culinary school nemesis. Can Willa whip up a recipe for love in the floury battlefield, or will romance collapse like a soufflé under the pressure? Get ready for a sweet and spicy romcom that proves love is the ultimate secret ingredient!



## *Note*

***Content Warnings:*** Anxiety, referenced/off-page loss of parental figures, firsthand account of cheating (NOT between main characters), swearing/harsh language, graphic/open-door sex scene.

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## *February 12th, This Year*

If nothing else, they aptly named this show.

The plastic banner, draped across the tent's ceiling, glistens in the harsh stage lights. *MENTAL BAKEDOWN*, it reads — and then, in smaller print: *WHERE BAKERS MEET THEIR MAKER*.

Even now, months after I've accepted the role as reality show contestant, the name of the show makes me chuckle. After the year from hell, *MENTAL BAKEDOWN* is a little *too* fitting.

I don't realize I'm grinning up at the banner until a layer of cakey makeup cracks on my cheeks. *Bleh*. I glimpse at the makeup crew over my shoulder, wondering if it's worth it to flag them over for a quick fix. Their backs are all turned, their brushes flying in a cloud of powder as they fuss over another contestant.

*Whatever*. I'll let them figure it out if they need to.

After all, this year is supposed to be about letting go. About allowing what's fated to come my way. About accepting, once and for all, that I can't force what's not meant to be.

I draw a deep breath through my nose, desperate to ground myself in an environment where everything's harsh and artificial. My tarot cards this morning couldn't have been *that*

wrong. They've never let me down before, and today I drew the upright Wheel of Fortune. It's a clear sign this year is going to bring change and the acceptance of inevitable fate. *Good things are coming my way*, I tell myself, drawing deep breaths.

Then again, good things aren't necessarily comfortable things — and allowing discomfort is a work in progress. I'm a professionally trained baker with the debt of a failed business hanging over my head like a constant storm cloud. Even if I could *afford* makeup, it's a sheer impracticality in my line of work. What am I supposed to do, worry about my mascara running in the middle of cooking off a raspberry reduction?

I shift the balls of my feet in my tie-dyed Chuck Taylors, already feeling constricted in my peasant blouse and stuffy blue apron. Charles, the producer of *Mental Bakedown*, has been crystal clear that my role this season is "Weirdo Hippie Vibes Girl." I'm choosing to be more delighted than irked that he nailed my personality from my casting tape alone.

*Deep breaths, Willa. Deep breaths. Think about the positive.*

Yeah... I need to get my shit together before the rest of the contestants arrive. I stand up straighter and hold my head up high. I'm a contestant on a nationally televised baking show. No matter what Mom says, that's a *big deal!*

Another makeup-cracking grin splits my face as I look around the soundstage. Each of the ten contestants gets a professional baking workstation with a little island, complete with a full stove and oven, a butcher block countertop painted in a bright pastel, and a rainbow of ingredients. Against the back wall of the tent, a row of giant fridges stand guard like soldiers on watch.

Ugh... a shared fridge.

It's been almost exactly two years since I experienced a nasty incident with a shared fridge, but the sight of it still churns my stomach. It was our pastry final in culinary school, and *someone* — who later ruined my life in a completely different way — left it open for too long, ruining my cake. Because this *someone* happened to be the chef nepo baby from



hell, my totally justified explanation didn't matter at all. He tried to apologize, but it didn't matter. He lost; I won. And today, two years later, I have to deal with his gloating grin stretched on every bus and billboard: The new face of the DC restaurant scene!

Nope.

Nope, nope, nope.

I draw deep breaths, gritting my teeth.

*Good vibes only, Willa!*

I direct my attention to more pleasant things around the room. I've endured a lot of bullshit in my professional career... *a lot*. And yes, the aforementioned asshole, now a revered pastry chef, is responsible for most of that bullshit. But guess what? None of that matters. Not now. I'm in a baking paradise, and I'm not gonna let my past ruin it.

I walk to the closest baking station and take it in with a gentle smile. They painted this station a Robin's egg blue, and all the equipment is color coordinated. The shiny mixer stands ready for action, with rows of neatly organized bowls and spoons waiting patiently for their turn. I can almost smell the promise of freshly baked goods in the air. *Good things are coming, Willa... because after this year, they have to.*

Someone calls my name, interrupting a potential rumination.

Really, I should thank them (or the universe) for saving me from that downward spiral. Right now, though, all I can think about is how the voice sounds super chipper and goes about a million miles a minute. "Oh, HEY! You must be Willa! I'm Danielle!"

Wait... Danielle?

As in... Danielle *Nakahama*?

My eyes widen, my heart hammering in my throat. I swear my body moves of its own accord as I turn on my heel. Sure enough, that's Danielle Nakahama. In the flesh. *Right in front of me.* Her straight black hair shines beneath the overhead lights, her signature blue Polo perfectly popped around her

neck. Her smile is big enough to wrap the world in goodness twice, but she's shorter than I thought she'd be. Isn't that what they say about famous people? They're always shorter than you think?

My mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water, but if Danielle notices I'm too star-struck to talk, she doesn't mention it. Instead, she extends her hand for a pleasant handshake. "You specialize in French dishes, right?" she asks, as casually as you please. "I've seen your work on the show's website! Seriously impressive stuff!"

With that, my words return. But because I'm me, they don't come back correctly. "I... holy shit... I... WOW! T-thank you!" I shake her hand far too aggressively, for far too long. "This... you don't understand," I finally manage, dropping her hand. "This is... wow. YOU! You're SUCH a big deal!"

"Eh." She disregards this. "I have a great social media team. Believe me, things are messy behind the scenes."

I chuckle, delirious. I have a hard time believing that Danielle Nakahama is a world-famous, hyper-realistic baker. Remember those videos with a chef's knife cutting into a toilet, only to have the toilet crumble into a pile of cake? She started that trend. She's the cake equivalent of Taylor Swift, and as someone currently wearing a Folklore friendship bracelet, I don't say that lightly.

I can sense she's over the praise, though. "So!" she says brightly. "Have you been practicing for the bread challenge?"

Like many other baking shows, Mental Bakedown has two phases (or challenges) each week: bread and dessert. In the event of a dead tie, we may have to do a technical baking challenge, but this is one of those pesky details I've pretended didn't exist. In terms of my mental list of things I'm worried about, knowledge of a maybe technical bake exists somewhere between getting a new IUD in three months and the growing stack of bills on the counter.

"Oh, I've obsessively prepped for all of it," I admit. What can I say? It's a perk of working minimum wage and living

with my mother. “I’ve been dreaming about dough for weeks. You?”

“Ugh, same! I’ve probably made enough loaves to feed an entire village by now. My three boys are in high school. By now, even their hockey team is tired of getting my practice batches.” She shudders, but my jaw is on the floor. I had no idea she had kids — much less three teenagers! She doesn’t look a day older than me.

Dammit. Danielle really is one of those people who just bounces through life with the grace of a fairy, isn’t she? *A baking fairy*, I think, my mind spinning. *A baking fairy with more Instagram followers than half the world’s leaders combined...*

“How about the cake challenge?” she asks, oblivious to my awe. “What do you have planned for the first one?”

I surprise myself by recovering enough to reply. “Chocolate mousse cake! With raspberry coulis. It’s one of my signatures. What about you?”

She heaves a dreamy sigh. “Well, *that* sounds simply heavenly! I’m not planning on chocolate until next week, assuming I make it.”

“I think that’s a fairly safe assumption,” I point out, but she waves this off.

“Nah-uh.” She wags her finger. “No assumptions from me! That’s how you lose in this challenge — getting a big head! You’re just as likely to win as me, dear!”

I have a hard time believing that, but keep my mouth shut. “Anyway, what do you have planned for this week?”

She bounces with excitement as the rest of the contestants filter in around us. “A black sesame tart with yuzu curd! It’s a more unique flavor than I’ve seen on the show before, so fingers crossed it turns out okay!”

“Ooh, I remember yuzu from culinary school!” My mouth waters at the memory. Yuzu are an East Asian citrus fruit with a taste somewhere between a lemon, an orange, and a grapefruit. They’re extremely hard to source in the mainland

US. “We only used them in savory dishes, but in a tart? From *you*?” I let out a low whistle. It’s hard to imagine anything more delicious.

“Hey!” Her dark brown eyes light up. “Let’s make a deal. If it’s possible, I’ll save a slice of mine for you, and you can save a slice of yours for me. Okay?”

“Count on it!”

I don’t know the exact rules of this game, but I hope we’re allowed to keep what the judges don’t try. It would be a waste otherwise, right?

I’m about to ask as much when a familiar voice bellows, “CONTESTANTS! Welcome!”

*Shit.* We all recognize it.

A hush falls across the soundstage as contestants leap to the closest empty workstation. I’m lucky to find the one behind Danielle. She shoots me a wink over her shoulder as Charles, show producer, steps into the spotlight. His bald head is almost blinding. Wow... I didn’t expect him to be so bald in person. *Is that a mean thing to think?*

“It’s so nice to see you all in person!” Charles enthuses, clasping his hands together. Like the rest of the crew, he’s clad only in black from head to toe. I recognize his black non-skid sneakers from kitchen-grade ones I’ve worn before. “Welcome to Mental Bakedown, where one of you will *rise* above the rest and claim the grand prize!”

There’s a smattering of polite groans; I, for one, am delighted. There are few things in life more enjoyable than a good pun.

“Before we get the cameras rolling, I wanted to introduce the key players for the first event. Now, if I may, allow me to introduce your host, Joel Morales!” Charles gestures to his left as a handsome man with dark hair and a charming smile steps onto the stage.

“Glad to be here,” Joel says, offering a perfunctory nod. Ah... I *do* recognize him. He’s been a judge on a few baking shows, including *I’m a Celebrity, Bake Me Out of Here*. He

offers us a few kind words of encouragement before turning back to Charles with a nod.

It's funny; before I knew much about the ins and outs of how these shows work, I assumed the host was in charge. Now I know better. The producer coordinates *everything* — everything — and lets no one forget it.

“Excellent!” Charles booms, proving my point. “Joel will be with us for the duration of the competition, but we’ll have two celebrity panelists who rotate, depending on their availability. For today, I’d like you to all welcome celebrated pastry chef Rick Dahl!”

Rick, a tall man with a head of gray hair, strides onto the stage to scattered applause. He says nothing, which is exactly what I’d do in his situation.

“Rick is a man of few words!” Charles jokes, elbowing him in the ribs. Rick remains unmoved. My lips twitch; I’m liking this dude more and more.

Charles clears his throat and turns back to us. “Anyway. Last but certainly not least, here is today’s final celebrity judge! Ladies and gents, please welcome world-famous pastry chef Miles Compton!”

What.

*WHAT.*

My heart stops. My head spins.

There’s no way I heard that right. It must be someone else with the same name. A delirious giggle crawls up my throat. What an unfortunate name to have! This poor dude doesn’t even know he’s named after the worst fucking human being alive! The man who ruined my life — twice. The man who’s evil incarnate. The man who shows up whenever my life seems like it’s finally getting back on track. The Wheel of Fortune wouldn’t do this to me, not now. It simply *must* be a mistake. It must—

It’s not.

Miles Compton — six feet of evil, with ice blond hair to match his soul — steps onto the stage beside Rick.

And with that, my life is over.



## *Valentine's Day, One Year Ago*

I stand, travel mug in hand, and turn to survey my kingdom. Or queendom. Is kingdom gender-neutral? Either way, I let out a deep breath and give my pastry shop a thorough once-over. I started setting up our Valentine's Day theme in early January, and it shows.

This year, I outdid myself. The bakery's pale pink walls come alive against the loping paper streamers draped across the ceiling. A crisp white cloth covers each table, with a miniature vase of flowers perched on each tabletop. Delectable — and by now, thoroughly inedible — treats call to me from the glass case behind the register; keeping a display stock of deliberately preserved goodies is one of the many tricks of the trade.

I draw a deep breath and sip my coffee. At least the smells in here can't be faked. An aroma of buttery croissants and rich chocolate hangs in the air, mingling with the delicate fragrance of rosewater from the macarons. Besides the standard weekend rushes, bakeries (or, if you're feeling pretentious, *patisseries*) have a handful of super-busy days each year. Since Dylan and I opened this place two years ago, our busiest days have been Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, and Christmas.

Ah, *Dylan*.

I sigh down at my left hand, where my diamond ring sparkles against the fairy lights behind the register. He's been better lately. Not perfect, but better. It's only natural for high school sweethearts to bicker and argue, especially when they co-own a bakery. And attended culinary school together. And live together. And are engaged. That last word stirs a wave of bitterness in my stomach. I do my best to ignore it as I stride behind the register and drop my belongings in our tiny office.

The whole "engaged" thing is something we've worked on in couples counseling... *a lot*.

It's just that after knowing him since high school and co-owning everything from a house to a small business, I kinda expected us to be more than engaged. We're both pushing thirty. But as Dr. Dubrow always says, you can't force someone who's not ready — and I'm far from perfect myself. This year, I'm pleased that Dylan's taken the lead in a lot of business decisions. When we first opened up shop, I did everything myself. For the past year, he's been in charge of the non-baking side of things. Dylan's now the go-to guy for paperwork and general business operations, including safety and equipment inspections.

I heave another sigh and pull on an apron. There's a whole tray of *pan de chocolate* that needs to be baked and prepped, so I'll start with that. I'm far from perfect, but what I bake is pretty damn close. I get such unique joy out of transforming basic ingredients into something to share with others; getting paid to do this is just the icing on the cake. I snort at my own terrible joke and turn the ovens on. I'm cheesy and predictable — and I refuse to believe there's anything wrong with either quality.

I work by myself through sunrise. Sarah and Diamond, our two employees, come in around nine o'clock, when their scheduled shifts start. I put them to work pretty quickly. They double-check all the pre-orders and make sure the preserved display items match what we've actually got in stock. Yes, that's a bigger problem than one might think.

The first "layer" of items are usually just for eye candy purposes, which means we need to have a real item either



behind it or in the back. After all, our little bakery's in the Central Business District, one of the bougiest places in DC. We've had many Karens complain about "false advertising" when our obviously fake bakery items weren't, in fact, available for purchase.

By the time Dylan finally shows at ten, we're swamped. The line's out the door, with most customers shoulders-to-shoulder in the bakery's tight space. Dylan manages to shuffle past the swarm of pea coats and purses and squeeze his way to the register, where he finally greets me with a lazy wave. "Good morning to you, too," I mutter, setting my jaw as he slides past me, but if Dylan hears this, he disregards it. *Fabulous*.

I'm impressed with myself for compartmentalizing all of this as I deal with the rush. Distraction helps. The endless stream of *thank yous* and *no, sirs* puts my mind at ease. When I'm busy, I'm useful. When I'm busy, I have less time to consider how Dylan's really getting on my damn nerves.

This is the exact thing we've been working on in couples counseling for a full year. As Dylan well knows, I come from a family where I had to handle literally everything myself — bills, rent, maintenance, cooking. Doing everything for everyone is second nature... but during times like this, when I'm really and truly overwhelmed, I wish it didn't have to be.

The little bell on the door jingles with the departure of the final customer, and I slump over against the register, exhausted. I've been up since four am, and it's now... I squint down at my watch. Five thirty in the afternoon?! I let out a low whistle. How the hell is it that late? Guilt surges through me. I haven't even had the chance to let Sarah and Diamond get their lunch breaks, but maybe Dylan took care of it. *Then again*, says a nagging voice in the back of my head, *maybe not. Maybe he—*

The door jingles again. Another customer. "Hi!" I greet brightly, fixing my face again. "Welcome to—"

I stop short, my jaw hanging open. Of all the people in the goddamn world, what is Miles Compton, my sworn enemy, doing in my bakery?

His hair's parted in a douche-y blond wave as he marches towards the register, hands stuffed in the pockets of his designer jeans. What, no entourage? Maybe the rumors around town aren't quite true. Since graduating from our culinary school class with flying colors (which he couldn't have done, by the way, without screwing me over), word is that Miles has taken the DC food critic scene by storm — and not in a good way.

My personal bias aside, he's known as an unflinching hard-ass. Allegedly, his write-up in *The Washingtonian* single-handedly closed Mrs. Lovett's, an adorable little pie shop on H Street. Of course, I'm sure Miles' newfound employment is totally unrelated to the fact that his father, Nigel Compton, is literally world famous. Must be nice to have a famous chef daddy who gets paid to scream at strangers for their cooking incompetence...

As he draws closer, I draw a deep breath and try to collect my thoughts. I soon abandon this plan in favor of gripping my hand into a tight fist and pretending his balls are in my palm. *That* does the trick.

It's amazing, really, how quickly my blinding hatred for everything relates to Miles Compton puts my mild irritation with Dylan into perspective. "Miles!" I clear my throat, my painted-on smile faker than ever. "Didn't expect to see you here. In our bakery!" I fight to keep that smile on my face. "How long's it been?"

His ice-blue eyes flit to mine... and fuck.

I forgot how much I hate those eyes. I've hated them from the second we met in culinary school — a day I'll never forget. We were just starting our unit on meat fabrication, and the professor, Chef Blanco, made us go around the class and introduce ourselves. I *felt* Miles' piercing eyes on me before I heard him speak — although saying that they were *on* me doesn't quite describe how thoroughly unnerving that sensation was. It was more like I could feel them burning through my soul. Viewing my darkest secrets.

*Undressing me.*

Even now, I gulp as he stares at me. His eyes are still that eerie shade, and I hate it.

“It’s been a year,” he says curtly, “and I’m here because I’ve heard of your excellent chocolate mousse cake. I’d planned a full write-up in the coming weeks, but I happened to be in the neighborhood, saw the lines out the door, and figured tonight would serve as a good example of top quality products.”

I’m sure my smile is painful by now. If I didn’t have enough reason to loathe this man, showing up after closing on Valentine’s Day really solidified the deal.

I must not satisfy Miles with my lack of response, because he hesitantly adds, “*If* everything goes well, I might even be interested in arranging a deal with Interlude. My father used to work there and they’re always looking to outsource desserts.” He gives me a significant look. “Interlude could really open doors for you, you know.”

HA! Okay, *that* shit is hilarious. I almost burst out laughing before remembering where I am.

Buddy... I’m a hands-on pastry chef with pink hair. My bakery is literally called Weirdough. I stand by my products, but I can’t imagine a ton of cross section between my clientele and a hoity-toity tight-ass Georgetown restaurant. The people who patronize Interlude are the types who’d gladly eat Play-Doh if you charged them two hundred bucks and said it was imported from France. I think I’ll stick to my loyal customer base who actually care about quality and taste, *thankyouverymuch*.

But because the universe is cruel, Miles is famous... which means I can’t actually vocalize these thoughts.

Instead, I bat my eyelashes and reach for an order sheet. “Our chocolate mousse cake is a top-seller,” I assure him, scribbling *chocolate mousse* on the paper. “We’re all sold out tonight, but I promise the quality of a future cake will be exactly the same. Just for you.” I provide an exaggerated wink. “Would you be okay picking up on Friday at three?”

His blond eyebrows furrow. “No. I want it today, you see.” Before I can object, he does something with his face — and for the life of me, I can’t tell what he’s aiming for, but there are two possibilities: He’s either attempting a smile, or performing a very accurate imitation of a constipated dog.

The former makes more sense... right?

“Um.” I swallow. “The issue, see, is that it’s Valentine’s Day.” I gesture at the garland, streamers, and fairy lights. “We’ve been overrun with orders for weeks. All I’ve got left at the moment is” — I lean over the display case — “three strawberry tarts and two pink macarons.”

“Hmm.” Miles drums his thick fingers on the speckled countertop and gives me that piercing stare again; I try my hardest not to shudder beneath it. “*Hmmmm.*”

I clear my throat. “Is there... something else I can help you with, Mr. Compton?” *Some of us would like to eat or pee today...*

“Actually, yes.” He raises his eyebrows. “If you can make that mousse right now, I’ll pay you three times the cost. Four times.”

“That’s generous.” I tap on my Strawberry Shortcake watch. “But see, it’s almost closing time... on *Valentine’s Day.*” How much clearer can I be? “Surely you have someone special to spend the evening with?”

His mouth snaps into a thin line. “We both know that I do not, Miss Comeau.”

“I didn’t know that,” I reply — and it’s only through sheer power of will that I avoid adding, “*but I’m not surprised.*”

“At any rate.” He clears his throat. “If you make a mousse for me tonight — and if you allow me to watch the process to better facilitate my learning — I will offer you ten times the cost of a mousse, right here, right now.” A pause. “That’s my final offer, Miss Comeau.”

Well, shit. I slump over the register again. What were my plans tonight, again? Oh, yeah — eating a microwave lasagna and watching Dylan scream at a Nats game. “I... don’t think I

can refuse that,” I admit. Miles flashes me a smile that feels unnecessarily bright. What’s he getting at?

I gesture to the front of the bakery. “Would you mind flipping the sign and locking the door? We technically closed thirty minutes ago, and I don’t want more random people walking in.”

“Oh.” His brow furrows. Could this be a never-before-seen sign of... remorse? Unbelievable! “Of course,” Miles says, bowing his head and turning to the front of the bakery. And then, quietly — so quietly I almost don’t hear it: “Sorry.”

I ignore the knee-jerk response threatening to overtake me (“No, don’t worry, *it’s fine!*”) and head for the kitchen, determined to let at least one girl go home. For busy events like today, they usually do alternating “late” shifts; one employee will help with clean-up and prep until six, the other until five. I think Diamond did the late shift yesterday, which means it’s Sarah’s turn.

I’m unsurprised to see that Dylan’s not in the office when I breeze by en route to the kitchen. Irritation flares in my throat at the thought that he might’ve already gone home, but as Dr. Dubrow says, that’s called Future Thinking — and that gets us nowhere. *Give him the benefit of the doubt*, I chide myself, turning towards the walk-in freezer to get some eggs and cream for the mousse cake. *Give him—*

Sarah’s petite frame springs out of the walk-in, and my heart leaps into my throat. “S-Sarah!” I stutter, clutching my chest. I have the most sensitive startle reflex known to man. Luckily, my employees know this.

“Are you... okay?” she asks cautiously, resting a delicate hand on my shoulder. Sarah’s a trust fund baby who dropped out of Catholic University at the start of last semester. I’ve always suspected she took this job as a rebellion against her parents, but if they’re planning to teach her a lesson, they might wanna start by cutting the rent payments and credit cards...

“Fine, fine,” I lie, straightening to my feet. “Sorry. You know me, always jumpy!”

Her bright green eyes pool with concern. She really *is* unfairly pretty. I've often thought that if Sarah were on Survivor, she'd be the contestant who still resembled a runway model after weeks in the jungle. There's one of them every single season.

"Well," she says, grinning, "hopefully you can rest easy knowing that we've taken care of most of the clean-up. Dylan let Diamond leave thirty minutes ago, and— oh!" Her eyes grow big as she stares at something over my shoulder. "Oh... oh my — *Miles Compton?!?*"

Ugh. I roll my eyes as he strides into the kitchen behind me. I was half-hoping he disappeared. Or was a horrific figment of my imagination.

"Pleased to meet you," he says to Sarah, reaching out to shake her hand. "You must be... Sarah? That's what your website says, anyway!"

She reciprocates, her hand shaking. "Y-you looked at our website?"

"Of course!" Miles grins — and goddamn, this asshole can be charming when he wants. "I was actually planning to do a full review in a few weeks, but I was in the area and saw the lines coming out the door." He pulls back to flash me a saucy grin. *The fucking audacity.* "I figured I'd stop by and see my old classmate, Willa, and get a taste of her famous chocolate mousse cake!"

"Oh..." Sarah bites her lip. "We sold out of those around noon. I'm sorry! I didn't know we—"

"No, not to worry!" Miles attempts to playfully elbow me in the side, but I step out of the way; his resulting gesture looks like a solo Irish jig. "Willa here has so kindly volunteered to make one, right in front of me, *from scratch!*"

"Oh!" Sarah's eyes get big again. "Well, don't let me stop you!" She nods out the back door. "Inventory's about to come in. I'm here til six, so I'm gonna help Dylan sort it out."

Ah... that explains where Dylan is. Guilt threatens to overtake me. Here I was, assuming the worst, and he's actually

doing a crucial part of the job! “Thanks!” I smile. “He’ll appreciate the help.”

Sarah leaves with a wave, and I take that as my cue to get started.



It’s been thirty minutes, and I’ve never felt so... disoriented.

If someone had told me this morning that Miles Compton would not only come to my bakery to demand a chocolate mousse cake with an enormous markup, but would offer polite encouragement as he watched me work, I’d have called them a liar. I’m still stunned as I move the flour to the mixing bowl.

How the hell is it possible that a man with eyes the color of a White Walker’s is so... supportive? I’d never admit it, but his running commentary has been... kind? And helpful?! (“Oh, good call with the baking soda beforehand.” “You chop the chocolate? Fascinating!”).

All of this has got to be further proof that I’m living in a simulation.

I grab the bubbling chocolate from the stove and incorporate it into the ganache mixture. I’m at about the halfway mark, which is usually when I get started with the raspberry coulis. It’s easier to get it prepped while the cake is in the oven. The additional warmth from beneath helps speed up the incorporation process.

“Hey!” I call over my shoulder, still whipping the ganache, “would you mind popping into the back to see if we’ve got raspberries in stock? Dylan was—” I bite my tongue, cutting myself off. *No.*

I can hear the smile in his voice; it’s infuriating. “Dylan was... what?”

*He was supposed to put in a double-order, but seeing as how his brain isn’t screwed on right, I’m not sure it went through.* “Nothing.” I face him. “I need two quart containers of raspberries. I’d be much obliged if you got them for me, please and thanks.”

Based on the look on his face, that all came out harsher than I intended. *Shit*. The stress of the day is piling on; I haven't eaten since the coffee I had instead of breakfast. But none of that matters when I need to keep Miles Compton happy. "Sorry," I mutter, staring at my flour-covered hands. "It's uh... been a long week."

"No," he says stiffly, pushing off from the counter. "It's fine. I'll be right back, okay?"

I reach for the sugar and another pot as he exits through the backdoor. All that's left, really, is the baking, mousse, and decorating. This is almost the home stretch! I reach for the cake rounds. *Almost there, Willa. Almost.*

*"WHAT. THE. HELL?"*

The bellow — louder than a freight train — crashes through the backdoor. I scream, the cake round in my hand clattering to the floor, but he's not done screaming. "You IDIOTS!" Miles roars, his voice carrying loudly enough for the whole block to hear. "What the FUCK were you thinking?!"

No... I'm fucking *done*.

Rage flares in my chest as I toss the cake round into the sink. What gives him the nerve to scream at Dylan and Sarah like that?! My nostrils flare as I wipe my hands on my apron and storm into the back alley. This is not Nigel Compton's cooking show. This is *my* shop. No one, and I mean no one, can treat my employees like —

*Oh.*

My breath freezes in my throat. Time slows to a crawl.

Because there is no way, *none*, that what I'm staring at in the back alley is real.

There is no way that Dylan — my high school sweetheart, my fiancée, the love of my life — is shoving his dick back into his jeans.

There is no way that Sarah — the cute would-be undergrad I took a chance on, despite her lack of baking experience — is



naked from the waist down, searching for her panties on her hands and knees on the gravel.

And then there's Miles, who's standing maybe five feet in front of me, and clutching two cartons of raspberries in his gigantic hands.

It takes several long, miserable seconds for the world to right itself again... and when the events in front of me begin to unfold, they seem to move more quickly. *Too* quickly.

Everything happens so fast I can't keep track of it. Miles is even more furious than I am, but for entirely different reasons. I'm detached, removed from my body as he rants about food safety. He points out something about how they've now contaminated everything in the alley, about how people can't just fuck on food carts and expect to stay in business.

Then Dylan is saying something, maybe, but there's a buzzing in my ears. I'm numb. Detached. I sink to the floor, my head in my hands. Dylan's begging now — that much I recognize, but Miles is having none of it. He screams back that he's a goddamn food critic... a mandated reporter for health and safety. That he'd lose his job if he didn't report such an egregious violation of food safety regulations.

I'm underwater. Floating. I may as well be collecting forks and singing about how life is better under the sea. Can I stay underwater forever? The cold child, creeping over my arms, says I can't. *Dammit*.

But when I finally speak, when I finally float to the surface long enough to break for air, I don't expect the words that come from my mouth.

"It's February," I whisper, wetting my lips with my tongue. "It's *February*. In DC. Were you really desperate enough to fuck her *in the cold*?"

Miles, Dylan, and Sarah all turn to me, their faces in varying states of guilt... and with that, it all clicks together like a ghastly, evil puzzle.

"Oh," I whisper. "This isn't the first time."



Danielle lets out a low whistle from across the table. “Wow. WOW. So you lost the bakery after that?”

I’ve just finished recounting the last time I came face-to-face with Miles Compton — an incident that will forever be burned into my mind.

After such an exhausting day, it’s amazing either of us has the energy for this conversation. In between rounds of interviews and reapplied makeup and awkward confessional-style interviews, each contestant on *Menty B* had to complete their first challenge: bread. Danielle and I finished in the top three of ten contestants. Now we’re sitting at the restaurant of the hotel where we’re staying for the duration of the competition.

“Yep,” I confirm, glaring at my Shirley Temple. “Miles tipped off the health department, and they showed up the next day.” Danielle looks scandalized, so I rush to explain. “No, no... I don’t even blame him. For that part, at least.”

“Oh?”

“He’s a food critic. He could’ve lost his job if he didn’t report a suspected violation, and two employees boning on a food receiving table is a *pretty damn big one*. Then the health department found all these maintenance things that Dylan just” — I toss my hand, frustrated — “*didn’t do*, despite promising he would. There was mildew growing in the ice. The freezer was below temp because of a broken compressor I told him to fix. He waited so long that a lot of other stuff needed replacement, which we couldn’t afford. In a lot of ways, it was a blessing in disguise. At least no one got sick.”

There’s a long pause after my words. Ugh... I’ve said too much. I always over share around Cancers; I pegged Danielle as one the second we met.

To keep myself from saying more, I reach for a slice of her Japanese milk bread. It’s light and fluffy on my tongue — more than enough of a distraction to prevent me from adding the details threatening to spill: *But I do blame Miles Compton*

*for being a demanding, entitled asshole... and for being the reason I didn't complete culinary school.*

Danielle bites her lip. "I'm so sorry. I wouldn't have brought it up this morning if—"

I wave her off, gesturing to a slice of my cranberry orange loaf that's sitting on a plate in front of her; true to our promise this morning, we saved a slice for each other. "Nah, you couldn't have known. Now, eat up! I want an honest review from a trusted peer!"

She giggles; I study her face intently as the fork slips past her lips.

"Holy shit, Willa!" Her eyelids flutter in pleasure. "The judges weren't wrong — this is otherworldly."

Oh, right... the judges.

The grin slides off my face as fast as it appeared. Because *Miles fucking Compton* is a judge, isn't he? And I don't know what he's been playing at, but he's done an excellent job of pretending I'm a total stranger.

"Ooof." She winces. "Sorry. That reminded you of Miles, didn't it?"

Goddamnit, here comes that perceptive Cancer energy again. "Yeah," I admit, taking another bite of milk bread, which is equally otherworldly.

"So... what are you worried about, in particular?"

I let out a half-laugh. What am I *not* worried about? "This show is my only lifeline. It's my only shot at moving out of Mom's house and starting a new bakery. I've put all my eggs in this basket, and it's starting to feel like a giant practical joke." I meet her eyes, paranoia surging through me. "Would you tell me if this was all a setup? Like the Truman Show?"

Anyone else might've laughed, but Danielle actually considers my words. "Well, I'd never be on a show like that, but someone on a show *would* say that, so I understand your concerns." She sips her water; I get the impression she's carefully choosing her words. "Instead, consider this: Would I

stake my reputation and name on such a cruel stunt? As you said, I have a big Instagram following. I promise, I'm not pulling anything funny."

"No," I agree. For the first time in a long time, my smile feels genuine. "You'd have no reason for an ulterior motive."

"Exactly." She smiles back. "And I also have no ulterior motive behind asking you— no, *telling* you— that you should confront Miles yourself."

"What?" I blanch. "W-why would I—"

"Because that's the only way you're gonna get answers," she explains, her voice dripping with patience; suddenly, I understand how she has three teenagers. "All the judges are in those big production trailers on set. If you *really* want answers, you need to go to the source."

"I'm scared, though." Why do I sound like I'm eight years old? "W-what if he's mean?"

She laughs, but not unkindly. "Oh, sweetie. He probably will be. I have to say, though — he doesn't give you mean looks."

"What do you mean?"

"I dunno. Could just be me, could just be based on limited experience with him, but he doesn't look at you the same way he looks at everyone else. His eyes go all crinkly at the corners, like you're..." She cocks her head, searching for the right word. "*Fascinating* to him. Or something. Does that make sense?"

"No," I admit. No, it does not. I spent a day under his gaze and felt nothing but ice and loathing.

"Well, I'm not the only one who noticed," she adds, lifting her eyebrows. "And no, I will not reveal the other sources — plural — who agree with me."

My jaw drops. "What the hell, Danielle? What have people been saying about me?"

"Oh, nothing bad," she assures me, ripping off another piece of bread. "Just that, you know. Miles um... *notices* you, and not in a bad way."

I groan, my shoulders slumping again. *Fuck*. What a bomb to drop on me at... I check my watch... ten thirty, on the night before an elimination round. “Does everyone think I’m getting preferential treatment, or something?” I mutter, now confused for entirely different reasons.

“What?” She pulls back. “*Hell* no! That’s not what I’ve heard at all. And your baking speaks for itself. Anyway, it’s getting late. What’s your game plan for tomorrow? Confronting him, I hope.”

I bite my lip. “I’m gonna have to, aren’t I?”

“Yep,” she says solemnly. “And I’m gonna tell you right now, sweetie. I’m a people person. I love helping people. I’ll listen to their problems until the cows come home, but it really chaps my ass when people prefer complaining over simple fixes.” A beat. “You know?”

I spread my palms. I read her loud and clear; until I talk to Miles, I have no room to whine. And honestly, I agree. That’s the point of this whole thing. To embrace change... to start fresh. *What’s the damn point if I’m still dwelling on the past?*

“You’re right,” I announce, clearing my throat. “I’ll go see him tomorrow after filming.”

Danielle beams. “That’s my girl.”



After a night on scratchy hotel beds, my fellow contestants and I all board the production bus and head to set. Today, we’re filming our signature bake round, which also means an elimination is on the horizon. I’m worried about the fates of Darius and Suruthi, two contestants I barely know, who finished in the bottom at yesterday’s bake.

From beside me on the bus, Danielle gives my hand a firm squeeze. *You can do this*, she mouths, nodding to the trailers out her window. Miles’ is clearly labeled, his name in blocky font. These trailers are a hell of a lot nicer than our rooms, a little fact I only learned after looking around the hotel — and I’m not saying we’ve got bad accommodations, but I understand why the hosts aren’t staying on hotel property.

I give her a silent nod. She's right; *I can do this*.

"What's your plan of action?" Danielle murmurs under her breath.

I thought about this all night long. "I am... going to study him today," I say, as delicately as I can.

"Study him?"

I draw a deep breath. I'm horrible with confrontation. If I'm going to confront him, I need proof, beyond a reasonable doubt, that he really is as much of a dick as I think. Then, tonight, I'll confront him with everything I have.

It seems like a solid plan... A very solid plan. The only question is if I'll have the balls to go through with it.

The bus reaches the parking lot with a squeak of the brakes. "Well, fair enough." Danielle gives my thigh a final squeeze. "Do what you gotta do! Hope I don't see you on the way back tonight!"

"I can do this," I whisper back, hoping that if I say it enough times, I'll believe it.

My plan is confronting Miles after we stop rolling today, then ordering myself an Uber back to the hotel. What could go wrong?



As it turns out, this plan was doomed from the beginning.

An hour later, we're all standing at our baking stations, makeup and smiles plastered to our faces. Charles gives a rough overview of today's events before handing the whole thing over to Raul, a process which will never *not* be a mind fuck. With the cameras rolling, Raul repeats everything Charles said, but acts like he invented it all himself.

For the first hour of our two-hour challenge, I genuinely lose myself in baking. Yesterday was bread; today is cake, with an elimination to boot. I'm laser-focused on mixing the ingredients correctly, on sifting the right flour, on—

“SHIT!” a pained voice cries out across the room; I jerk towards it on instinct to see Suruthi, one of the two bottom contestants from yesterday, sinking to the ground behind her baking station. Before I can rush over to help, there’s a flurry of activity. A throng of production people surround her, and someone calls for a medic.

With that, I turn back to my baking.

I don’t intend to be cold-hearted. Far from that, in fact. I’m just someone who’s had to call an ambulance for my mother countless times. I know that the best course of action is not getting involved unless asked. I don’t know what happened to Suruthi, but a medical emergency is embarrassing on an average weekday — not to mention when being filmed for national television. The last thing I need is to add to the spectacle.

I’m just adding my ganache when I hear it, above the din and bustle.

*Miles’ voice.*

“Shhh,” he murmurs, his voice low and rumbling — and I swear to god, he might as well be a doctor nurturing a patient. He’s... calm. And soothing. When did Miles, of all people, become soothing? “It’s okay, Suruthi. It’s just a cut.”

Suruthi issues a half giggle, half sob. As I mix my batter, the crowd in my periphery disperses. The cameras back up; Suruthi wraps a bandage around her hand with the help of a medic, Miles at her side. When the show airs, this will probably turn into one of those clickbaity, “Stay tuned after the break for a medical emergency!” clips.

As I add the finishing touches to my bake, I try my hardest not to think about why my hands are shaking. Or why I can’t stop replaying Miles’ voice: “It’s okay, Suruthi.”



These feelings don’t improve as the day progresses. If anything, they worsen.

Because now that I've noticed Miles' nurturing side, it's all I can think about. It's all I see. I notice things I've never seen before — things I wish I could unsee. He visits each contestant's station with concern in his eyes and care in his voice, regardless of if the cameras are rolling on him. He asks such sweet and personal questions ("How's the family? I bet they miss you!") that by the time he reaches me, I'm a mess.

"Willa," he says curtly, those piercing eyes staring at me again.

"Miles," I grit back. "Lovely to see you here."

Something shifts in his features. "Not sure what you mean," he drawls, raising his near-white eyebrows — and ohh. *Oh, shit*. Through all my tortured deliberation, I'd never stopped to consider that we're probably not supposed to know each other...

"Anyway." He clears his throat and jerks his chin towards my workstation. "What have we got going?"

"A chocolate mousse cake," I whisper, blood rushing to my cheeks. *The same thing you requested when you walked in on my fiancé—*

"Oh." A flash of recognition slides across his face. "I've heard that's um... legendary." His voice is strained. "I'd offer my help, but you don't need it."

I bark out a laugh — *if you're lazy, just say it!* — but there's nothing humorous in his answering expression.

"I'm serious," he says, his eyes boring through me. "You're —" His mouth snaps shut, his eyes darting around. The camera over my shoulder creaks in my ear. I'd almost forgotten it was here, too. "You're very good," he repeats, then signals at the operator that he'd like to move to Suruthi's station.

As the camera pans away, though, he slinks behind me, quiet as a ghost, and in an almost imperceptible voice whispers: "You're so talented, Willa."

When I'm confident he's focused on Suruthi's station, I allow myself to lose my mind.



*Shit.*

My blood freezes in my veins. My heart hammers in my throat.

Why do I feel... Naked? Stripped down. Bare in front of him, like he can see through my soul. It's the same feeling I had the first time he looked at me in culinary school. And the second.

By the time he bustled into the shop last Valentine's Day, I guess I was used to it. Maybe the time away from him is what set me off?

I don't know how I'm blushing so furiously when it feels like all the blood drained from my body. All I know is that I still need to finish this bake, no matter what. I turn back to my prep table, but I can't stop hearing his voice in the background, deep and rumbling, just like the day we met in culinary school.

And then an even worse thought occurs, one I've probably been repressing forever: do I have a crush on him?

No... No, there's no way there's no way I...

Shit.

*SHIT.*

I take a deep breath through my nose, wondering what the hell came over me. Wondering why this is happening so fast. *But doesn't it always happen fast like this?* says an annoying voice in my head, one that sounds a lot like my grandma, who's been dead a few years. And dammit, Ghost Grandma is right. Even in high school, it took someone else pointing out I had a crush on Dylan for me to accept it, too.

By the end of the day, I'm too freaked out to do anything but get on the bus and go home. Danielle raises an eyebrow as I slide into the seat next to her. I try with an explanation, but the words don't come out. My stomach keeps fluttering.

I can't stop thinking about how long ago I should've figured this out, too.



## *Valentine's Day, Two Years Ago*

Today's the day.

Our culinary finals for pastry baking.

I adjust my headband, making sure to keep my hair from my eyes. Touching your face or hair is an automatic failure.

From across the room, I feel a pair of eyes on me. I shudder, hair raising on the back of my neck. Those eyes can only belong to one person: Miles fucking Compton. I toss my eyes to the drop ceiling, trying to keep it together. I can't stand him — a fact that hasn't changed in three years. He's a decent pastry chef but relies on Daddy's connections entirely too much for my liking...

"What's wrong?" asks Sam, my pastry school BFF, from beside me.

I try not to think about how much I wish Dylan cared enough to ask even basic questions like that, but just as quickly realize that's not a fair thought. Either way, there's only three of us in today's trial: me, Miles, and Sam. "Nothing," I mutter. "Just Miles' eyes on me. They always freak me the fuck out."

Sam's lips curl like she wants to say something. Somehow, she holds it back. Everyone always does that when I bring up how Miles stares at me. Except Dylan, who doesn't give a shit

either way. He's back at our apartment now, probably asleep. Sometimes I wish he had hobbies, interests, or friends of his own...

Chef Frank, our pastry instructor, clears his throat, and takes a stand in the front of the kitchen. Good; I won't have to think about that much longer.

"We will begin the technical challenge," he announces in his heavily accented French. "You will have two hours to bake, plate, and present." He sets his watch. "Starting... NOW!"

There's a flurry of activity. There's so much pressure to get this right. Everyone's prepared their own dish, but there's so many moving parts it would be easy to mess up. Time passes. More shouts fire overhead.

I zone out as much as I can, focusing on my first layer. This is coconut chiffon, Grandma's favorite. She passed away three months ago. I try not to focus on that either, working as hard as I can to get the cake flour sifted. I admit, though this is ambitious for a final. Many people are simply doing a chocolate layer cake, but not me. I'm determined to finish this mascarpone and buttercream.

"Behind!" Sam calls behind me, charging up the galley.

"Heard!" I turn on the mixer, where I slowly incorporate the ingredients together. For a proper chiffon cake, it's best to add a little well in the middle of the flour for the wet ingredients before blending them all together. I whip the egg whites in the stand mixer, then gently fold them into the batter. A quick glimpse at the oven to make sure it reads 350 degrees — which means it's time to get the batter into greased spring form pans.

"Shit!" cries someone — maybe Miles — from across the floor. But I can't be bothered with him now, not when I only have an hour to get this cake baked and iced. I wipe the back of my hand across my forehead and get to work

After I pop them in the oven, I begin blending the mascarpone and buttercreams. Not a super easy task, but won't be bad without—

“Fuuuuck!”

Now it’s definitely Miles, but I don’t know what he’s shouting about. I also don’t particularly care, except that he’s near the blast freezer, which I’ll need to use in... I squint at my mini timer. Shit. Thirty seconds?! How has time passed so quickly?

I put the mascarpone mixture to the side, slip on my oven mitts, and pull the layers out. The key to releasing the layers from the pans is getting them out while they’re still hot. If the layers cool, they’ll be almost impossible to remove. That doesn’t mean I like this part though. I flip the top pan over first, pleased to see that it landed flat, before repeating with the other two.

I need to get these in the blast freezer... *now*. If I don’t, the cake will be a melty mess for my final. “Behind!” I shout, charging past Sam, my three layers on baking sheets.

“Heard!” Sam replies, still engrossed in her simple layer cake.

When I reach the blast freezer, Miles is pacing outside. The man is a walking, talking Rolodex of every health and hygiene baking violation, but he’d definitely be biting his nails if he could get away with it.

“I need this,” I say, impatient, nodding at the blast.

“Go ahead,” he grumbles, shuffling out of the way.

I roll my eyes and open the door before pushing my layers inside.

“Thirty minutes left!” trills Chef Frank, pacing at the head of the kitchen like a proud lion.

Shit... *shit, shit, shit*.

I return to my baking station, determined to finish my mascarpone and buttercream in time. I barely make it. In ten minutes, my buttercream is slightly watery from the heat of the kitchen; on the cold texture of my cake, it’ll thicken up.

“Behind!” I shout, racing to the blast freezer in a rush, more determined than ever to get my cake layers out... But that’s

when I spot it. The fatal error that spells my doom.

Because the blast freezer is wide open. All three of my layers are inside, still steaming from the oven. And Miles, the oblivious douche bag, is puttering around in a different side of the kitchen, completely unaware.



For the second night in a row, Danielle sits across from me in the restaurant as I regale her with a story of my personal Miles Compton lore.

And for the second night in a row, she's looking at me with a mixture of pity and confusion. "So that's... all?"

I can't decide if I'm offended by that reaction. That story — of how Miles made me fail the final on a technicality — is a huge fucking deal to me. "It uh... kinda upset my life plans."

She's no less confused. "Why, though? Couldn't you take the final again?"

"Not there," I explain. "It was the Patisserie Institute. One of the most elite organizations in the country. I would've had to retake the entire capstone course. Dylan had already secured the funding for the bakery, so it made no sense to take out more loans, and—"

"Wait, wait, wait." Danielle raises a hand to stop me. "What you're telling me is that it didn't matter if you had that certification or not when you worked there?"

"Yeah," I mutter to the woodgrain, "but it mattered a hell of a lot when we lost the business. When I applied for jobs afterward, I only had a few semesters of culinary school under my belt. I've worked for minimum wage in chain kitchens since then.

"I can see how that's... not ideal," she allows, biting her lip, "but if I'm being brutally honest, you could chalk all this up to a series of well-intentioned misunderstandings. I mean, hell — you even admitted you don't blame Miles for bringing in the health department!"

I blink at her, irritation pounding behind my eyes.

She's not wrong; I've had this realization multiple times myself. It's just been easier to have someone to blame. Admitting I'm simply unlucky is worse. Scarier.

I sigh, resting my head in my hands, but for the first time, I don't ruminate. I think back to my tarot card... The Wheel of Fortune. Is everything finally changing for me?

*And more importantly*, adds Grandma's nagging voice in the back of my head, *do you have a choice either way?*

"You're right," I confess, unable to meet her eyes.

"Look," she says gently, tilting my chin up. "From what you've told me and what I've seen, he's actually a nice guy. Maybe he's just... awkward. Or into you and weird about it." She shrugs; that's a possibility I hadn't considered...

"And he's right," she adds, reaching for a bite of my cake, "you *are* extremely talented. I mean, damn." She shakes her head. "Take Suruthi, for example. She was a sweetheart and probably bakes well at home, but standing up under timed pressure takes a special skill set."

"Yeah," I agree. Today's elimination surprised no one, not even Suruthi. Luckily we have two more days before another one.

"I'll... talk to Miles tomorrow," I vow, more resolute than ever. I want to get this over with, dammit.

Danielle smirks. "That's what you said yes—"

"Yesterday," I explode, "I didn't know I had—"

*Fuuuuuck.*

I snap my mouth shut, but the rest of my sentence hangs between us: Yesterday, I didn't know I had feelings for him.

Danielle could mock me for this. She could easily giggle or sing a schoolyard song about sittin' in a tree.

But she doesn't. She reaches across the table, gently rests her hand on mine, and says, "It'll be Valentine's Day. Get him."



I actually summon the nerve to do it today. Or at least that's what I tell myself as I stand outside Miles Compton's trailer, my whole body shaking like a Chihuahua in the wind.

I raise my fist to the door better get this over with.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

There's a fleeting half second where I hope he doesn't answer... Or I wonder if maybe I'll get another day of reprieve.

I don't. The door swings open, revealing Miles Compton in his full creepy glory.

He looks surprised to see me; I'm still surprised I had the nerve to talk to him at all.

"Willa!" He says my name in a way that makes my stomach feel rumbly and strange

I push that thought aside. "Mind if I come in? I think we have a lot to talk about."

Miles' eyes widen, but his gentlemanly ways soon overtake his confusion. "C-course!" he stammers, gesturing behind him. "Come on—"

I don't wait for him to finish before I storm inside, closing the door behind me. His trailer is nicer than my hotel room. It's very white and sterile-looking, but he's got a little vanity table, a leather couch that looks like it pulls out into a bed, and what must be a bathroom off the tiny side hallway.

Miles moves to stand in front of me, leaning against the vanity. There's an unreadable expression on his face. "Willa," he repeats, and once again, it makes my insides melt. "To what do I owe the—"

"Why the hell am I on the show?" I blurt, so quickly it almost sounds like one word. Dammit. This was not at all the script I planned...

Miles looks taken aback for a fraction of a second. "I'm sorry... what?"

“Why the hell,” I grit, finally daring myself to look into his eyes, “am I on this show?”

There’s a full five second pause before Miles understands what I’m talking about. “Oh,” he says, something akin to recognition sliding across his face. “Do you think *I* had any say in—?”

“Of course you did!” I blurt, tossing my hands in the air. Does he think I’m an idiot? “You may be a guest judge, but you’re Miles fucking Compton! Your dad runs the entire DC bakery scene. There’s no way you—”

“I had nothing to do with that,” he says firmly. This time, his voice is different. Loud. Booming. “Willa... Please, you’ve got to believe me on this. You probably think I’m a jackass who ruined your life, and I’m not saying you don’t deserve to believe that, but please...” His eyes meet mine again. “I had nothing to do with you being on the show, and I want you to know that.”

A beat.

“Why should I believe you?”

He sighs, looking away again. He shifts his weight, crossing his arms over his white button-up shirt that probably cost more than my car. “I have a conflict of interest with you that is far more than professional.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, no shit! Which time specifically do you mean? The time where you left the blast freezer open and ruined my final for culinary school?” I don’t mean to, but I’m allowing the rage to build in my chest. To crawl up my throat. To explode from my mouth. “Or the time you demanded a cake when my bakery was already closed, and just happened to stumble on my fiance fucking someone else, which then led to the forced closing of said bakery? Or how about the millions of times you were an asshole to me throughout culinary school? Or glared at me like I didn’t belong in the room? Or—”

It happens in a flash. In a burst of heat.



He's a white blur as he storms towards me... and in a split second, his hand presses to my mouth. Those goddamn eyes are staring into mine again, even more penetrating than before. My chest heaves, my core pounding. What the hell is wrong with me?

*Fuuuuck.* I whimper beneath the pressure of his palm, but not from pain. His body is so warm... so close. And fucking hell, it's been so long since—

“Have you ever stopped to consider,” he rasps, his face inches from mine, “that maybe — just maybe — I don't hate you?”

He doesn't move his hand from my mouth, but I don't know how I'd respond if he did. Instead, his other hand drifts down my neck, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. “I could never hate you,” he whispers almost reverently. I can only whimper and lean my head back, allowing more access. I don't know what he's doing, or why. And I know this is a terrible fucking idea. But for the love of God, I hope he doesn't stop.

The Wheel of Fortune must be on my side; he doesn't.

His fingers trail, lower and lower, caressing my shoulder bones, pushing my peasant, blouse off my shoulder, and even though I'm mostly clothed, I've never felt so naked. Warm. He draws a deep, shuddering breath, looks up at me, and removes his hand from my mouth. When his eyes meet mine, they're fervent. Burning.

“I am going to kiss you.” It's not a question.

I can only reply with a single word that seems to echo in the empty trailer. “Yes.”

And then, he's kissing me... actually kissing me. Miles fucking Compton is kissing me on Valentine's Day in his trailer. But I don't have time to ponder the logistics of that, not when his lips are soft and gentle on mine, not when his calloused hands are moving on my neck... then sliding down my waist... then caressing the swell of my ass. I don't have time to consider that this time yesterday, I considered him my mortal enemy, with absolutely no nuance allowed.

I never once considered that maybe, just maybe, all of that hatred was hiding something much different...

He pulls himself back with what seems like a Herculean strength. "Is this okay with you?" he asks, his eyelids fluttering.

"What the hell do you think?" I demand, draping my arms over his neck again. He chuckles against my lips, but doesn't fight me... Not this time.

Because now that I know what I want, I'm not gonna stop.

I drag him to the couch, arms around his shoulders, and suddenly, I can't feel enough of him... I can't feel enough of his tall, lean body on mine, or his erection pressed to my inner thigh, or the way he growls from low in his throat as I leave gentle bites on his neck.

He keeps murmuring my name with soft reverence, his hands all over my hips, then roaming down my thighs as I straddle him... and for the first time in my life, kissing someone feels effortless. Like fate meant it to happen this way. It's the easiest thing I can imagine, easier than breathing. I don't have it in me to feel embarrassment, not when he's holding my hips in place as I rock against him on the couch.

"Willa," he moans again, his voice growing more strained. "Willa, I — fuck."

"What?" I demand, looking down at him, my breath coming in short pants.

"I just." He wets his lips, his white-blond hair falling into his eyes and out of its perfect coiffe. "I want you to know... I had nothing to do with you being on the show. It was as much of a surprise to me as it was to you. I only found out the day before we started, and if I'm being honest, I've had a thing for you since we met." It's all coming from him in a rush, like something he's needed to say for a long time. "But for all of culinary school, you were with that fucking dick weed—"

"Dylan."

"I stand by my phrasing." He glares at the memory, our hips still rocking together. With anyone else, this would be a

strange conversation, all things considered. With Miles, it's not. We've always bantered like this.

He looks up at me again. "And truly, leaving the blast open was the biggest mistake of my life. I know I apologized to you in the moment, but please believe me, I haven't stopped beating myself up over that. That's actually why I stopped by the bakery last year. In my clumsy, useless way, I was trying to make amends. I was gonna writing you a glowing review — and holy fucking shit!" He lets out a low swear, tossing his head back; the sound only intensifies the low throbbing between my legs. I slide his pants down, impatience tugging at me. "As much as I love hearing you grovel," I murmur, pulling off each pant leg, "I'd kinda like to follow this random, spur-of-the-moment urge and fuck your brains out." A pause. "Is that okay?" He moans from low in his chest, his eyes never wavering from mine. "That's... yes." His voice is raspy. "That's... fuck, Willa, that's everything I've—" He cuts off with another string of swears as I reach down to pull his cock from his boxers, and damn... I let out a low whistle. *He's big.*

I don't have a lot of comparison, but definitely bigger than Dylan. A furious blush spreads over my body as I look down at the bead of liquid on the tip. And following that same impulsive, reckless train of thought that got me here in the first place, I decide to do the wildest possible thing: Take him into my mouth.

Words can't describe the sounds that fall from him as I take him in... as I let my tongue travel up and down his length. He thrashes and moans beneath me, his hands coming to thread through my pink hair, and it's only then that I'm able to identify the sensation that urged me towards this.

*Power.*

I travel up and down over his length, loving how he feels in my mouth... but more so loving how he makes *me* feel: Powerful. Deserving.

I wrap my fist around him and begin to pump, so focused that I don't have time to consider that I've never enjoyed this before... never. I begrudgingly gave Dylan blow jobs when I

was on my period, but I never felt like this about. I never wanted more, wanted—

He pulls me off his cock, his chest heaving.

I wince, hoping I don't trauma-dump my way through an apology. I'm out of practice with this. "I'm sorry. Did I do something—"

"—no." He cuts me off, his eyes slammed shut. "You're, um. Doing this *too* well."

Oh. I giggle. "Right... so is it okay if I just, you know." I make a vague gesture; it's hard to think when you're this turned on. "Fuck you?"

He doesn't answer in words.

With another growl, he wraps his arms around my waist, his mouth on mine. We don't waste time after that. My peasant blouse comes all the way off, my skirt sliding down my ass and landing on the floor.

When he leans up to kiss me again, I already know what he's going to do; without breaking eye contact, he rips my panties clean off. "You're so wet," he mutters, eyes heavy-lidded, as he reaches up to part my folds. I gasp beneath his touch, but I don't think it's a surprise to either of us that I'm already done with teasing. I want him inside me. I push on his shoulders until he's flat beneath me, not caring about the insecurities that plagued me with Dylan. How could I worry about that little patch of pudgy skin on my stomach when Miles is staring at me like I'm the most gorgeous thing on the planet? I position myself above him, meeting his eyes once more. "I've got an IUD." He dares to lift his lips in a smile. "I figured. You'd never do this — at least not to me — without some form of protection." I cut him off with a kiss. "No more commentary." A smart retort dies on his lips as I sink onto his cock — but honestly, a smart retort would've flown from my head too. We both release staggered moans as I slide onto him, but he's bigger than I thought. It's funny how it works that way. I've already seen him and had him in my mouth, but fitting inside me is something else entirely. "Take your time," he murmurs, his palms coming up to grip my ass. "Don't tell

me what to do,” I hiss, but listen regardless, taking him inch by inch. When he’s finally inside me to the hilt, he extends his palms to help me balance above him. “Okay?” he whispers, as my hips start to rock. “Okay,” I confirm, losing myself in the sensation, and oh... *oh, my God.*

I release a ragged breath, adjusting my hips so my clit hits his stomach. He answers with a moan beneath me. It’s reassuring, in the strangest way, that it’s as good for him as it is for me. But good isn’t enough of a description, really. This is better than anything I ever had with Dylan, not that I want to think about him now. *Good* can’t possibly describe the feeling of being soaked around Miles’ cock, of his hard length deep inside me, of the tightening that’s just beginning in the base of my belly. We’ve just started, but I’m already close. He can tell. “You gonna come for me?” Miles asks, his voice doing that low rumbly thing again. For the first time, I don’t answer with a snarky rebuttal. “Maybe?”

He chuckles, a vein throbbing in his neck. “Let me help.” I don’t get to ask how before he moves. In a flash, his hands leave mine to work simultaneously. One slides into my bra, pinching my nipple; the other slips between my thighs, sliding along my clit, and ohh... OH. “I’m gonna—” “Come for me, Willa,” he commands, his eyes an unmistakably darker shade of blue. “Come for—”

And with a scream, I do.

I really, really do.

My cry fills the trailer, but I’m so lost I hardly hear it. I surge on the waves of it, my peak so intense it’s almost painful... so intense that I hardly hear him screaming my name, hardly feel his fingertips on my hips as he pumps once, twice, before his cock twitches with his own release.

Sensation finally returns to my body as I slump over, sated and warm, my cheek pressed to Miles fucking Compton’s bare chest.



He brings it up later, when we've both recovered a bit. "I think we should both resign from the competition." *WHAT?!*

I lift my head from his chest, ignoring how his skin sticks to my cheek. "Why?" He sighs, looking down at me. "Listen. I know I can be impartial, but if this gets out, it'll look... *bad*." I consider this. His image, his brand, is very important to him, but still... "Listen, Miles Compton." I narrow my eyes. "You might have the funds to just open a bakery, spur-of-the-moment, but some of us are broke. *Dead* broke." I shoot him a glare. "I don't expect I'll win the grand prize, but second would really help. Hell, even third place is ten thousand dollars! It'd be enough of a little nest egg to put down a deposit, and—" "—Okay, okay." He raises his hand to cut me off. "Point taken, but listen." He swallows, his eyes meeting mine. "I've... actually been looking to open a bakery. Somewhere in the district." I scoff, returning my cheek to his chest. "You don't have to lie to make me feel better." "No, I'm serious! I have the funding, you're right, but I've been looking for someone with enough experience and drive to go in as co-owner." *Oh*. My heart beats in my ears. I'm half-naked on the couch of his white production trailer, but this feels more monumental, more important, than Dylan's shitty, drunken marriage proposal. "Are..." I wet my lips. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?" He chuckles, his hand returning to my bare ass. "I'm saying whatever you'd like me to say. I've known you for ages, Willa. Through all of culinary school. I know this seems like it... came together fast." "No shit," I mutter; he disregards me and plows on. "But really..." He traces swirls on my ass; my skin erupts in goosebumps. "I've... been *into* you, more than into you, for over half that time." I bite my lip. I wish I had a guide on what I'm supposed to say to that. *Sorry, I only realized I was into you yesterday, but I'm still totally down for opening a bakery with you!* "You don't have to say anything," he says lightly. "I just... wanted you to know. So it didn't seem like a random offer. Which brings us to the real issue here." He sighs, his hand dropping from my skin. "I'm not gonna be able to return as a guest judge." I don't expect the burst of anger at his words. I lift from his chest again, my nostrils flaring. "THE FUCK?!" He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Willa, listen. Like I

said, I don't doubt my ability to be impartial, but—"—then that's all there is to it!" I insist, raising my eyebrows. "This is absolutely not the first time a reality show judge has slept with a contestant. You know that, right? Besides, you're enough of an asshole that I *definitely* believe you can be impartial. No offense." He waves this off. "None taken. But, really... we'd have to keep this quiet. *Whisper*-quiet. We probably shouldn't meet up again, or even show we knew each other beforehand." I think back to all my conversations with Danielle. It would be easy enough to lie to her; she'd understand. "I can do that." He smiles down at me, his eyes no longer piercing. Or threatening. "You're probably gonna win anyway, you know that?"



## *Valentine's Day, Next Year*

From the front of the shop, the bakery bell chimes, announcing the arrival of a customer.

“Are you on that, Patrice?” I call into the headset, my hands covered in flour.

“Got it!” she replies, chipper as always. “Welcome to Enemies to Lovers, DC’s finest bake shop. Can I take your order today?”

I chuckle, kneading the flour into a soft dough. The name of our shop still cracks me up. Miles is less amused, but I’m not sure what he expected after going into business with me, of all people. Frankly, he should be happy I didn’t go with a pun. Believe me, I wanted to.

Ah, speak of the devil...

Miles strides into the kitchen behind me, a giant sack of flour thrown over his shoulder. I flash him a wink. We’ve been together a full year, but something about the sight of that man carrying heavy things still does it for me...

“Is there some reason for that expression, Miss Comeau?” he asks, tucking the bag beneath the countertop. “Nope,” I lie, returning to my kneading. “No reason at all.” He chuckles, standing behind me. “I think I know you a little too well to believe that.” I stick my tongue out at him, but don’t deny it. He



does know me well... too well. As it turns out, I didn't win Menty B — but the outcome was more than fair. I came in second place, with Danielle crowned as the winner. Despite my protests, Miles didn't end up returning for the rest of the season. I hate to admit it, but that made everything a little easier to handle, especially because we officially (and quietly) began dating soon after. Even aside from the fact that I have limited experience to compare with, he's not only a perfect boyfriend, but a perfect business partner. When I tell him to do things, he does them — and when he tells me to do things, I do them. There's a level of partnership I've never had, and this shop is equally important to us both. It's embarrassing to admit, but he's everything I've ever wanted. Who could've guessed he was beneath my nose the entire time? I'm not saying he's perfect, of course. With our tempers combined, our fights can be explosive. We're two very passionate people who tend to lack filters, but the commonality we share is that we always, always want to get better for each other. I smirk at his butt as he marches to the back of the shop, where he keeps everything in tip-top working condition. I didn't know it, but the Wheel of Fortune, all those months ago, was right. I needed to accept fate, to embrace inevitable change, to handle what might've held me back about my past. I just couldn't have guessed, not in a million years, that the person I needed to accept was Miles fucking Compton. I giggle to myself, reaching for a baking sheet. I slide the dough onto it, preparing it to chill overnight. I did my cards again this morning. By now, it's a Valentine's Day tradition — and just like last year, I have a strong feeling they're not wrong. This morning, I drew Two of Cups. If I were superstitious, which I definitely am, I'd say this might indicate upcoming nuptials.

To be fair, I'm basing that prediction on way more than the Two of Cups. Miles also demanded we close up shop in — I check my watch — exactly fifteen minutes, with explicit instructions that I'm supposed to “dress up” and meet him at the waterfront.

*Yeah.* I grin at my reflection in the stainless steel hood. *It's in the cards.*



## *About the Author*

Calla Claire is Cherokee romance novelist with a flair for the dark side. She's a native of the D.C. area, which perhaps explains her twisted mind. Calla has two small boys, so free time is a distant memory. However, she'd love to hang out on social media if you're also a fan of junk food and 90s nostalgia. Her works under this penname are all published on Amazon, and she truly hopes to see you around!

Check her out at: [https://linktr.ee/Calla\\_claire](https://linktr.ee/Calla_claire)

# *Whirlwind of Whispers*

Krys Strong



## *Blurb*

I hate Valentine's Day; there I said it.

This year might be the worst one yet. There's nothing like finding out your boyfriend is in another relationship from a paparazzi website. Ten out of ten wouldn't recommend it.

Did I mention he's also my boss?

Now I'll have the pleasure of attending the company's annual charity event with said ex and his new girlfriend... which happens to be his ex. And I get to do that while wearing a stupid masquerade mask.

If you ask me, Bobby, head of the party planning committee, the comic book collector, and an all-around ray of sunshine, was behind it. I'm sure he and his goofy smile thought it'd be fun to give the event a Valentine's theme.

The only thing that will make the most annoying company party in the history of company parties more tolerable is the open bar. Which I plan to use to the fullest extent.



## *Note from Author*

### ***Trigger and Content Warnings:***

Alcohol

Profanity

BDSM

Kinks

Sexually Explicit

### ***Tropes:***

Office Romance

Grumpy & Sunshine

Valentine's Day

Second Chance

Outsider

Self-Discovery

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Shayla



## *Dedication*

This is for those of you who will forever giggle when you see  
a man with his tie draped over his shoulder.





# Chapter One

## Shayla

With a ding, the elevator comes to an abrupt stop. Checking my appearance in the mirrored wall, I give myself my daily pep talk.

*You're doing great.*

*You earned this.*

*You're the motherfucking boss bitch.*

Laptop bag strewn over my shoulder; Birkin clutched tight in my hand. I push my shoulders back as the doors open, ready for whatever the day may bring. Ten years ago, I wouldn't have imagined I'd go from receptionist to senior partner. Most say I slept my way to the top; others say it's because of my last name.

*Hearsay.*

I've dreamed of being a lawyer like my dad since I was little and have worked my ass off since. Well, the man who I thought was my dad until eight years ago.

"Shayla," my assistant states with a forced smile on her face.

There's an odd vibe in the air that prevents me from moving forward. It's giving me the same gut wrenching feeling I had

as I watched my dad hit the ground from a heart attack.

“We’re waiting on chocolate filled donuts and iced lattes.” She quickly steps towards me, and before I realize it, her arm is looped around my back. “They should be here any minute.” Her speech is fast, and her tone is sharp.

“Why?” I stop dead in my tracks, trying to figure out why she’d order foods I crave when I’m stressed or on my period.

*I’m neither.*

“No, no. We’ll talk in your office,” she says in a singsong voice while nervously laughing and pushing me along.

I may detest everything she’s doing right now, but I don’t resist. She’s a fantastic assistant who has my back, so I follow her lead.

“Going to tell me now?” I ask as she closes the door behind us.

“After caffeine and donuts.” She sits in a chair in front of my desk, nervously glancing at her watch. “Where the hell is Daniel?” She murmurs.

“Okay, what gives?” I lean back in my chair, eyeing her.

Ever since I can remember, I’ve always had an amazing sense of smell. I’m sure it’s something that I inherited from my biological father. It’s both a blessing and a curse.

“You’re putting off a weird odor.” I wave my hand in front of my nose.

“You and your sensitive nose,” she giggles as a knock on the door breaks the awkwardness. “Come in,” she says without looking.

Seeing the smile on my face, Dorin turns and gasps. Walking through the door is my best friend Colleen, phone in her hand, scowl on her face.

“No!” Dorin screeches, jumping to her feet, rushing towards Colleen, who sidesteps her.

“Back off!” Colleen snarls, storming past Dorin. “I’m guessing you haven’t said shit.”

My smile fades. Colleen's jaw is clenched and cocked to the side. Her eyes are narrow and her nostrils flare with every breath. The last time I saw her this furious was after a celebrity client went on a drug fueled rampage in a hotel lobby.

"No, I have not..."

"Dorin." Daniel walks into my office with drinks in one hand and a bag in the other. "Where do you want these?"

"You were supposed to be here twenty-minutes ago. Just put that over there and get the hell out." Dorin snaps. "Damn it, Colleen, I have my way of doing things." She runs towards Colleen, who is feet from me.

"What the hell's going on?" I look between the two of them, waiting for answers.

"Sometimes the best way to handle situations like this is just to pull the band-aid off real fucking quick." Colleen places her phone on my desk.

"What's this?" I ask, looking at her phone.

"I'll keep this in mind the next time you get bad news." Dorin hisses.

"Read it. It's all anyone is talking about." Colleen nudges her phone towards me.

It's an article about Liza Randall on vacation in Hawaii posted to a paparazzi website. She's a social media influencer turned actress after a sex tape scandal our firm helped her with. She's also my boyfriend's ex. They dated for three years until she dumped him. Just like every aspect of her life, the media extensively covered their relationship and nasty breakup.

Then I see it and my heart sinks. Photos of them together; romantic dinners, kissing on the beach, holding each other poolside, and finally the icing on the cake... the two of them having sex on a hotel balcony.

*Allegedly.*

My stomach churns and my hands shake as I read the title of the article, 'back together at last?'

“What the hell?” I gulp, looking up at Colleen. “I feel sick.”

Colleen grabs her phone as it slips from my grip. Leaning forward, I clutch my stomach while fighting back tears.

“I’m supposed to get in front of this, but I had to show you first.” Colleen sighs with a mix of anger and empathy on her face.

She’s amazing at her job and has a way of making things go away. We met on my first day here. She was fresh out of college, foulmouthed, and two steps ahead of everyone. It didn’t take her long to become head of public relations. She’s been an amazing friend, supporting me through my dad’s sudden passing, then again after I met my biological father. I was even maid of honor at her wedding, which I attended with my boyfriend, Nigel Walker.

He’s fifteen years my senior, and one of the founding partners here. We started dating a year after his messy breakup with Liza. As a junior partner, he recruited me, along with another, to work with him on a high-profile case. I was overjoyed at the prospect of demonstrating my abilities as a trial lawyer.

We became close, working side-by-side for months preparing for the trial. After a jury awarded our client one hundred million dollars, Nigel rewarded us for our hard work. He gave the other junior partner a pool for his new house. I was given a Birkin and promoted to senior partner. Nigel rewarded himself with a new lime green Lamborghini. Thinking back, he couldn’t have bought a better car that screams, *‘Look at me, I’m a douche.’*

Six months later, Nigel asked me out. His idea of a first date was flying us to Mexico to spend the weekend in a private villa. It was magical, and I was hooked. Something I never thought I’d feel again after losing out to the mate bond three years earlier.

“I can’t believe he’d do this to me!” I knock books off my desk.

“Fucking pig.” Colleen stomps her foot.

“He’s also our boss,” Dorin says, picking books up.

“Who the hell does he think he is?” I slam my fist on my desk.

“Fucking dick!” Colleen shouts.

“You’re not helping,” Dorin says, glaring at Colleen.

Bouncing my knee, I fight my emotions as anger builds. I swore after Kevin I’d never let a man hurt me so badly. At least Kevin had the balls to tell me face-to-face.

“Bullshit!” I jump to my feet and head straight to the door.

“Kick his ass.” Colleen shouts from behind me.

“Shayla!” Dorin jumps in front of me with her arms extended. “Think about this.”

“There’s nothing to think about.” I walk past her.

Stepping out of my office, everyone stops to look my way. I know what they’re all thinking; I’ve heard the whispers and rumors that run throughout this place. Hell, I’ve even agreed with some of them, especially comparing myself with Liza. She’s tall, with large breasts, an hourglass figure, and an ass that won’t quit. I’m short and plain. The only thing I have going for myself is my brain.

Getting off the elevator on the tenth floor, I make a beeline straight to Nigel’s corner office. I’m so furious my entire body trembles. This man does not know the hellfire storm heading for him.

“Miss Stone, he’s in a meeting,” Marge states without looking up. “Miss Stone!” she exclaims jumping to her feet as I storm past her.

Swinging the door open hard, I freeze when I see them together. Liza on Nigel’s lap, his hand between her thighs. Stunned, they jump as the door swings wildly, crashing into the wall.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Walker,” Marge states putting herself in front of me. “She barged past me before I could stop her.”

“It’s okay, Marge. Shut the door on the way out.” His eyes shift to me. “Careful.”

“Why did I have to find out from a paparazzi website?” I put my hands on my hips as the door closes behind me.

“What did you expect?” Liza points between me and her. “It’s like comparing a Bentley to a Kia.”

“Is this why you’ve kept me on the eighth floor and not up here with the other senior partners?” I glare at Nigel. “So you can parade your sluts through here without me seeing them?”

“Excuse me?” Liza stands. “I’m not a slut,” she scoffs, pulling her skirt down.

“Oh please, you go down faster than cupcakes at a weight loss support group.” I snarl.

“Nigel.” She gasps, turning to him. “Are you going to do something about her?”

“Baby, you should go now.” He wraps his arm around her.

“Baby?” I scoff, folding my arms across my chest.

“Really?” She stomps her foot.

“Yes.” He kisses her forehead. “I have things to discuss with my employee.”

“Fine,” she huffs, grabbing her bag. “I’ll see you later, lover,” she says in a low, sensual tone.

I gag, watching them kiss while she rubs against him. The public display of affection is nauseating. His going along with it shows that he doesn’t care about my feelings.

*Did he ever?*

Watching her saunter towards the door, part of me wants to punch the smirk off her face. However, the lawyer part knows this bitch would sue me for everything I’m worth, and that asshole would represent her. Still, I could probably win a countersuit for emotional damages.

*Decisions, decisions.*

As she walks past me, rolling her eyes, the temptation of seeing blood spew from her nose is high. Another trait I inherited from my biological father. Nigel looks like he's holding his breath, praying that one of us doesn't do something to the other. As talented as a lawyer he thinks he is, I'm sure by now he realizes I'm a force to be reckoned with.

"You keep rolling your eyes, sweetie, and maybe you'll find a brain somewhere up there." I smack my lips.

"Shayla." Nigel warns as Liza walks out of the office, shutting the door behind her.

"This could have been handled differently." He sits in his chair.

"You're damn right. You could have told me before I read about it, like everyone else." I walk to his desk.

"I'm not too sure why you're so worked up. It's not like we were serious," he says in a monotone voice while rolling his hand.

"Wait, what? Not serious?" I glare at him with my lips curled upwards. "What the hell have we been doing for the last four years? Because it looked pretty serious to me." I slam my hands on his desk.

"Come on. We had fun flirting and you're a ten in the sack, but other than that." He shrugs.

My hands shake, hearing the words leave his mouth. Anger turns to rage. No one has ever made me feel so insignificant.

"Hate to break it to you, but we were more than some casual fling. You've accompanied me to family functions, and we vacation twice a year... *together*. Oh, and let's not forget we have keys to each other's place..."

"Yeah, I'm going to need to get those back, pronto." He looks at me.

"The night before you left, you laid in my bed, professing your love. What the hell was that all about?" I lean on his desk with my palms face down.



“Liza is my soulmate. We’re getting married,” he blurts without looking at me. “It’s always been her.”

“Oh.” I exhale as shock sucks the air from my lungs.

Straightening up, I realize he never felt the same as me and the last four years were a waste of my time.

“Well then,” I clear my throat while smoothing the bottom of my blazer. “I wish you both the best of luck.”

Fighting my emotions, I quickly turn towards the door. The last thing I want to do is let this ass see me cry. With shaking hands, I reach for the doorknob. Pausing before I twist the handle, I turn back to him.

“You knew about my previous relationship; how he cheated, then chose her. I begged you not to break me the way he did, and you promised you were nothing like him. I loved you so much and gave you everything. God, how could I have been so stupid?” I shake my head and scoff. “I wish you both, till death do you part. Then I hope she brings a date to your funeral.” Holding my head high, I exit his office, leaving the door open wide.



## *Chapter Two*

### Bobby

After my meeting, I stop in the breakroom to fill up on go-go juice. Must be my lucky day because I get the first pour from a freshly brewed pot of coffee.

“Yes!” I wiggle my body, doing a happy dance while filling my mug.

“Too early for this,” Fran exhales, standing next to me with her mom of the year coffee mug in hand. “And aren’t you a little old for a mug like that?” She nods towards my Hulk fist sculpted mug.

“Ma’dam.” I bow my head. “Let me top that off for you.” I fill her mug, ignoring the scowl on her face. “My mug makes me happy. My grandma told me when I was just a wee boy that I should only do things that make me happy.” I smile widely at her.

“And here you are, an accountant,” she says sarcastically while pouring sugar into her mug. “God, how can you drink that?” she asks, watching me take a drink.

“I see you take your sugar with a little coffee.” I snicker, taking another sip when I hear shouting coming from Shayla’s office, followed by a gigantic crash.

“Woah.” I jump, peeking my head out of the breakroom.

Everyone's attention is focused on Shayla's closed door, making the office dead quiet. Shouting coming from one of the attorneys' offices is not unusual, especially with the clients we represent.

"Hey Kel, what's going on?" I nod towards Shayla's office.

"You haven't heard? Oh my God. Turns out boss-man was on a romantic vacay with his ex," she excitedly says with a huge smile on her face.

"Sex tape scandal influencer?" I tilt my head.

"Actress," she corrects. "I'm thrilled. They're the perfect power couple."

"The one that publicly humiliated him by saying he had a tiny... pecker?" I scrunch my face.

"She's since apologized." Kel nods before walking away.

I scratch my head, trying to figure out what's wrong with Mr. Walker.

Maybe he has a brain eating amoeba.

It'd explain why he'd choose Liza over Shayla. I've been here for seven years and met Liza several times, and well... she's awful. By today's beauty standards, she's top tier... if you're into silicone and cigarette breath.

In my mind, I've always thought Shayla was beautiful. Not to mention one smart cookie. She just doesn't pick the best guys. I remember right after I started here; she went through a tough break-up. Kevin, I think his name was. Gym-bro type dude and friend of her brother. Complete slimeball if you ask me. She didn't show much emotion, but her shine just wasn't there for a while.

Suddenly her office door flies open, and she rushes out. With a wild look in her eyes, she races past me, gets on an elevator, and leaves a frantic Dorin behind.

"Shit, shit, shit." Dorin says to herself, walking past me.

"Oooo." I look at Fran with wide eyes. "Crapola's about to go down." I laugh.



It's Friday, four days since everything went down between Mr. Walker and Shayla, and one heck of a tense week. Everyone's walking on eggshells and keeping quiet. Shayla's kept it professional and classy, but her shine is gone again.

"Ladies and germs of the eighth floor, it's time to celebrate Amanda Jones as she makes another trip around the sun." Hanging up the phone, I wait for the others to gather.

After singing happy birthday and passing out cake, I look around and see everyone is present, except Shayla. She's in her office, nose stuck in a file. Usually, she's here with a gift card on behalf of the firm, but not today. Today that duty fell on Dorin's shoulders. I'm not sure why, but I can feel her pain. Cake in hand, I tap on her open door with my knuckle.

"Yes?" she asks without looking up.

"It's Bobby from the party planning committee." I step into her office.

"Dorin has the gift card," she states.

"I have cake, in case you missed my announcement," I stammer.

"I'm not exactly in the mood for cake or socializing," she says without looking at me.

"That's why I brought it to you." I smile, walking to her desk.

"Just leave it over there." She points to the front of her desk.

Determined to lift her mood, I walk around and set the cake right in front of her.

"What the hell?" She holds her hands up.

"It's ice cream cake. Better eat it before it melts." I smile and nod.

"This is not a place for cake. These papers are extremely important." She picks up the cake, offering it to me. "Here."

"No, thank you." I rub my belly. "Already had a piece."

“Are you dense or something?” She groans.

“Quite the contrary. I have an IQ of one-twenty-five.” I proudly say.

“For someone so intelligent, you’re kind of dumb.” She sharply exhales.

“Wow. Rude much?” I put my hands on my hips and laugh while bobbing my head. “Well, this dummy has seen you working your derriere off without looking up. I noticed the sadness in your eyes and thought cake would help.” I bow with my hands extended out. “You’re welcome.”

“How’s cake supposed to help?” She crosses her arms across her chest.

“Have you ever seen a sad person eating ice cream cake?” I shake my head. “No, you haven’t.” I turn and leave before my ego takes another hit.



With a week left before the firm’s annual charity auction, each floor’s party planning committees have joined forces and taken over the small boardroom on the eighth floor. It’s been a gathering point for all the donated items.

“Woah.” Shayla walks into the conference room. “What’s this?” She looks around.

“It’s for the firm’s upcoming party.” I push my shoulders back.

I have avoided her since cakegate, while she has avoided everyone else.

“The one on Valentine’s Day?” She pretends to gag.

“Yes, this year’s theme is Whirlwind of Whispers Masquerade.” I smile and nod.

“Great.” She rolls her eyes.

“I take it you don’t like Valentine’s Day. Why?” I walk towards her.

“Isn’t it obvious?” She shrugs.

“You had a couple of guys that didn’t treat you right, so what, you’ve completely given up on love?” I cross my arms across my chest.

“I wouldn’t say that. Just not fond of a day that exploits many, so a few can line their pockets. It forces unrealistic social pressure while making the rest of us feel like shit because no one chose us.” She exhales.

“Wow.” I stare at her with my mouth open. “You’ve left me speechless. I love Valentine’s Day myself.”

“Why’s that?” She picks up one of the silent auction items.

“What’s not to love about it?” I shrug. “We constantly run this rat race called life, but we set aside this one day to focus on our partners. I mean, that should happen every day, but life sometimes gets in the way. Ya know?”

“Your partner is lucky,” she plainly states.

“Oh no,” I laugh pointing at myself. “Single AF over here.”

Putting down the item she was holding, she chuckles under her breath. Even though she’s looking down, I can see she’s smiling. This is the first time I’ve seen her smile; it’s beautiful.

“You did all this?” She points around the room.

“Party planning committee did.” I nod.

“Gotcha. Listen, I’m sorry for the way I treated you. Not to make excuses for my behavior, I was having a shit day. And yes, the ice cream cake helped.” She turns on her heels and walks away.





## Chapter Three

### Bobby

“Thirty minutes we start counting silent bids,” I say through my earpiece mic, catching a glimpse of myself.

The *Mission Impossible* theme song plays in my head, and I can't help but wiggle my booty. The earpiece makes me feel like a spy on a secret mission. Hate to toot my own horn, but I'm looking quite dapper tonight in my favorite deep purple suit. I noticed bossman wearing a similar suit, only difference is my vest is paisley and his is plain and boring.

Taking a moment to order a drink, I admire how all our hard work has come to fruition. The transformed first floor lobby looks like a sophisticated high-end club. It gives me the warm and fuzzies.

With the annual event falling on Valentine's Day, some wanted to make it all about love. Others wanted to be more inclusive for us single folks. Kyla, who reads those naughty lady books at lunch; you know, the ones with the half-naked dudes on the covers. She convinced the others that we should do a sexy masquerade ball. Her excitement was contagious. So here we are.

The music is pumping, the bid-boxes are filling up quickly and everyone is having a good time. I don't know if it's love in

the air or the full moon tonight, but even mister Walker has congratulated us on a job well done.

Praise from Caesar.

I find it funny I only recognize a handful of people. How can these silly little masks offer so much ambiguity by only covering the eyes? Chuckling to myself, I take a drink as two women and a man enter the lobby. Again, no clue who they are. Pretty sure the women work for the firm, so I concentrate on them. Then the one in the strapless black mini dress smiles and I sit straight up. I'd recognize that smile anywhere.

Shayla.

Squeezing my eyes closed tight, I open them and focus on her with my mouth open wide. She looks like she stepped off the pages of a magazine. She's always been beautiful, but tonight... wow.

Soft, bouncing brown curls cascade over her shoulders. I've never seen her with her hair down. It's so long and beautiful. I want to run my fingers through it. My eyes travel down to her red lips, so full and kissable. I can't take my eyes off her.

"Bobby." Judith appears out of nowhere, startling me.

I scream uncontrollably while my arms and legs move wildly on their own as my drink splashes out of the glass. Trying to stay on my feet, I look like a baby giraffe walking for the first time. My voice changes several octaves as my soul leaps from my body, making a run for the hills while Judith glares at me. Finally, I'm able to regain control when my soul decides it's safe to return.

"What?" I hold my chest, trying to catch my breath. "I wasn't thinking anything."

"Obviously." She rolls her eyes. "We're going to tally the bids. I'm tired, my feet hurt, and I despise drunks," she scoffs.

"Yeah," I say in a high-pitched voice while nodding my head.

"Did you pee yourself?" She stares at my crotch.

“Hey, hey. Eyes up here.” I cover myself and point at my face. “It’s white wine spritzer.”

“Your mommy’s special guy, aren’t you?” She laughs hysterically.

“She tells me that all the time.” I grab napkins from the bar as Judith bursts into a fit of laughter.

Wiping my jacket and shirt, she continues to cackle while walking away. Trying my best to ignore her, I pat my pants dry. Well, as dry as I can, considering I’m using these fancy black napkins. I swear the added color is keeping them from absorbing anything.

“Here ya go, buddy. For what it’s worth, that lady has scared me all night,” the bartender chuckles, placing a fresh drink in front of me.

We laugh before he turns away, while I continue to dry myself with the least absorbent napkins ever.

“Have an accident?” A soft voice says over my shoulder.

“Spilt my drink, when...” I freeze and my breath gets caught in my throat when I come face-to-face with Shayla. “Hey, you,” I say with a smile.

“Bobby, that you?” Colleen lifts my mask. “Damn boy, you clean up nice.”

“The lobby look so...”

“Sophisticated?” I shrug.

“I was thinking sexy.” Shayla giggles.

“Shots!” Colleen passes out glasses.

“Oh, no.” I push her hand away. “I’ve got to go. Need to help with the silent bids.”

“Bobby! Don’t be a pussy. It’s a fucking party.” She pokes her finger in my chest.

“Woo! Party!” Shayla waves her hands above her head.

Pushing Colleen’s painful finger away from my chest, I stare at Shayla, wondering what’s gotten into her.

“As Dimebag Darrell would say, ‘drink it or wear it.’ Your choice.” She pushes the glass into my chest.

Jumping back, I take the shot from Colleen before another accident happens.

“Drink it!” Shayla shouts before chugging down the brown liquid. “Woo!” She slams the glass down.

“Drink! Drink! Drink!” They chant while pumping their arms.

Holding the shot in my hand, I look between the two of them. I’m not much of a drinker. Sure, I enjoy a white wine spritzer, but I steer clear of the hard stuff. However, something inside me would do anything to make Shayla smile.

“Over the lips, through the gums, watch out stomach cause here it comes.” I lift the shot glass as they squeal with delight.

Opening my mouth, I tilt my head back, pouring all the liquid into my mouth, swallowing quickly before I taste the alcohol.

Too late.

I shiver as the bitter liquid makes its way from my mouth, burning its way down my throat straight to my stomach.

“Ack.” I twitch while they continue to yell. “What the heck was that?” I smack my lips and stick my tongue out.

“Tequila, baby.” Shayla bops my nose.

“Tequila?” I ask in a high-pitched tone.

“You did that like a champ; didn’t even need the salt and lime. You’re a badass, Bobbylue. Another round.” Colleen circles her hand above her head.

“Bobby?” Judith snarls over the radio.

“Well, hello there.” Mr. Walker appears out of thin air next to me, causing me to jump, but not scream.

Thank God.

Standing between me and Shayla, he rubs her lower back. I’ve never wanted to break a man’s arm so badly in my life.

“And who might you be?” His eyes never leave Shayla’s breasts.

She looks up at him, batting her eyes while sucking on the straw in her glass. He licks his lips watching her with lustful eyes. I want to jam my thumbs into his eye sockets.

Where are these thoughts coming from?

“You’d think you’d recognize someone you’ve seen naked before.” Colleen laughs.

“Shayla?” He gasps, leaning down to her.

“Hi.” She giggles.

“Shots!” Colleen yells before passing out glasses.

“You look amazing.” He pulls Shayla close, whispering something in her ear.

“Bobby.” Judith shouts over the radio again.

“Coming,” I say through the mic on my earpiece, before walking away.

There’re so many emotions churning inside me. How can I feel so possessive of a woman who doesn’t know I exist? Part of me wants to turn around and claim her as my own, but I keep walking, knowing she’ll never look at me the way she does him.



## *Chapter Four*

### Shayla

“You look amazing.” Nigel pulls me close, grinding into me. “Good enough to eat.” He whispers into my ear. “Let’s go to my office, so I can fuck you senseless.”

“Nigel, do a shot with us.” He licks his lips and gives me a wicked smile before we drink.

“I remember helping you pick out this suit.” I run my fingers along his lapel.

“You were tired of blue and black.”

“Dark purple is your color.” I bite my lip as he leans down to me.

“Nigel!” Liza snaps from behind us, making him jump.

“Baby.” He releases me before walking to her as Colleen pulls me in close.

“Holy shit!” She says in my ear. “You should see the look on Liza’s face. She’s so pissed.” She laughs.

“Good, serves her right.” I tilt my head

“How she got him is how she’ll lose him...”

“And she knows it.” I laugh, finishing Colleen’s sentence. “She’ll never get a good night’s sleep again.”

“Here.” She hands me a shot. “Give her something to worry about.”

“Nigel.” Turning to them, I hold the glass up. “Ready for another shot, babe?”

“No, he’s not.” Liza looks like she’s biting the air as she speaks.

“Operation, make her pay,” Colleen says in my ear.

“Let the games begin.” Watching her drag him away by the hand, we clink our glasses and drink.



I knew I was a little tipsy when the driver helped me out of the SUV tonight. Colleen made the right call when she asked her husband, Dave, to make margaritas, because I wouldn’t have worn this dress, heels, or all this makeup if I wasn’t a little tipsy. Now I’m three shots in... or is it six? Who knows? I sure the hell don’t.

“Eat this.” Colleen shoves a piece of bread into my mouth. “Chew.”

“Where’s my marg?” I ask with a mouth full of bread.

“Water break time. Drink,” she demands, handing me a bottle of water.

“Fine. Buzz kill.” I roll my eyes and drink.

“I don’t feel like holding your hair while you puke your guts up in the bathroom. I’m planning on fucking my husband on the conference table and I don’t need you messing it up.” She laughs.

“Use the tenth floor’s conference room.” I stick my tongue out at her.

“Congratulations to all of our silent auction winners.” Nigel announces. “And thank you to my beautiful girlfriend for being by my side all night.”

“Mistress.” I correct, then shove my finger in my mouth, pretending to gag.



“DJ, let’s put this party into high gear.” Nigel says, as Low by Flo Rida and T-Pain plays.

“This is my jam!” I squeal, tugging Colleen’s hand.

We hit the dance floor just as the chorus starts. Each time they say low, I pop my ass, dropping lower and lower until I’m just inches above the floor. Popping back up, I belt out the song while shaking my ass. People watch at first, but soon join us on the dance floor.

“Fucking hate these.” Colleen holds my arm while taking off her heels. “Better. Give me yours before you break your neck.” I slip off my shoes, handing them over to Dave, like Colleen instructs.

We dirty dance, grinding against each other like we used to in the clubs. Spinning her around, I bend her over as Dave cheers and whistles. Seeing a familiar dark purple suit watching with his arms crossed across his chest and a sinister grin on his face, I slap Colleen’s booty as she shakes it in unison with my hips. I squeal as the song changes to Sexy Back by Justin Timberlake.

Feeling free, I dance with everyone around me. I laugh, seeing Liza shooting eye darts at me.

If looks could kill.

She knew Nigel was taken, but that didn’t stop her. She moved in for the kill, thinking I would just go quietly into the night. Now she’s standing by, watching as people take turns dancing with me. Guess she’s pissed I’ve stolen the limelight from the attention seeking slut. She storms off while I laugh and twirl right into the arms of the man in the familiar dark purple suit.

“You’re the belle of the ball, aren’t you?” He brushes the hair from my face.

“Nice of you to finally join me.” I spin, resting my back on his chest.

“I couldn’t resist another second.” Holding my hands, he wraps his arms around me, whispering into my ear. “I like the way you dance for me.”

“Oh yeah? I like teasing you.” I grind my ass against him.

“You do it well. Just know you’re treading on dangerous grounds, little girl.” He spins me, so I’m facing him.

The world around fades, people disappear, it’s just the two of us. Our sweaty bodies move in perfect unison, making me tingle like never before. As the music slows down, I loop my arms around him. He holds me tight, looking deep into my eyes while I run my nails down the back of his neck. There’s a look of promise in his eyes; one I’ve never seen before. More than that, there’s a strange pull to him.

“Shot time.” I drag him from the dance floor towards the bar.

He sits on a stool in front of the bar, pulling me between his thighs, resting his hands on my lower back.

“Two tequila shots,” I say to the bartender.

“And two waters.” He adds.

Now that I’m still, I’m wobblier on my feet than I realized. I wrap my arms around his neck for support but enjoy the closeness between us more than in the past.

Must be the tequila talking.

I rub my nose against his, just like I have since we started dating. In return, he kisses the tip of my nose, which is new, but I’m not complaining.

Being in his arms feels like a dream that I don’t want to wake up from. Neither of us like PDA, but I’ve never felt more alive than I do right now. I might have started the night wanting to get even with his mistress, but now I’m craving him like never before.

“Here ya go.” The bartender puts our drinks in front of us.

“Have you ever done a body shot?” I bite my bottom lip as he shakes his head. “That changes tonight.” I wink, tilting his head to the side before rubbing lime and sprinkling salt on his neck.

He moans and massages my ass, making my core throb. Licking and sucking the salt and lime off him, I try to remember the last time I was turned on this much.

“Woo! Your turn,” I say, pulling my hair aside.

With one arm looped around my waist, he rubs the lime on my neck.

“Like this?” He sprinkles the salt. “Here we go.”

“Wait.” Pulling away with a sinister grin on my lips, I take the glass and put it in my cleavage. “Work for it.” I giggle.

“You’re full of surprises tonight, aren’t you?” He grins, grabbing a handful of hair.

An electric pulse races down my spine as he pulls my head to the side. He’s never been rough like this before.

Do I like it?

With a growl, he licks my neck. I breathe heavily as his teeth nibble my skin. His hot breath gives me goosebumps while his tongue travels to my chest. He kisses the top of each breast before burying his face. I’ve done body shots before, but none have dampened my panties like this. Maybe it’s the tequila, maybe it’s him, but I feel an orgasm building.

He emerges victorious with the glass firmly between his lips. Seeing a drop of tequila on the edge of his mouth, I quickly lick it clean. His chest heaves up and down as his eyes darken with lust.

“Still want to take me to your office?” I look into his eyes.

He shakes his head and places his hands under my hair, pulling me close to him. He rubs his nose against my jaw and cheek and kisses my ear before sucking it into his mouth.

“I want to take you home where I can properly worship your body like the temple it is.” He whispers into my ear.

Without a word, I take his hand, leading him to my waiting SUV.



## *Chapter Five*

### Shayla

We barely make it through the door of my condo before I'm out of my dress. Things escalated fast in the SUV. Somehow, I ended up straddling his lap. Our kisses were hungry and desperate. His hands freely roamed under my dress and into my panties, turning me into a moaning mess. The only thing stopping us from taking it further was the driver clearing his throat, reminding us he was there.

Wearing only soaked panties and a masquerade mask, my back is pressed against my front door. His body is tight against mine. His dick grinds against my leg as his thigh presses against my wet core. I gasp as he kisses and licks my breast before sucking each nipple.

My body tingles and vibrates like it has never done before; making me feel like I'm on fire. I push his jacket off his shoulders, desperate to feel his skin on mine. It hits the ground as I rip open his white button-up shirt. He spins us, so his back is against the wall. His tongue dominates my mouth, and I think I might lose my mind. He pulls away and begins to lift his mask.

"Wait." I put my hand on top of his, stopping him. "The masks stay on. There's something so sexy about them." I pant.

"Mmmm." He growls, taking my lips again.

Each kiss is more searing than the last, leaving me breathless. I want him buried deep inside me, more than I ever have. He pulls away, his eyes travel over my body. Normally I'd immediately cover myself, but the way he's looking at me fuels confidence within me.

"Are you a good girl?" He rubs his thumb over my bottom lip while holding my chin in his hand.

I gulp, not too sure what to say, since no one has ever asked me that before. There's something about the way he says it that sends a shock wave through my body. I nod, oddly wanting to hear more.

"Words, kitten. I need to hear your words." His voice is lower than normal and so demanding. "Are you a good girl?"

"Yes." I eagerly say.

"Mmmm, good. I love good girls." The way he speaks, his voice sounds almost like a purr. "Now, show daddy just how good of a girl you are." He presses down on my shoulder.

Without thinking, I drop to my knees, coming face to face with the bulge in his pants. I'm not sure why, but I've never wanted to please him more than I do right now. Each hand wrapped around his thighs; I look up at him. His lustful eyes take me in. Every hair on my body rises, hearing him moan as I rub my face against his bulge.

In a frenzy, I unbuckle his belt and unbutton his pants. My mouth waters hearing the zipper releasing. I pull his pants and underwear down in one swift motion, freeing his rock-hard dick. Feverishly, I capture it with my hands. Staring at it, it's thicker and more curved than I remember. He gasps as I trail my tongue up the shaft, stopping at the tip, running my finger across the clear liquid seeping out. Without breaking eye contact, I lick the liquid from my fingertip.

"Sexy." He groans as I take him into my mouth.

My head bobs up and down. Slurping and sucking, I'm enjoying the sounds escaping his lips. Loosening my jaw and relaxing my throat, I take in his shaft. Saliva escapes from my mouth as I hold his hips, pulling him in deeper. He moans,

grabbing my hair with both hands. His hips thrust and soon I can feel his balls rubbing against my chin. Pleasing him is turning me on so much, I feel like I'm going to explode.

“Play with your pussy for daddy.” He pulls out of my mouth. “Get it good and ready for me, kitten.”

Strings of drool spill down to my breast and my eyes are watering, but I don't want to stop. My body vibrates under his touch. Looking up at him, I slip one hand into my panties and the other around his cock. Licking his tip, I rub circles on my button.

“Slip a finger inside. I want to hear how wet I've made you.” His voice rumbles.

I do as I'm told and sink my middle finger inside me. Everything we are doing differs from anything we've ever done. He's showing me a side of him I've never seen before and bringing out a side of me I didn't know existed. Every day, I control every aspect of my life, both personal and professional. I don't take orders; I give them, but there's something freeing about giving him control.

My core tightens around my finger, and my ears wait for his guidance. The sounds of liquid sloshing fill the air as I pump my finger in and out.

“Mmmm, such a good girl.” He holds my hair back, watching me intently.

Those words shoot electric bolts down my spine, straight to my core. Teetering on the edge of an orgasm, I moan louder while sucking and pumping his magnificent cock as hot liquid drips from my entrance.

“Don't come,” he orders, pulling away from me.

Staring at his shiny tip leaves me craving more of him and not liking the disconnect. I move my face back to his shaft but am stopped when he cups my chin with his hand, forcing me to look up at him.

“If you do, I'll have to punish you. Only daddy is allowed to make you come. Understand?”

Punish me?

I'm not sure what he means, but the look in his eyes warns me not to test him.

"Yes... daddy." I softly reply.

Why did I say that?

"Good girl." He pushes my face back to his dick, and like a good girl, I quickly draw him in.

I continue to suck feverishly, thoroughly enjoying myself, which I find odd. Normally, I avoid oral sex like the plague. It's not something I've ever enjoyed doing, but tonight is different. I feel different. He pulls away before helping me to my feet. Spinning me around, he pins me against the wall.

"Where did you learn to do that?" he asks before crashing his lips into mine.

Pressing his body into mine, I raise my hips. All I want is for him to be inside me. I need him so badly. He breaks our kiss, looking me up and down, before leading me by the hand towards my bedroom. Excitement builds, knowing I'll soon get what I'm craving. Stopping in the living room, he bends me over the back of the couch.

"Don't move." He places my hands flat on the cushions before ripping the panties from my body and spreading my legs wide.

"Oh my God." I gasp, feeling his hot mouth on my core.

With his face buried in my backside, he glides his tongue from my entrance to my ass with such expertise. My head spins as he devours me, like never before. Fisting the cushion, his moans vibrate through me. Just as I begin to slip over the edge, he stops. Leaving me frustrated and confused.

"Come, kitten." He takes me by the hand.

With shaking legs, I follow him down the hall towards my bedroom. For a moment, I wonder why I'm following him like a damn puppy. Those thoughts quickly diminish as the spicy, musky, and citrus notes of his cologne fill my nose.



When did he change what he wears?

My heart rate speeds up as we cross the threshold into my bedroom. Guiding me to my bed, he stops at the foot of it.

“Get comfortable.” He points. “I’m not stopping until you’re begging me to fuck you.” He kisses my lips, then tosses his shirt to the floor.

Once again, I follow his orders. Although it’s out of my character, I’m excited by all of this. I settle back on my pillows, watching as he removes his pants. Staring at me like a starving man, he slowly crawls onto the bed.

“I’ve denied you twice. Time to give you what you deserve.” He buries his face between my thighs.

“Oh my God.” I moan while his tongue claims me.

He tosses my legs over his shoulders, holding me tightly in place. Hearing him moan as he pleasures me is such a turn on. It doesn’t take long before my body shakes and I’m breathing heavily. Tossing my head back, I grab my breasts and moan louder and louder. My body tenses as a powerful climax rips through me. He watches my body shake with a grin on his face and satisfaction in his eyes.

“Mine.” He growls before burying his face in me again.

I lost count of my orgasms after the third one. My body drifted to a different plain and my mind went blank. I’m breathless and trembling. He’s ravenous and fulfilling the promise he made earlier. My body is exhausted, but I can feel another climax building. He has two fingers inside my core and another in my ass. He’s doing things he’s never done; things that I didn’t realize I would ever like.

“Please,” I beg, pushing his head away.

“Yes, kitten.” He looks up at me, his fingers still pumping.

“I can’t.” My voice quivers.

“Want me to stop?” he says through heavy breath.

“I’m tired.” I whisper.

“I need to hear what you want.”

What do I want?

Exhausted and overly stimulated, I'm not sure if I can take much more. But damn, I want to feel him inside me.

"Does kitten want me to fuck her to sleep?" He grins.

I nod, almost climaxing at his words.

"I need to hear you say it." He growls.

"Please, daddy, fuck me to sleep." I say through heavy breath.

The words barely leave my mouth before he flips me to my knees, and with a single powerful thrust, he enters me. Pushing my face down, he holds the back of my neck. His grip is firm, but not too tight. With deep strokes, he thrusts in and out. My ass jiggles as our skin slaps together in perfect unison.

"You like that?" He slaps my ass.

"Yes." I gasp, fisting the blanket.

"I'm going to come," he groans, picking up the pace.

Grabbing my hips, he pushes deep inside. Holding me tight, he grunts his release. Feeling him come sends me over the edge. My face becomes hot, every muscle in my body tenses as I'm overcome by the most powerful orgasm yet. I scream while being hit with wave after wave of pleasure, leaving me breathless and gasping for air.

Coming down, I go limp as exhaustion takes over. Cradling me in his arms, he gently lowers me to the bed before pulling out and leaving. Slipping the mask from my heavy eyes, I lay motionless with a smile on my face and skin damp from sweat. I don't think I've ever felt this exhausted or satisfied.

I feel the bed dip as he returns. Softly, he hums while cleaning between my thighs with a warm, damp towel. Exchanging the towel for a dry one, he wipes my body with a gentle touch. I open my eyes as he lifts me, resting my back against his chest.

"Drink." He holds a bottle of water in front of me. "You need replenishment."

“No.” I push the bottle away.

“It wasn’t a request.” He puts it to my lips.

Without argument, I drink until he is happy. With tenderness I’ve never experienced from him, he places me under the covers before reaching across me to turn off the lamp.

“Don’t leave.” I beg, grabbing his arm.

“I’m not going anywhere, kitten.” Settling in behind me, he wraps his body around mine like a security blanket.



## *Chapter Six*

### Shayla

The sun jars me awake as my phone notifications ding. It's after ten a.m. and I have ten missed texts from Colleen and two from my brother. Putting the phone down, I roll over to find I'm alone.

Was it a dream?

Hearing him whistle, I sit up with a smile. Excited, he is still here, unlike in the past. Holding the blanket tight against my naked body, I look around. Relieved seeing the empty condom wrapper peeking out from under his mask on the nightstand.

“Do I hear someone stirring?” he says in a singsong voice.

I scream in shock as Bobby walks through the door carrying a mug in his hand. His goofy smile fades as he screams in horror.

“What the fuck?” I shout before covering my head, realizing he's only wearing boxers.

Hearing him continue to scream bloody murder, I peek out from under the covers. His hands shake as he jumps around, dodging hot coffee as it splashes wildly from the mug before it hits the ground.

“What the hell are you doing here, Bobby?” I cover my face again.

“You invited me,” he says in a high-pitched tone while holding his chest.

“What?” I uncover my head.

“What?” He looks at me.

“What do you mean, I invited you?” I snap, tucking the blanket under my arms.

“We were dancing, then we did a body shot. Little note, you really need to change your choice of liquor to something more palatable.” He shudders.

“Oh my God.” I smack my forehead as my stomach churns.

“Were you that drunk that you don’t remember? I mean, I knew you were tipsy, but...”

“I remember everything,” I snap as heat from embarrassment rolls across me.

“You thought I was mister Walker.” He gulps, then looks down.

“It was the damn masks,” I say, falling back and hiding under the blanket.

How could I be so stupid?

I was with Nigel for four years; how could I not realize it wasn’t him? I’m blaming the tequila for that.

“Guess it’s safe to say this wouldn’t have happened otherwise.” He lets out an exasperated sigh. “I should probably get going.”

Without another word, he leaves. Suddenly I’m hit with the worst pain in my chest and overcome by sadness.



Taking a deep breath before the elevator doors open, I hold my head high. Preparing for the stares and whispers.

Might as well own it.

My stomach flips and flops as the doors open. I’m met by an anxious Dorin; clip board in one hand and coffee in the other.

Great.

“Bill Shaffer is in your office.” Dorin sharply exhales. “Coffee?”

“Seriously? He’s two hours early.” Stepping out of the elevator, I take the coffee and look around.

“His soon to be ex-wife is threatening to sell her shares of his company for pennies.” She nods.

“Really?” I stop walking.

“One more thing.” She loops her arm through mine and takes a deep breath. “Nigel is on his way down.”

Great.

Walking through the office, I’m relieved seeing it’s business as usual, until my eyes meet Bobby’s. Our eyes lock for a moment before he looks away. My heart sinks seeing him; he looks as broken as I feel. My jaw quivers watching him walk away. I want to chase after him and tell him I haven’t stopped thinking about him, but I know we could never be. The elevator dings behind me, and I don’t have to look to know who it is. I can feel it. Nigel is the last person I want to see right now.



“Okay woman, start talking,” Colleen says as our server walks away.

“What are you talking about?” I take a sip of my water, avoiding eye contact with her.

“I’ve been trying to get you alone for three damn days. What the hell happened at the party? You were dancing with Nigel when Dave and I snuck off to fuck on his desk,” she says without taking a breath.

“Wait, you and Dave had sex on Nigel’s desk? That’s fantastic.” I laugh.

“Eh, figured he was busy.” She shrugs. “We came back to the party to find Nigel proposing to Liza and people saying

you left with someone. Can we talk about how hideous her dress was? The purple flower didn't even match Nigel's suit."

"He proposed? I thought he did that in Hawaii." I feel like I'm being gut punched all over again.

"Everything is for optics with people like her." She shrugs.

"People noticed I left with someone?" My heart sinks into my stomach.

"Yup, right after you both got frisky at the bar." She winks.

"I hate knowing people were talking about me." I exhale.

"Gossip moves fast. You're old news now." She laughs. "So, who was the lucky guy?"

"First, I thought it was Nigel." I exhale.

"Yeah, yeah." She sighs before taking a drink of her soda.

"Bobby," I blurt causing her to choke and gag.

"Oh my God!" I jump to my feet and pat her back as brown liquid spews from her nose and mouth as she coughs.

"Holy shit," she says, recovering. "Damn, you just about killed me." She snuffles, wiping her nose with her napkin. "Did you say Bobby?"

"Yes," I wince.

"From accounting? Mister jolly himself?" She leans into me with narrow eyes.

"That's the one," I nervously laugh.

She stares at me while her eyes blink in rapid succession. Her face looks like her brain is overloading and may explode at any moment.

"Bobby?" she questions before bursting into a fit of laughter. "Oh my God, that's fucking classic. Let me guess, he was like 'oh golly gee, I'm comedidliuming.'" She snorts.

"Shhh." I look around. "People are staring."

"Oh, relax." She swipes the air. "Did he have that goofy smile on his face the entire time?" She laughs.



“If you don’t stop, I’m going to leave.” I huff.

“I’m sorry.” She wipes tears from her eyes. “I can’t believe you went through with it. How drunk were you?”

“We left the masks on.” I look down. “It was my idea.”

“We did too. Fucking hot.” She nods.

“I didn’t know it was him until I woke up the next morning.” I close my eyes and rub my temples.

“Wait, you couldn’t tell?” She leans in.

“No, everything about him was... different. He was so... commanding.” I look at her.

“Really?” She tilts her head. “Like, he tossed you around?”

“I guess you could say that.” I take a drink.

“And?” She stares at me.

“And what?” I inhale, knowing full well what she’s asking.

“How was it? Did you?” She whispers, rolling her hand.

“I can’t believe I’m about to say this. It was mind blowing. I lost track of how many times I came. Hands down, best sex I’ve ever had.” I lean back in my chair, stunned to hear the words leave my mouth.

“Bobby? Holy shit. I would have never guessed.” Her mouth is opened wide while her eyes dart around. “Are you going back in for seconds?”

“No.” I shake my head and laugh.

“Why?” She narrows her eyes.

“It’s Bobby.” I stare at her as my phone dings.

“Who’s that? That him?” She watches intently as I look at the text.

“No. Brother number two. They’ve both been trying to reach me for the past couple of weeks.” I put my phone away.

“You haven’t called them back? Maybe there’s something wrong with your father.” She states.

“With my sperm donor, you mean?” I shrug. “Doubt it, he’ll outlive us all.” I take a drink as she laughs.

“Did I ever tell you about a skinny, dorky history teacher I dated? I only did it to find out if what they say about those skinny guys is true. Hung like racehorses with stamina to match. It’s true if you’re wondering.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “Hands down the sweetest guy I’ve ever met. He treated me like a goddess from day one. Anyway, after rearranging my insides a few times, I realized I didn’t want to live without him. So, I molded him into the perfect man. Bulked him up, new hairstyle, wardrobe, and have been happily married ever since.” She winks.

“How is that relevant?” I hold my hands up.

“What I’m saying is you can have the best of both worlds. A man who will treat you like a queen... and who’ll fuck your brains out.” She laughs.



## *Chapter Seven*

### Bobby

I've watched her walk off the elevator for the past four mornings looking more beautiful than ever. She's always put together so well with her head held high. Her hair is in its signature tight bun, but other than that, she's dressed differently. She's wearing stilettos instead of her normal pumps and has traded in pants for a form fitting skirt that sits just above her knees. Her legs and butt look amazing.

I find it odd that the men in this office don't notice her like I do. They notice the other women and practically trip over themselves to get their attention. Maybe they're intimidated by her, or maybe it's because her goodies are covered up. If they'd opened their eyes, they'd see her for how amazing and beautiful she is.

Dummies.

I feel privileged I got to see her in a different light, six nights ago. Raw, passionate, exposing her vulnerable side. The way her body shook under me; she was putty in my hands. If only things had ended differently, we could have been amazing together. But nice guys don't win in the end, though; jerk-offs like mister Walker do.

"Out of toner." Dorin turns from the copier to me with a panicked look on her face. "Shayla is heading into an

important meeting in less than an hour.”

“Second floor.” I snap my fingers. “I helped Amber add toner yesterday.”

“Oh my God, I could almost hug you. Almost.” She grabs a stack of papers, then runs towards the elevators.

“Don’t worry, I’ll add more,” I laugh, looking in the cabinet below. “Of course, not an extra toner in sight.” I sigh, shutting the door.

After taking my file back to my cubicle, I make my way to the supply room, finding it odd that the door is locked. Thankfully, all members of the party planning committee have keys, so I let myself in and turn on the lights.

“Go away.” A voice hisses.

“What?” I look towards the sound of the voice.

“Go away...”

“Shayla?” I ask.

My heart stops... I stop. Not wanting an argument, I turn back towards the door. With my hand on the doorknob, I close my eyes; my body is refusing to let me leave the room without checking on her. My thumb locks the door and I turn towards her.

“Please go away, Bobby.” She sniffles.

“Did someone hurt you?” I ask.

“Go away.” She repeats.

Her distraught voice stirs something inside me and my dominant side surfaces outside the bedroom. Seems she has that effect on me, since it happened during the party too. Rounding the corner behind a bookcase, I find her sitting with her back against the wall on a blanket. Her blazer and shoes placed neatly next to an untouched iced coffee. Panic riddles her face as she stares at the wall next to her.

“What the hell? I asked you to leave,” she snaps, jumping to her feet.

“I needed to make sure you’re okay.” I take a deep breath.

“I’m fine.” She gulps. “Just trying to get my mind right.”

“Why would you need to get your mind right?” I step closer. “You’re a brilliant attorney.”

“I haven’t been the same since...” she exhales. “There’re millions of dollars at stake. This could cost me my job if it goes south.” She looks down.

“Mister Walker, breathing down your neck? He can be a real butthead,” I say causing her to giggle. “What can I do to help?”

“Nothing.” She shakes her head.

“I’m sure there’s something I can do.” I grin.

“Doubt it.” She exhales.

“If memory serves me correct, I know exactly how to relax you.” Closing off the distance between us, I brush the back of my fingers across her cheek. “You slept so sound afterwards.”

“We can’t.” She gulps.

“Why? Because I’m not some egotistical cheating bastard with a fancy car?” I press my body into hers, causing her to moan.

“Shhh, kitten.” I grin, placing a finger across her lips. “You wouldn’t want anyone to hear us in here, would you?”

I can feel her spirit calling to me from behind the walls she has built to protect herself from the world; begging me to give her a place of rest and solitude.

“This can never work.” She whispers.

“It worked fine a few days ago. Let me set you free. Free to be yourself, instead of what the world expects you to be,” I say pinning her hands above her head.

Without warning, she crashes her lips into mine. It’s like explosions go off when our lips meet. I press my body into hers and everything around us melts away. She fits perfectly in my arms, like she was made for me. Our tongues dance as my

hands caress her scrumptious curves while a tiny moan escapes her lips when I lift her skirt. Breathless, I pull away and stare at her.

“Quiet, kitten.” I peck kisses on her sweet lips then slip my fingers into her panties, causing her to gasp and moan. “Tsk, ts, kitten. Now I’m going to have to make you be quiet.”

Falling to my knees, my dick stiffens seeing a wet spot on her green lace panties. She breathes heavily as she allows me to slip her panties off. Standing, I wad them in my hand, then press my body into hers.

“Open.” I order, tugging at her bottom lip with my forefinger.

Without hesitation, she opens her mouth wide. Her eagerness to please me makes my pants uncomfortably tight.

“Kitten, I’m going to need you to be very quiet. If not, I will stop, leaving you more frustrated than ever. Understand me?” I say into her ear while stuffing the panties in her mouth.

She nods and bites down. Her chest heaves up and down. You can almost smell her excitement. Dropping to my knees, I place my tie across my shoulder and kiss her sweet pussy. Lifting her leg over my shoulder, I lick, savoring her sweet honey-like taste.

Once again, she’s putty in my hands. I feast, licking and sucking every inch, paying close attention to her clit. She breathes loudly but doesn’t dare make a sound above that. As much as I want to take my time and prolong her pleasure, I know I can’t. It won’t be long before Dorin comes looking for her.

Soon her hips buck against my face. She holds the back of my head as her legs shake and her juices spill to the floor. I stop only after she pulls away and relaxes. Looking up at her, her head is against the wall and her eyes are closed. Removing her leg from my shoulder, I kiss her pussy once more before pulling her skirt down and standing to my feet.

“You did so good, kitten.” Removing the panties from her mouth, I slip them into my pocket then rub her jaw with my

thumb. “How do you feel?”

“Relaxed.” She giggles. “Can I have my panties?”

“Later. I want you to think of me every time you feel the slickness between your thighs.” I kiss her before turning and walking away.

Toner in hand, I quickly make my way from the supply room almost running into a fast-moving Dorin as she rounds a corner.

“Got it.” I hold the toner high as her eyes shift to my tie, still positioned over my shoulder.

“Oh geesh, how’d that get up there?” I laugh, pulling my tie down as I pass her.





## *Chapter Eight*

### Bobby

Hours pass, and the heated meeting rages on. Screaming and cursing can be heard throughout the floor from behind the conference room's closed doors. I hate this for Shayla, but I know she's a darn good lawyer who can handle her own just fine. After texting her my address, I head home to prepare dinner.

"Good evening." I bow my head.

"Hello." She smiles.

"Welcome to my humble abode." Stepping out of the way, she walks in. "Let me help you." I take her bags and help her out of her blazer then place them in a nearby chair as she sighs a breath of relief, stepping out of her stilettos.

"Hungry?" I walk to the kitchen.

"No," she states from the living room. "I'm just here because you have something of mine."

"You have to eat," I snicker, making my way back to her with drinks in hand. "It's dinner time after all."

"Why do you have all these toys?" she asks, taking the drink from me.

“These are not toys.” I shake my head. “These are collectable figurines, some older than us.”

“But why?” She picks up one of my prized pieces.

“Hey, don’t touch.” Taking it from her, I place it back in its rightful spot. “Why not?” I shrug.

“Are you one of those comic book guys?” She takes a sip. “What is this?” She looks at the glass.

“White wine spritzer.” I smile widely. “Much better than tequila. Ack.”

She shakes her head while smiling widely at me.

“What?” I chuckle.

“You’re like night and day.” She laughs.

“What do you mean by that?” I put my hand on my hip.

“You’re always so happy-go-lucky. Nothing seems to bother you. There’s always a smile on your face. I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say a negative word, and you collect toys.” She pauses.

“Figurines.” I correct, holding a finger up.

“You’re different behind closed doors... so assertive.” She gulps.

“Let’s eat before it gets cold.” I walk to the kitchen.

“I told you; I’m not hung...” She gasps, walking into the kitchen. “Woah. You cook too?”

“Yes.” I turn to her. “I love to cook, something I learned from my grandmother, who ran a bed-and-breakfast when I was a kid. Sit, I’ll make you a plate.”

“Oh wow. Is she the reason for your cheery disposition?” She looks at the plate I set down in front of her.

“No, it’s because of my dad. Dig in.” I motion with my hand before taking a seat.

“I can’t believe you cooked all this. I burn water,” she says widening her eyes.

“Nothing to it. Garlic shrimp, green beans, and roasted potatoes. I helped my grandmother with much more complicated meals,” I say before taking a bite.

“This is fantastic.” She covers her mouth and looks at me with wide eyes.

“Glad you like it. My grandmother would say we are all talented in our own way.” I take another bite.

“So, you’re like your dad?” She takes a drink.

“Not hardly.” I shake my head. “My dad was a jerk. I swear he hated my mom, me, my sister, his job in the factory... life. There was never peace in the house, and I got the brunt of his anger. When I was twelve, he died from lung cancer, and we finally got peace. That’s when I decided I didn’t want to be anything like him. I choose happiness, not to let things stress me, choose to find the beauty in everything, and do only things that make me happy.” I take a drink.

“Wow,” she gulps, playing with the food on her plate. “So... behind closed doors...” She shifts uncomfortably in her seat.

“I’m a gentleman dominant.” I smile.

“Dominant? Are you one of those guys who gets off to beating women?” She sits back in her chair with a disgusted look on her face.

“Not hardly.” I shake my head. “I find pleasure in giving pleasure. A dom’s job is to be the safe place for his sub without judgment. A place where you’re free to explore every aspect of your sexuality. Now, if pain is what the sub is into, I don’t have a problem inflicting it. Just as I don’t have a problem handing out punishments when needed. As you learned earlier today. That reminds me.” I reach into my pocket. “These belong to you.” I set her panties next to her plate and wink.

“Thank you.” She blushes. “Tell me, how did you come to be a dom.”

“My first girlfriend was older and more experienced. She came with a bunch of kinks and preferred taking a submissive role in the bedroom. I learned I enjoyed taking the dominant

role. Since her, I've done a lot of studying, and all my relationships have been that way since."

"A bunch of kinks?" Her mouth opens while her right eye twitches.

"Things outside regular intercourse. I'm sure you have some." I smile.

"Ha! No." She snorts, shifting in her seat.

"Nothing you've fantasized about?" I ask, watching her closely.

"No. Sex has always been very... normal." She blushes.

"You're telling me, mister fancy car is plain vanilla?" I slap my leg and laugh. "I knew it!"

"And you?" She leans into me.

"I have a breeding kink." I exhale.

"What is that?" She smirks.

"Sex without protection. Filling you deep with my cum. The thought of getting you pregnant is such a turn on. Plus, I enjoy the connection we'd share without a condom. Everything except the baby." I laugh.

"Oh." She clears her throat. "So, this dom thing? Is it something you do all the time?" She narrows her eyes.

"I prefer to be in control in the bedroom only, but every dynamic is different. Everything is discussed and agreed before the contract is drawn." I smile.

"Contract?" She stares at me.

We talk and laugh through dinner. She has a natural curiosity about the lifestyle. Seems everything she knows, she's learned from movies, which isn't the best example.

I'm enjoying getting to know her better and can't believe how funny she is. We lose track of time and before we know it, it's ten p.m., but neither of us is ready for it to end.

"Wait, you have a toy box?" She leans into me. "Like with multiple toys?"

“Yes, all new. Waiting for my new sub.” I chuckle.

“Wow, I only have one, and half the time I have to knock it on the nightstand to make it work,” she giggles.

“We’ll have to fix that,” I say, rubbing her thigh.

“Can I see it?” Her eyes grow wide.

“It’s in my room and I can’t guarantee I’ll be a gentleman if I get you back there.” I grin.

“I’m a big girl,” she says, flashing me a devilish smirk.



## *Chapter Nine*

### Bobby

“Wow,” she breathes, looking around my room. “This is not what I expected.”

“What did you expect?” I sit on the bed.

“I don’t know, maybe toys...” she pauses and gulps. “Figurines like the rest of your home.”

“This room has a different purpose than the others,” I say patting the bed next to me. “Besides, black and purple are my favorite colors. Ready?”

“For?” She flashes a seductive grin while taking a seat.

“Careful.” My fingers run circles on her thigh. “You’re in my domain now, kitten.”

“What exactly does that mean?” She grins devilishly.

“You like to tease, but in here, I’m the boss.” Her hair cascades around her face as I remove the clips. “In here, I dictate the rules. Rules that must be followed.”

“Or?” She pants as I brush her hair over her shoulder, exposing her neck.

“I’ll be forced to punish you.” I kiss her neck. “Bottom drawer.”



“Huh?” She tilts her head.

“My toy box. It’s in the bottom drawer.” I look at my nightstand with a smirk.

“Oh yeah, forgot about that.” She giggles, then clears her throat before opening the drawer. “It looks like a fancy toolbox.” She removes it from the drawer, placing it on her lap.

“It’s custom made. Beautiful, isn’t it?” I run my fingers across the intricately carved wooden box. “Open it.”

Her eyes grow wide as she studies the different items, running her fingers across each piece. I love her natural curiosity.

“Is this a pearl choker?” She picks it up.

“Nipple clamps.” I chuckle.

“What?” Her head snaps to me. “They look painful. Wait, I thought you weren’t into hurting women.”

“Everything in this box is for exploration.” I rub her jawline.

“These are not for me.” She exhales, putting them back in the box.

“How do you know, if you never try it?” I kiss her lips. “See these claws? Like the nipple clamps, they’re for sensation play.” I run the claw along her thigh. “Do you like that?”

“I’m not sure.” She breathes heavily as her nipples poke through her top.

“Perhaps, you’d prefer a paddle.” I remove the top tray exposing more toys.

“Are those dildos?” She stares into the box.

“Yes, some vibrate, others don’t.” I watch her.

“For foreplay?” She looks at me.

“Not necessarily.” I lick my lips. “I love filling multiple holes.”

“Oh.” She clears her throat. “What is it you want?” She puts her hand on my thigh.

“For you to trust me... with your body... mind.” I circle the claw on her arm. “If you allow me, I can safely guide you as you explore your sexuality.”

“Oh.” She watches my hand. “Please.” She whispers.

“Please, what, kitten?” I take the box from her.

Her chest heaves up and down, eyes fixed on the floor. Her face twitches as if she’s having an internal conversation, trying to decide what it is she wants.

“Nothing happens without your verbal consent.” I whisper.

“Guide me.” She looks me in the eyes.

Her bottom lip quivers, and she has a tear in her eye. I’m sure for someone like her, giving up control is difficult.

“Are you sure?” I ask, cupping her jaw.

“Yes.” She nods before taking a deep breath.

With her eyes closed she rests her head in my hand. This tiny gesture signifies she trusts me. It’s a beautiful moment that I don’t dare rush.

“Kitten, I want to see you.” I place the box next to me.

She sits quietly for a moment, then stands in front of me. Our eyes lock as she slowly removes her clothes. A smile creeps across her face as she drops her green lace bra next to her.

“You are so perfect.” Without breaking eye contact, I place claws on the fingers on my left hand. “First lesson.” I stand and point. “On the bed.”

Without hesitation, she climbs onto the bed, eagerly watching me. I remove my shirt and join her. My movements are slow and gentle as I position her; all fours, ass high, cheek pressed flat against the bed, arms extended next to her thighs.

“This is how I expect you to be waiting for me when I command you.” I kiss her cheek. “Understand?”

“Yes.” She whispers.

“Good girl.” I run my claws along the curve of her back to her ass. “You like showing off for daddy, don’t you?” I glide my right fingers along her slit.

“Yes.” She moans.

“Time to reward you.” I turn on the silicone vibrator to high, holding it against her clit. “Don’t move.” I order.

She comes quickly, like I knew she would. I watch her body shake without removing the vibrator as liquid drips from her. It’s a glorious sight. After a few minutes, she lunges forward, away from the vibrator. Knowing she has broken a command; she watches me nervously.

“I told you not to move.” I look sternly at her.

“It was too much.” She covers her mouth.

“I’ll tell you when it’s too much.” I grab her by the ankle, pulling her flat onto her back. “You’ve left me no choice.”

Taking restraints from the box, I strap her wrists to her ankles, then strap the vibrator tight against her clit, turning it to high.

“I’ll be back when I think you’ve had enough.” I kiss her lips, then leave the room.

Not wanting to overwhelm her, I return a few minutes later with water. She’s trembling and moaning, her body glistening with sweat.

“You are such a beautiful sight.” I turn off the vibrator, remove the restraints, and hand her the water bottle. “Drink all of it.”

I give her time to recoup while I undress. Returning to the bed, I rub my hard cock and position myself by her head.

“Please me.” I look at her.

Quick to her knees, she draws me into her mouth with gusto. I hold her hair back, watching how eager she is. Her hands and mouth work in perfect unison. I feel cum creeping up my shaft, but I pull out before any escapes. Reaching for the

condom on my nightstand, she places her hand on top of mine, stopping me.

“I want to connect with you.” She bats her eyelashes.

Laying back, she spreads wide. Offering herself to do as I please. A growl vibrates through my chest as my eyes feast on her fully exposed body. Sexy doesn't begin to describe how she looks right now. Like a starving man, I dive into her deliciousness. Moaning, she grabs my hair pressing her pussy tighter to my mouth. I slip a finger into her tight ass, causing her to moan louder.

“I need you,” she whispers.

Out of breath, I position myself between her thighs, rubbing my hard cock against her wet lips before entering her. Tossing her head back, she moans as I thrust in and out using short, fast strokes.

“You like being fucked hard, don't you?” I watch her.

When she doesn't answer, I slip my hand around her throat.

“You like being fucked hard, don't you?” I repeat, applying a bit of pressure.

Opening her eyes, she looks at me with a sinister grin. She wraps both hands around my forearm and squeezes. Her nails pierce my skin while her eyes beg for more pressure.

“Yes, daddy. Harder.” She groans.

Her breast bounce wildly as I pick up the pace. Our moans fill the room as the headboard hits the wall. I never expected to see this side of her so soon, but I love it. Out of breath and feeling cum rising again, I pull out, inserting a vibrator in my place. Worshiping her breasts, I rub the vibrator against her G spot as she comes for me.

“I love watching you come.” I kiss her breasts.

“Please, I need you inside me.” Her voice quivers.

“Oh yeah? How about you let me fuck that tight ass?” I look at her face, waiting for her response.

“I’ve never, but I like it when you use your finger.” She bites her lip and smiles. “Okay.”

“Are you sure? There’s no pressure.” I look deep into her eyes.

“I’m sure.” She smiles. “Gentle though.”

“Of course, kitten.” I kiss her lips.

After she’s properly lubed, I slide my tip in. Gently pumping, watching her intently, waiting for cues she is ready for more. Taking my time, gently stretching and filling her ass until I’m completely inside.

“Yes.” She massages her breasts. “Feels so good.” She moans.

She is a beautiful sight, moaning and licking her lips. I’m enjoying taking my time with her. Moving slowly and gently, even though she bounces her hips, asking for more. I want her first time to be a beautiful experience.

“Fuck.” I groan, enjoying feeling the vibrations through her.

Her chest rises and her eyes roll back before she closes them, tossing her head back. With her mouth open, she fists the blanket. My head spins and my eyes blur as I fight my climax. Her breathing becomes shallow. I watch her legs shake uncontrollably.

“Bobby!”

I love hearing her scream my name as she climaxes.

“That’s right, kitten. Come for me.” I’m fully focused on her.

Her body convulses, her moans and screams are like music to my ears. I continue pumping in and out of her, prolonging her pleasure. Opening her eyes, tears stream down her cheeks.

“Oh, baby.” I pull everything out of her. “Are you okay?” I hover over her, wiping the tears away with my hand.

“I’m so good.” She smiles.

“Why are you crying?” I kiss her lips.

“I don’t know... I...” Her voice is ragged. “I think... I’m in love with you.” She gulps.

My breath gets hitched in my throat and I’m suddenly overcome with joyous emotion. No one has ever told me that before or made me feel the way she does.

“Baby, it’s always been you.” I take her lips for a searing kiss.

Breaking our kiss, I look deep into her eyes, all I see is love staring back at me. Her face is soft and glowing. My heart is full. She reaches between us, taking my dick in her hand and lining it up to her entrance. With a single thrust, we are fully connected again.

With long and slow strokes, we kiss. Lust is gone, replaced by love. Holding her tight in my arms, she feels so perfect. For the first time, I make love. There’s no dom and sub dynamic, just two souls connecting. This is love in its purest form.

“I’m going to come,” I say into her lips.

Wrapping her legs around me, she locks me in tight. Her nails dig into my back. Holding myself deep inside her, she gasps as I fill her. Soon she follows, pulsating around my shaft and I feel myself being drawn deeper into her. I suck her neck; she is mine, marked both inside and out.



## *Chapter Ten*

### Shayla

The past six months have been like a dream. Bobby is easily the best boyfriend I have ever had, and an amazing partner, both in and out of the bedroom. I've learned so much from him. His love of life is contagious, and I smile more and more each day. Communication is top notch; I never have to guess where I stand with him.

We've maintained a professional relationship at work, and as far as I know, Colleen is the only person aware of our relationship. That was until last night when Bobby and I ran into Nigel while out for dinner.

A month ago, Liza dumped Nigel publicly for a prince. Karma served him a piece of humble pie when he found out from the same paparazzi site I did. Courtesy of Colleen, of course, which she immensely enjoyed.

He immediately begged for another chance. We were face to face in my office when I told him I was in a relationship. You should have seen his face when I told him I was in love for the first time in my life and have never been happier.

This morning I was called in early, before normal business hours. Nigel met me in my office with the police, terminating my contract on the spot. They paraded me out the building



past my incoming coworkers as Nigel watched with a cocky smile. It was the ultimate walk of shame.

Sitting on my patio with wine in my hand, I ignore the onslaught of text messages and calls. I simply sip my wine, basking in the afternoon sun. This is the first time in my life that I have just sat still without a care in the world.

“Shayla?” Bobby shouts, closing the door behind him.

“Hey babe,” I say, walking into the living room.

“Baby, what happened?” He wraps me in his arms. “You weren’t answering your phone. I was so worried.”

“So sorry.” I squeeze him. “I just needed a minute.”

“Rumors are swirling.” He sits me down on the couch.

“Oh, yeah?” I take a drink.

“Did the police really escort you out? Why?” He holds my hand.

“Nigel’s way of humiliating me for not accepting his advances.” I shrug.

“Wait, is this because he ran into us last night? He said he was happy for us.” He grinds his teeth.

“Something about superiors dating subordinates. I’m in breach of contract.” I chug the last of my wine.

“Well, if that’s not the pot calling the kettle black.” He scoffs.

“I know. Nigel knows. I’m sure the tenth floor has been scrambling all day to cover their asses.” I lean back.

“What are you going to do?” He puts my legs across his lap.

“I have a copy of my contract here and will go through it with a fine-tooth comb.” I take a deep breath. “Then make my move accordingly.”

“Lucky you have a copy here. Most would’ve just kept it at the office.” He rubs my feet.

“I’m not like most. Nigel knows this.” I laugh.

“If you’re not working there, then I quit.” He pushes his shoulders back.

“Don’t be silly.” I playfully slap his arm. “One of us has to be gainfully employed.” I laugh.

“I’ll have you know; I’m highly sought after.” He bobs his head. “I turned down a management position at another firm last week.”

“What? Why?” I gasp.

“You work so many hours; I was afraid I wouldn’t see you if I left the firm.” He looks down.

“You’re the most amazing man ever,” I say, wrapping my arms around him.

“How about I get you another glass of wine and start dinner?” He winks.

“Or... we could soak in a bubble bath, order Thai, and watch movies.” I wiggle my eyebrows.

“I like where this is going. First wine, then bath.” He stands, taking my glass.

“That sounds amazing.” I kiss the air.

Watching him walk away, my heart is full. He’s more than perfect and I love him so much. There’s nothing I’d change about him. A sharp knock at the door drags me from my thoughts. Answering it, fully expecting an angry Colleen, I’m shocked at who I see.

“Christopher...”

“Do you ever answer your phone?” he asks, leaning against the outer door frame. “Going to invite me in?”

I step aside. My stomach churns nervously as he walks through the door. If he’s here, it can’t be good. He looks around, sniffing the air. I’m sure realizing we’re not alone.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, eyeing him closely.

“I wasn’t too sure which wine, so...”

“Who’re you?” Christopher glares at Bobby.

“Plot twist.” Bobby tilts his head while staring at Christopher.

“Christopher!” I snap.

“Am I interrupting something?” Bobby asks, looking between us.

“Yes.” Christopher sits on my couch.

“No.” I make my way to Bobby, wrapping my arm around him. “This is Christopher Stone... my brother. I told you I had two brothers.”

“And a sister that died as a toddler. I remember.” He smiles and nods before turning his attention to Christopher. “It’s just that you look like that millionaire guy. The one who’s married to one of Zane Robert’s daughters... Marco Stone.”

“He’s our older brother. Shayla and I are only months apart.” Christopher smiles.

“Different mothers.” I add.

“You’re related to Marco Stone?” Bobby looks at me with wide eyes.

“Yes.” I sigh. “I only met him eight years ago. He doesn’t like me.”

“Not true.” Christopher corrects.

“Really?” I snap my head to him. “He refers to me as the bastard child. According to him, I’m not good enough to carry the Stone name.” I sharply exhale.

“Shayla, this is family business. Think we can speak alone?” His eyes shift to Bobby.

“No.” I shake my head.

“I wish you could mindlink.” Christopher growls.

“Mind what?” Bobby tilts his head.

“Sorry, seems the only thing I inherited from dear old dad was his sense of smell.” I roll my eyes.

“Marco has been trying to reach you; we both have.” He runs his fingers through his hair.

“Unlike you, I don’t answer to him.” I shake my head.

“I see the family resemblance now.” Bobby looks between us.

“Shayla looks like our grandmother.” Christopher smiles.

After learning about me, Christopher reached out. Excited to have a sister, even though I’m half human. He welcomed me to their territory and gave me a crash course about who I am.

Werewolf.

Marco, who is the Alpha, shunned me. Angry because I resulted from a relationship between our father and my mother. A relationship that ended when she died. Over the years, Christopher and I have remained close, but they have not invited me back to pack lands.

“Why are you here?” I let out an exasperated sigh.

“Time to join the family business.” He blurts.

“Family business?” I scoff. “Marco was very clear.”

“He’s reconsidered... seen the error of his ways.” He rubs his jaw. “A lot has gone on outside this world’s knowledge. He realizes now that family, no matter how they came to be, is very important. His children need their aunt.”

“Wow, pulling at those heartstrings, huh?” I gulp.

“Nigel is not who you think he is. He’s an Alpha of a small pack.” He exhales.

“What?” I ball my fists at my sides.

“Boy, am I lost.” Bobby laughs.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I grind my teeth.

“Wasn’t my place. Plus, after Keith, I was sure you’d pick up on the signs.” He shrugs.

“Not your place?” I shout. “You’re my fucking brother.”

“Now I’m your brother?” Christopher stands. “Eight years ago, you begged me not to tell anyone. Said you didn’t want to be treated differently because of who you’re related to.”

“Get out.” I point to the door.

“What’s the matter baby sister, your words haunting you now?” He mocks. “Time to take your place on the other side of Marco.”

“Never!” I shout.

“Hey, hey,” Bobby says, stepping between us.

“You’re as pig-headed as Marco.” Christopher lets out a wall shaking growl.

“You don’t fucking scare me.” Stepping closer, I sandwich Bobby between us.

“Speak for yourself. I’m about to pee myself.” Bobby squeaks.

“Fuck.” Christopher glare shifts to Bobby as he steps back. “We’ve wanted you to join us for two years, but we didn’t think you’d leave the asshole. We decided to make our move after finding out about Nigel and Liza. Marco wanted to be the one to talk to you...”

“Really? Where’s he at?” I snarl.

“You’re definitely scarier than your brother,” Bobby says.

“If you would have answered your phone.” Christopher snaps. “I volunteered to come here today; thought you’d be more receptive to me. Didn’t count on you having father’s temper.”

“Baby, if Marco is ready to make amends, then I think you should.” Bobby wraps his arms around me.

“Mate,” I whisper shifting my eyes from Bobby to Christopher.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Christopher looks between us. “Him?”

“It feels like electricity when we touch.” Tears fill my eyes.

“I do get zapped a lot by her.” Bobby laughs.

“Mates are welcome.” Christopher watches Bobby.

“My mother wasn’t,” I state.

“Extenuating circumstances,” he replies. “I’ll make it right.”

“How?” I cross my arms.

“I have a management position available. Interested?” he asks, looking at Bobby.

“Ummm, yes.” Bobby wiggles his body, doing his happy dance.

“Him? You’re positive?” Christopher looks at me.

“Stop it.” I scrunch my face.

“Fine.” He holds his hands up. “Let’s get this over with.”

“What?” Bobby shifts nervously.

“There’s something I need to tell you, but you’ll want to sit for this,” Christopher motions to the couch. “It’s important you keep an open mind.”

***The End***

## *About the Author*

Krys Strong was born in Thailand. She is a romance author, mom of 2, and lives in Houston with her husband and rescue pup. After being an aspiring writer for years, she published her first book at 46.

Krys loves all things romance with paranormal and fantasy being her favorite. She loves to write plot driven books that promise to take the reader on an emotional ride. Her favorite characters to write are over 35.

When she is not writing, she enjoys reading, cooking, gardening, exploring the Texas Hill Country, and sharing her culture with others.

You can learn more about her and her books at

# *A Chance Encounter*

Tamara Whitlow





## *Blurb*

### **Hearing a man cry after sex wasn't on my bingo card.**

I made a bet with my best friend that I'd be engaged by Valentine's Day but that will be hard to do because I'm not even seeing anyone. For the first time in forever, I go to drown my sorrows in alcohol at a bar and end up going home with a beautiful specimen of a man. I would have never expected the night to end in tears. If this is the way my life is going, I'd rather fess up and lose the bet of a proposal.

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# *Chapter 1*

## Jackson

“Dude, you’ve been coming to this club for the last month. You can’t keep getting drunk. She left you and it’s over. Forget about her.”

I take another drink and wince as the liquor burns the back of my throat. Slamming the empty glass down on the table, I turn to glare at my best friend.

“That’s easy for you to say. We were together for four years and she threw it all away to sleep with someone else.”

He slaps a hand on my shoulder and smiles. “At least you didn’t give her the ring.”

“Fuck you, Tin.” I wave my hand in the air and the bartender comes to pour me another glass. I snatched the glass before he even finished pouring and downed it in one go. “I was really going to propose on Valentine’s Day. What a fucking waste.”

Tin sighed and looked around the bar. “Look, Jackson. There are so many women here and you’re still stuck on a two-timing whore.”

I grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him close. “Don’t call her that!”

“She cheated on you, bro!”

I let him go with a push. “I know, but I still love her.”

His lip curled in disgust as he turned away from me. “Whatever.”

The night wore on as usual and ended with me barely wondering how I got home. For four years, Tricia had been my world and now it's over. From high school sweethearts to never speaking again. There's no way I would ever open my heart like that again.



## Chapter 2

### Pine

Valentine's day is quickly approaching and I have yet to find a boyfriend. Last February I made a bet with my friend that I'd be in a relationship or married by this time and I've failed yet again. Myliah, my best friend has been in Europe for the last seven months studying and I lied to her saying that I was seeing someone. She's due to be home at the end of the year and now I'm nervous. She's going to know I lied the moment she steps off that plane. All it will take is one look at my face and she'll know. I have never been good at lying and that's one of the reasons I haven't video chatted with her. My face always gives me away. Feeling buzzing under my leg, I pull my phone out and gulp at the screen. *Speak of the devil.* I put a smile on my face even though she can't see it.

"Myliah! How are you?"

The phone shuffles on her end and her cheery voice come through. "Bonjour!"

I had to chuckle at her cheesy accent. "What are you doing? No school today?"

"No. We have a holiday and I'm going out with a couple of friends later. Thought I'd check on you a bit before I got busy. What's up with you? Going to see your man?"



I had to bite my lip hard. “Um, maybe? I was thinking of going to get a drink later.”

“Well, be careful Pine. You know you can’t handle your liquor. Don’t let that man take advantage of you.”

“I won’t. I miss you.” I told her with guilt building up inside me.

“I miss you too! I’ll be there before you know it.”

I smiled into the phone because I did miss her. “I’ll talk with you soon.”

“Au revoir!”

Placing the phone down, I lay my head on the back of the couch to stare at the ceiling. *Maybe I need to grab a drink. One won’t hurt, right?*



## Chapter 3

### Jackson

The smell of vanilla washed over me as my fingers grazed the softest skin I've ever felt. Butterfly kisses caressed my neck as I angled my head to give better access. The body on top of mine anchored me to the bed as the kisses moved lower. Hands tugged at the hem of my shirt and I sat up a little to help with the removal of my clothing. The kisses continued down my chest and to my stomach. My hands moved on their own to the long brown hair that tickled my skin. Brown eyes looked up at me from where her mouth still kissed me. Her brown skin on top of my tanned skin looked beautiful. My hands went under her arms and pulled her up close to me. Our mouths crashed together in a wet kiss as I rolled her over and climbed on top of her. Our movements were hurried as I pulled her shirt over her head and looked down at her breasts that sat high in her bra. My fingers lightly grazed over the top of her skin and her body shuddered. *Wait...Am I smiling?* I had to quickly move back down and place my face in the crevice of her neck and inhale her scent again. If I start thinking, I'll never be able to finish this. Whether this be a dream or reality, I need to finish this. My hands reached under her back and unsnapped her bra and pulled it from her. Her brown nipples stared up at me as I looked down at her. I pulled one into my mouth and her moan made me instantly hard. The pants I wore were now in the way and I needed to be closer to her. Her

hands gently scratched my back as I sucked at her breasts and kissed her skin. I couldn't take it anymore; I stood tall on the bed and pushed my pants down my legs and threw them to the side of the bed. Her hooded eyes watched me from below and just looking at her face, I knew she was right there with me. Her hands pushed her skirt down her legs and she kicked it to the floor. Coming back down over top of her, I kissed her deeply and nudged her legs apart with my knee. My hand searched blindly beside her to grab the condom from the table. Releasing her mouth, I tore open the package and quickly sheathed myself. I searched her eyes and with a smile, I had her permission to continue. The moment the tip of me went inside, I felt the heat of her core. I had to pause because I was already ready to lose it. It had been months since I last touched a woman and this woman beneath me felt right. I pressed in slowly and her moan of pleasure as she was filled spurred my greediness and allowed me to move all the way in. Her nails dug into my back as I sat back on my heels and held her hips tight. I thrust into her in a steady pace and watched as I disappeared into her again and again. It was as if I was watching it from afar and it felt as if I was sharing a secret that no one should be witnessing. Her upper body arched from the bed as I kept the pace. The sounds and faces she made, made me want to give her more. Her hands reached out to me and I couldn't deny her. I slowly lay over her and she held me as I continued to pump into her. Her body erupted and she held on tight as her nails dug into me again. The tightening of her walls drove me to move faster as my balls emptied into the condom. Time stopped for a moment and then the most embarrassing moment of my life happened. I started to cry.



## Chapter 4

### Pine

*Is he crying?* The alcohol that flowed through my system that gave me the courage to go home with a stranger from the bar, quickly evaporated from my body. My hands went from gripping his body to now consoling him. As his body shook from crying on top of mine, my eyes looked around for help. *What the hell am I supposed to do in this situation. This was a first.*

“Um, are you okay?” I asked apprehensively.

His body froze which made me nervous. It’s like he had forgotten I was there until I spoke. He slowly pulled himself from my body and without even answering or looking at me, he slid from the bed and disappeared into the bathroom. I sat up with the sheet pulled up around my breasts and stared at the closed door in bewilderment. “Serves you right, Pine. This is what you get for lying to your best friend.” I couldn’t help but speak out loud to myself. I hurried from the bed and pulled my clothes from the floor to hurry them on. As I was zipping up my skirt, the bathroom door opened and I froze. His face peeked out first and his cheeks were red. I tried to offer a smile but I’m not sure how it came off. He had a towel around his waist as he stepped out slowly.

“I’m so sorry. I have never done that before.”

My eyes widened in surprise. “You were a virgin!?”

His mouth dropped and then closed as his head tilted, thinking. His eyes looked at the floor and then suddenly at me. “NO! That’s not what I meant.” His hand messed up his already wild hair. “I meant; I’ve never cried like that before after...you know.”

I know the look on my face must’ve been a sight because I could feel the disbelief written on it.

“Right. Well...” I smiled and finished fixing my clothes. I grabbed my shoes from the floor and held them as I turned towards the bedroom door. “Thank you?” I could feel his eyes watching me as I made my way to the door.

“Wait!” He cried out. My feet stopped and I didn’t turn around. “Let me make it up to you.”

“I-I’m okay.” I answered uneasily.

“Please. I don’t even know your name.”

At that, I turned to give him a look. I know I was drunk, but I wasn’t that drunk. The bar I went to was almost empty when I had arrived and this guy was sitting at the bar alone. His arm that rested on the bar top, also held up his head as he downed glass after glass. I sat a couple of stools down from him as I started my first margarita. By the third one, me and this guy started chatting. He told me of his lost love, his heartbreak and that his name was Jackson. I told him about my bet with my best friend and how I needed to find a boyfriend fast as to which he stood up and said he wanted to help me.

“You don’t even know my name yet.” I laughed and placed my hand out to him. “I’m Pine.”

“Pine? What a unique name. Does it mean something?”

“Yeah. My mom was in love with fruit.” I tell him dryly. “It’s short for Pineapple. Pineapple Dream Scott.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish I were. I wanted to get it changed after high school but never did.”

“I love it.”

The way he looked at me and kissed the back of my hand when we shook made me feel something I hadn't felt in a long time. When he asked me to go back to his place, I said yes without any hesitation.

Now, I'm looking at this man that didn't even remember my name. I nodded once. “I'm okay. When you remember what happened yesterday, call me. My numbers in your phone... Jackson.” I sneered out his name at the end to let him know that I still remembered him. I turned on my heel and slammed the door closed behind me. I had the best sex of my life last night and it was ruined by an idiot who cries after sex. I quickly called a rideshare to my location and couldn't wait to get home to shower. This day needed to come off me fast.





## Chapter 5

### Jackson

Ugh...My head is throbbing and my dick is swollen. My hand absently cups my junk as I try to remember what happened last night. I sit up in the bed and realize I'm completely naked. I look around the room nervously waiting for someone to jump from the shadows. I close my eyes as bursts of rapid visions play through my mind. Brown skin under my fingertips. Soft moans and nails in my back. *What the fuck happened last night?* I hurry out the bed and try to shake these thoughts from my mind. I turn on the spray in the shower and my body shivers as the cold water hits it before it starts to heat up. As the water cascades down my face my eyes close and another

vision hits me hard. A beautiful body moving up and down on my lap as my mouth covers her breast. Her hand grips my hair as my hands help lift her up and down. My mouth lets her go and my eyes are moving up her chest to her face. I can almost see her and my knees go weak and my eyes pop open as I catch myself against the glass. *Why can't I see her face?* I let out a calm sigh. Whoever she is, I can still feel her tightness around me and I know for a fact it wasn't a dream. I hurry and wash and turn of the water. My phone is ringing from the bedroom and I jog over to catch it before it hangs up. I smile at the profile picture I have set up for Tin. We were at a college party and he had just participated in a watermelon

eating contest and his whole face was red. He would never live that night down. I slide the bar over and answer.

“Sup, Tin.”

“Dude. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I say confused. “Why?”

“You left me last night with that chick and wouldn’t let me come with you. I tried to call you last night but you didn’t answer.”

I barked a laugh. “Why didn’t you just come over and check on me if you were that nervous?”

“You threatened me bodily harm if I followed you! I can’t deal with you when you’re drunk.”

“Whatever. I’m good.” I paused for a moment. Um. You don’t happen to remember her name, do you?”

“Oh shit! No way!” His laugh was so loud, I had to pull the phone from my ear. “The one time you leave with a girl and you don’t remember her!”

“What are the chances, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s rich. You still want to grab dinner later?”

“Sure. I’ll stop by the bank first and I’ll call you later.”

“Cool.”

After hanging up, I smile to myself. Although I don’t remember much of last night, I’m grateful. This was the first time I didn’t think about my ex when I first woke up. Maybe I do need to move on.



## Chapter 6

### Jackson

The sky was clear when I walked out to my car to meet Tin. I noticed the stars for the first time in a long time. The song I was whistling caught me off guard. *When did I start whistling?* I felt freer for some reason and I liked this feeling. The roads were surprisingly free of traffic as I made my way to the restaurant. It's been a whole month since Tin has been taking me out to eat to try and clear my mind. At first, I was aggravated by his constant nagging but now I've been looking forward to these days out. I found Tin sitting at a booth in the back and he raised a hand as soon as I walked in. I smiled and made my way over. I slid in the other side with a smile on my face.

"You look happy." He smiled back.

"I am."

"Did you figure out who was at your place?"

I sighed and shook my head as I picked up the straw from the table. He had already ordered my drink and I took a hefty drink.

"I'm just glad that I feel good. I'm not going to think too much on it."

The waitress brought out a large plate filled with different fruits. I smiled wide and looked around.

“Why did you pick this place? This isn’t your usual type of place.”

He shrugged and grabbed a strawberry. “I don’t know. I wanted something different.”

“Yeah. This is definitely different.” I grabbed my fork and took a slice of an apple.

“I just wanted something sweet. You like the cake from here, right?”

“Ooh! Is this where you got the lemon cake from?”

“Yep.”

“I think I’ll have that. I haven’t eaten all day though.”

“They have regular food too.”

He picked up a pineapple and I could feel my brow furrow. *Pineapple... Why does that sound like something I should remember?* I shrugged it off raised my hand to order. I was too hungry to think. Just being here with my best friend was enough for me.



## Chapter 7

### Pine

*Ugh. I should be happy right now. I should be over the moon, but I'm not. I'm bummed. I had some of the best sex of my life and he turned out to be an emotional wreck.* I was supposed to meet up with a couple people from work but I decided I needed to be alone. I didn't want to deal with anyone lately. They would go on and on about their love life and I couldn't stomach it. I picked the furthest place I felt anyone I knew would go to. This place has been on my radar for so long and I've always wanted to try their desserts. With the way I'm feeling, I needed all the sugar I could eat. The bell dinged as I opened the door and the scent of sweetness assaulted my nose. I closed my eyes and let the smell take over. When I opened my eyes, the hostess stood there smiling a knowing smile.

"Don't worry. Happens all the time."

I smile and follow her as she walks me to a table that held two chairs. It was tucked in a corner and I was glad because I didn't want to be seen. I'd rather people watch. A waitress comes and hands me a menu and I look it over as she walks away. As I get ready to order, I make eye contact and smile. She walks back over and I hand her the menu and order a cup of coffee and a slice of carrot cake. As she walks away, I look around and my eyes land on the man that led me here today. Jackson. His face looks totally different from when I saw him



last. He was smiling and laughing brightly and he had a sense of freeness coming from him. He was beautiful. I felt my cheeks raise as I smiled with him and quickly shook my head to come to back to myself. *What the hell? I'm supposed to be in my feelings.* I thought I never wanted to see him again. His friend reached across the table and jokingly hit him on the side of his head and they laughed. Their hearty laughter carried across the entire place and this time I didn't stop my smile from forming. His friends' eyes cut slowly over and met mine. I quickly looked away. *Dammit. I hope he doesn't recognize me.* When I chanced a look, they were back to talking and I breathed a sigh of relief. The waitress came over with my cake and coffee and I was grateful to have something to focus on. I took my time and savored the cake and listened to the chatter around the room. It was comfortable and although, I came here to escape last night, I was glad that I saw him laughing. Seeing and hearing him cry did something to me. On one hand, I wanted to run away as fast as I could, but on the other, I wanted to hold him and comfort him. My head tilted up as a shadow crept up to my table.

“Pineapple Dream.”

The voice had me closing my eyes and a shiver run down me. That voice was one that whispered in my ear the night before. My eyes snapped up to his and my heart skipped a beat. The half-smile on his lips made my breath hitch.

“Y-You remember me?” I asked softly.

He shrugged and placed his hands in his pockets which caused my eyes to look at the crotch of his pants. My heart beat faster as I thought back to the way he filled my body. A throat clearing had my eyes snapping back to his face and his smile was even bigger.

“It took me a minute but... Yes, I remember. Do you mind if I sit?”

My head shook no before I could think and I sat up straighter in my seat as he pulled the chair out across from me.

“I'm sorry.” He started. “I let you leave me.” I couldn't speak. I could only give him an awkward smile. “If I did

anything to you that made you uncomfortable, I apologize.”

“Like crying?” I mumbled.

His eyebrows rose. “Crying? Me?”

“You don’t remember?”

His brows scrunched together in deep thought and he shook his head. “I don’t.” His shoulders dropped. “Aw man... That’s embarrassing.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s in the past.”

“I think you should let me make it up to you.”

“Those words sound familiar. And how do you propose to do that?”

“How about dinner?”

“I think I can do that. Call me.”

He looked confused for a second. “I don’t have your number.”

My lips turned up and I tsked. “Something else you don’t remember.” I stood up and smiled down to him. “When you remember, call me.”

As I walked away, I saw him reaching for his phone from his pocket. I chuckled and went to pay my bill. My legs were still shaking and my heart was racing as I tried to play it cool as I walked out the door.



## Chapter 8

### Jackson

As Tin ate another piece of fruit, I cringed as the juice ran down his chin. I had to look away before I gave him an even more disgusted look. I scanned the room and my eyes landed on the prettiest face I'd seen in a while. Somehow, she looked familiar but I couldn't place her. Her smile as she looked at the other patrons as they laughed at something made me smile too. Her eyes found mine and they rounded and looked away sharply. I was a little confused because that look told me she knew me. I closed my eyes and tried to think. When I opened them, Tim was grabbing another slice out of the large bowl. I saw the yellow color being lifted from the bowl and my mind started to race. *Fingernails digging into my back. Tongues touching. Moans of pleasure in my ear.* "Pineapple." I must have spoken out loud because Tin was looking at me confused.

"What?" He looked at the fruit on the end of his fork and then back at me. "You want some?"

I chuckled, *hell yes*, and shook my head as I hurriedly slid from the booth. I heard Tin's protest as I rushed away. I weaved in and out of the tables until I stood behind her. Her face tilted up to see who had walked up and her eyes widened in surprise.

"Pineapple Dream."

Her eyes closed and she lightly bit her bottom lip. I had to adjust my stance at the look on her face. She had to have remembered.

“You remember me?” she asked timidly.

I didn't trust my own voice so I put my hands in my pockets and shrugged nonchalantly. Her eyes followed my movements and rested on my crotch to which I had to clear my throat. She would get a rude awakening if she kept looking down there. Her eyes snapped up to mine and I smiled.

“It took me a minute but... Yes, I remember. Do you mind if I sit?”

She shook her head no and I sat down before she changed her mind.

“I'm sorry.” I started. “I let you leave me.” I paused and looked down at the table. “If I did anything to you that made you uncomfortable, I apologize.”

“Like crying?” She mumbled.

My eyebrows rose. “Crying? Me?”

“You don't remember?” Her giggle gave me chills.

I sat in deep thought and tried to think back to that night. I saw bits and pieces but I didn't remember shedding tears. “I don't.” My shoulders dropped. “Aw man... That's embarrassing.”

“Don't worry about it. It's in the past.” She smiled and took a sip of her coffee.

“I think you should let me make it up to you.”

“Ha. Those words sound familiar. And how do you propose to do that?”

“How about dinner?”

“I think I can do that. Call me.”

I looked at her befuddled for a second. “I don't have your number.”

Her lips turned up and she tsked. “Something else you don’t remember.” She stood up and smiled down to me. “When you remember, call me.”

She slid effortlessly from her chair and gave me a smile before walking away. My heart was completely smitten and I had to see her again. I quickly pulled my phone out and went through the contacts. I smiled wide as I saw her name. Pine with a pineapple emoji next to it. I pressed her number and watched from the window as she pulled her phone from her purse.

“Hello?”

“Found you.”

Her steps paused in the middle of the parking lot and she looked around. As her eyes found me in the window, I waved and she smiled and waved back.

“That was fast.”

“It was. You have my number now, call me.”

“Will do.”

She hung up and waved once again before making her way to the car. Tin walked over next to me and looked out to where I was looking.

“Who was that?”

I let out a hard sigh. “That’s going to be my wife.”

I could feel him staring at me but I didn’t look his way. I watched as she backed from the parking space and drive away.



## Chapter 9

### Pine

“Girl, you’ve been sounding different these days.”

I smile as I hear Myliah’s voice on the other end. I had been avoiding her for months because keeping up with the lie of no boyfriend was getting harder and harder. Now though, I have a reason to smile.

“I miss you.” I tell her truthfully.

“I miss you too. I have three more months and I’ll be home! I can’t wait to see you.”

“Me neither. We’re going to have the biggest drink ever.”

“I’m ready.”

We laugh and chit chat for another half hour before she has to go for an afternoon class. I smile at the text message that popped up on the screen as I disconnected our call.

*Don’t forget to eat today. I’ll call you later.*

*Jackson*

I sit my phone down on the coffee table and pick up my journal that I had started writing in. I skip through a couple of pages and stop on our third date.



*Jackson picked me up and took me to a family style restaurant. It was loud with chatter and dishes clanking. We talked about nothing of importance. It was simple and laid back. I had a great time. I want to see him again.*

I smile as I turn the page.

*We met at a bar downtown. I only had a glass of wine and he had a tonic. We ordered some wings and shared the plate. Football was on the screen and we watched while we idly chatted.*

I could only huff a laugh as I thought about how easy going this night was. I turned the page...

*I invited Jackson up to my apartment. We ordered takeout and watched a movie. I fell asleep halfway through and when I woke up, I was laying on his shoulder. His hand was resting on my knee drawing small circles. It felt nice. We parted ways with a kiss.*

My stomach started to flutter as I turned another page. I knew what was coming but it still took my breath away.

*We went to the river and walked around. The air was cold but there was a man playing the saxophone so we stayed and listened for a while. We bought hot chocolate and made our way back to my apartment. We had been seeing each other for two months now and this man treated me like I was special each time we met. This time was no different. He walked me to my door and kissed me after I opened it. Our eyes connected after the kiss and it was like a dam burst. I grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer to me and our lips connected again. His hands steadied himself on my waist and his fingers inched under my shirt. His steps forward, walked me back into my apartment. I kicked the door closed as we passed the threshold and my shirt lifted over my head. We left a trail of clothes on the way to the living room and fell onto the couch. The only time our lips disentangled was when he searched his pocket for his wallet to retrieve a condom. It all started with me on top as he sat on the couch to ending with me face down across the coffee table as he entered me from behind. This night because we both remembered it, was one of the best nights. He*

*ended up staying the night and held me till morning. I'm starting to love this man.*

I close the book and sigh. I want to tell him how I feel but it's too soon. I don't want to scare him away knowing that I've fallen hard for him. All I could do right now was wait. Things were perfect and I'll be damned if I mess this up.



## *Chapter 10*

### Jackson

“I tell you, she’s the one. I haven’t felt this good in so long.” I’m smiling from ear to ear as I grab my keys and walk out the door. I had already come home from work and Tin asked if I wanted to grab a beer and I readily agreed. I locked the door behind me and started for my car but was halted in my tracks.

“Hello? Jackson...hello?” Tin’s voice sounded far away on the phone as I was rooted in place. “Jackson! What the hell, bro. What’s happening? Are you okay?”

“I-I have to call you back.” I hurried the phone off and focused in front of me. My ex sat on the steps which stopped me from going down. Tears streamed down her face and her cheeks were red. Her breath hitched with each sniffle as her sad eyes stared up at me.

“Tricia? What are you doing here?” I could feel my voice shake. I was shocked to see her there and as much as I say I was over her, seeing her cry made my heart hurt a little.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know where else to go.” Her voice was small and that was so unlike her. She was always the life of the party and you could hear her voice carry over a conversation.

“Why are you here?” I still hadn’t moved from my spot and the keys were now biting into my hand with the firm grip that I

had on them.

She stood up slowly and wiped her bottom. She turned towards me and took a step up which caused me to step backwards. Her eyes caught my movement and she stopped.

“I’m sorry. I should go. I shouldn’t have come here.” Her voice sounded sad but aggravated at the same time.

“I still don’t know why you came.” I could feel my irritation building. For just a moment, I felt sympathy towards her but now, I’m irritated.

“I miss you.”

“What?”

She sighed and her foot played with a small pebble on the stair. “I know I was wrong and I know why you left but that’s all behind me now. I want to start over.”

“You’re kidding right now, right?” My voice now displays my aggravation.

Her eyes snap up to mine because this was a side she hadn’t seen before. I always gave in with her and let her have her way. I never raised my voice to her, even when I found out she was cheating.

“Jackson, we have history. I know you can’t just throw that away.”

“Why? You did.”

Her hands went to her hips. “That’s not fair.”

“Why isn’t it? You cheated and threw everything we had out the window.”

“But I don’t want to be with him anymore. I miss YOU.”

I barked a laugh and shook my head. “You’ve got to be out of your mind.”

“Why, because I want to be with the man that I’ve loved for half my life?”

“No. Because, you cheated on me and now you want to come back. I’m not doing this with you today.” I throw my

hands up and go to walk past her. Her hands reach out and grab my arm.

“Jackson, please!”

I shrug her off and continue down the stairs. “Please leave. I have nothing more to say to you, Tricia.”

“Jackson, wait!”

I don't turn around as I made a beeline for my car. My heart was racing and all I could think about was Pine. My mind was running a mile a minute and I just needed to get out of there. As I pulled away, Tricia still stood on the stairs and watched me pull away. I definitely needed that drink today.



## *Chapter 11*

### Jackson

The cars blurred past me as I sped to the bar that Tin was waiting for me at. I parked haphazardly in the lot and hurried inside, checking behind me to make sure no one was following me. Through the bodies dancing on the floor and standing around talking, I saw Tin sitting at the bar laughing with a man and a woman. I shouldered my way through the bodies and reached through where the woman stood facing Tin and picked up his drink from the bar top. I vaguely saw his eyes widen as I threw back the drink and signaled the bartender for another one.

“Whoa, Jackson! What the hell?” Tin half chuckled nervously.

I couldn't answer as I picked up the glass again when the bartender poured and emptied it quick. I felt my phone ringing in my pocket but I was too scared to look at the screen to see who was calling. I raised my hand again for another drink and Tin grabbed my arm and put it back down.

“Bro! What the hell is going on with you?” His face looked worried and I kind of felt bad for him but I was too angry to care. I raised my other hand and the bartender poured another glass. I pulled my arm away from Tin's and picked up the glass. I stared at the dark liquid and took a breath before



downing the glass again. I slammed the glass down on the bar and winced as the liquid heated my chest. I could do nothing but put my head down and try to even my breathing. When I felt I had control, I looked up at the worried gaze of my best friend. I tried to smile but I felt myself forcing it. I looked around and nodded to the woman who still stood there in shock.

“I’m sorry.” I half smiled at her. Her eyes lowered seductively with a smile and I could feel my lip curl. Her smile dropped and she stomped a foot and walked away in a huff.

“Dammit Jackson! Do you know how long I’ve been chatting her up?” Tin sounded annoyed.

I shrugged and took her spot at the bar. “You have no idea what I just went through.”

“I would if you would come and talk like a normal person and not some drunk.”

“Fucking Tricia was at my house.”

His eyes grew wide. “What the fuck did she want?”

I gave a dry laugh and signaled for another drink. Tin looked at the bartender apprehensively and I could only shake my head in annoyance. *Just let me get drunk.*

“She wants me back. Said she made the wrong choice or some bullshit. I told her to leave me alone.”

“Fuck. Did she leave?”

I picked up my now filled glass and took a sip. “I have no clue. She was still standing there as I drove away.”

“What about Pine?”

I looked at him bemused. “What about her? I’m not going back to that cheating bitch.”

“I mean, have you told Pine about her?”

I swirled the liquid around in the glass as I stared into the swirl. “Not in detail. I thought she was gone from my life. Why would I want to bring her up?”

“True, but I think you should since she’s sniffing around now. I’d hate to see her try to ruin your relationship.”

“Dammit. I was finally in a good place. Why now?”

“She’s always been selfish; this is nothing new.” I could only nod my agreement. He clapped me on the shoulder. “C’mon, let’s get wasted. You’re already almost there.”

I laughed and lifted my glass to him as I downed it again. I pulled out my phone and saw I had eight missed calls, all from Tricia and groaned. I pulled up Pine’s number and sent her a text.

*Me: Hello beautiful. Hope you’re having fun. I miss you.*

*Pine: Hey yourself. \*heart emoji\* Everything is good. I’ll be back in three days. I miss you too. Maybe you can show me how much you miss me when I get back. \*tongue out emoji\**

*Me: I’m already thinking of ways. \*wink\**

*Pine: You text me first, you must be drinking.*

*Me: \*laughing emoji\* I’m with Tin.*

*Pine: Oh lord. Be safe and text me when you get home if you can.*

*Me: Okay. I just wanted to say goodnight just in case I’m to wasted.*

*Pine: Okay \*kiss emoji\**

When I looked up, Tin had a goofy grin on his face. “What?”

He took a sip of his drink. “Nothing. You’re just smiling hard.”

I could feel my cheeks relax and there was pain in my cheek muscles. He laughed and took another drink. I flicked him off and put my phone away. *It’s time to forget about Tricia.*



## *Chapter 12*

### Pine

I've been gone for three days due to work and it seems like the days are getting longer. I've talked to Jackson every day that I've been gone and even on the road here. I had the option to ride the bus with the others but I opted to drive. I wanted to get back as soon as possible. Who would've thought I'd be happy in a relationship today? As I put the final touches the document I was working on, I hurried the laptop closed. I stood quickly and looked at my team.

"I'm finished and I'll head out."

One of my coworkers gave me a knowing look. "Have someone waiting for you, huh?"

I smile shyly. "Yep."

"Be careful on the road."

I wave my goodbyes and gather my things. The cool air hits me as I walk out and I hurry to the car to escape the wind. I finished a day early and am excited because I get to surprise Jackson. My cheeks hurt from smiling and my voice is getting hoarse from singing almost every song that came across the radio. I had a four hour drive and I've never been so ready for a road trip. I can't wait to see the look on his face when I get home.

The music was blasting and the weather was beautiful. The sun was shining through my rolled up windows and felt good on my skin. It was still too cold to roll the windows down but the sun was a relief to see. The four hours breezed by as I rolled down the highway. The closer I got to home, the more my smile rose on my face. I was going to call Jackson and tell him I was coming home early but I decided against it. The traffic started to pick up when I got closer to the city and the music was becoming more erratic which grated my nerves. I turned the radio off and breathed in the silence of the car. Hearing the tires roll down the highway was kind of therapeutic. I finally made it to the exit that took me to Jackson's house and my stomach had butterflies. I missed his kisses. As I pulled up to the house, I saw a woman sitting on the stairs of his house. I could feel my brow furrow. *Is Jackson not home?* I pulled into the driveway and hurried out the car. The woman looked to have been crying which made me move closer to her faster.

"Miss? Are you okay?"

She looked up with a tear stained face and I expected her face to look sad but she looked irritated or angry.

"Who are you? Why are you talking to me?"

I was so taken aback, that I literally stepped backwards. "I'm sorry."

"Whatever. We didn't order anything so you can go away."

I was confused. "Excuse me? Order something? I'm not delivering anything."

Her eyes searched my face and she got an excited spark in her eye.

"Are you a friend of Jackson's?"

I looked at her with apprehension. "You could say that. Who are you?"

"His girlfriend."

At that I paused and raised my brow. "I'm sorry?"

"You heard me. I'm his girlfriend."

I had to shake my head to clear it to make sure I heard right. I looked at her befuddled and finally made my way around her watching her from the corner of my eye. I hurried to the door and knocked.

“GO AWAY! LEAVE ME ALONE!” Jackson’s voice on the other side caught me off guard.

“Jackson? Are you okay?”

The locks clicked and the door swung open. His eyes were wide with surprise as he stared at me.

“Pine!” His voice was low as he opened the door wide for me.

A body pushed past me and caught the opened door. My body went sideways and I started to fall. An arm reached out and grabbed me by the waist and my hands automatically braced on his chest. Jackson was now standing in front of me on the porch while the woman stood in the open door staring at us. His face came slowly down and took my lips. The sharp intake of breath behind Jackson had my eyes opening and seeing the hurt and confusion on the woman’s face.

“I missed you.” He whispered against my lips.

I smiled at his words and was immediately brought back to reality by a screech behind Jackson. He made sure I was standing straight before he released me and smiled down to me. He made sure to place his body between me and the woman that stood behind him as he turned to face her.

“Tricia, I told you to leave me alone.”

Tears rolled down the woman’s cheeks as she started bawling loudly.

“I’m sorry, Jackson. I made a mistake! I told you I’d never do it again. Please believe me.”

“Tricia, a mistake is turning the wrong way down a street. A mistake is writing the wrong thing and having to start over. Sleeping with another man and leaving me was not a mistake.”

Comprehension rose over me. This was the woman that made him cry. My anger bubbled over as I thought of how

hard it was for Jackson to move on.

“Are you fucking serious right now? You have the nerve to show your face here after what you did to him! You don’t deserve any other chance with him!” I screamed behind Jackson.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” The woman hollered with tears still streaming.

“I’m to one who keeps the smile on his face.”

Her eyes snapped to Jackson and whatever was on his face made her body sag in defeat.

“You can’t have moved on. We’ve been together since high school, Jackson.” Her voice was small as if she was talking more to herself than him.

“You ruined that, Tricia. I have nothing more to give to you.” Jackson’s voice was stern.

Her eyes closed and when she reopened them, the reality of her never getting Jackson back was written on her face. One of Jackson’s hands had reached back and lay on my hip as we both waited for this crazy lady to leave. Her shoulders dropped and she stepped away from the door.

“This is the last time, Jackson. Once I leave, I’m never coming back.” She threatened.

“Goodbye, Tricia.” Was all Jackson gave her.

We both watched her walk away and only when she disappeared around the corner did he turn to me and wrap me in a hug. He held on for dear life and I know now that I made the right decision on coming home early. This was the closure he needed and feeling his body shake as he held me made me hold him tighter.





## Chapter 13

### Jackson

Tricia had been banging on the door and stalking me for the last two days. I have tried to reason with her and even raised my voice but she still won't listen. I knew when she showed up the first time, she would be a problem. There was a time when I wanted a break in our relationship and even though she agreed, she called me and came to my job every single day. I didn't want to get fired and I was tired of all the stares when she came around so I gave in. I've been called weak my entire life and I blame that on my family. I didn't like to see anyone hurt or argue so I was the go between for everyone. I smiled and tried to make things right and it blended with my relationship with Tricia. I think she saw that in me and knew she could manipulate me into being what she wanted me to be. Me turning her down now is out of the norm for me and this must be killing her. Ever since I met Pine, I can't recall the last time I did something out of fear of losing out. Everything we've done together has been amazing. It took one time of her changing the food order because of a look that I had on my face to make me see her differently. Her words still rung in my ears. *I want you to enjoy this too.* When have my wants ever been in the forefront? All these thoughts were going through my head as I sat on the couch and listened to the banging at the door. I knew Pine was due back this weekend and I had to get rid of Tricia. My heart couldn't take her walking out of my

life. I've never been happier and I didn't want her to get the wrong idea about Tricia on my porch. Who would have thought, she would come home early and not only defend me but understand. Watching Tricia walking away defeated and Pine holding on to me, made my heart feel as though it was going to come through my chest. No words were spoken as she held me. When I pulled back from her, the worry in her eyes made me smile. I placed my hands on her cheeks and pulled her in for a kiss.

"Thank you." I whispered against her lips.

I could feel her smile against my lips. She stepped back and looked me in the face. "I've been gone for a couple days and you have women beating down your door?"

The lightheartedness made me chuckle as I pulled her back to me. I placed my lips against her neck as I held her. "I need all these clothes off so I can show you how much I missed you."

She sighed playfully. "Sheesh, took you long enough!" I laughed against her skin and hurried the door open and pulled her inside. She yelped at the quick pull and laughed as I slammed the door shut behind her and started to help her with her clothes. Her beautiful smile lit up the room as she laughed at my eagerness. My eyes took in her beautiful brown skin as she stood before me in her panties and bra.

"Why am I the only one undressed here?" Her eyebrow raised.

I quickly threw my clothes to the floor and kissed her deeply. I walked her backwards until her thighs touched the kitchen table. I stepped in between her legs and lay her back as I continued the kiss. My hands slid her panties down her thighs and my eyes took in her body. I was already hard for her and quickly took a condom from my wallet from my discarded pants. I moved back over top of her and kissed her softly as I lifted her legs over my forearms and slid inside her. Her eyes closed and she moaned deep.

"I missed you." I whispered against her neck.

“I missed you too.” She moaned in response.

My fingers dug into her hips as I stood tall and pulled her butt closer to the edge of the table. Her fingers gripped the sides of the table. Her moans and the clinking of the glasses that decorated the table were the only sounds in the room. Her back arched from the surface of the hard wood and her body stiffened. A groan made its way from my throat as her body squeezed mine and I couldn't hold back. My hips pumped with a mind of their own as I came with her. I felt a bead of sweat rolling down my back as I tried to catch my breath. Looking down at her laying on my table my brow furrowed at the smile on her face.

“What are you smiling at?” I asked, still inside her.

“I need to go out of town more often.” Her chuckled made me dislodge from her body and I felt the separation immediately. She must've seen it on my face because she sat up and placed her cheek on my chest. I could feel her eye lashes move with her blinking across my skin. My arms held her tight as she started to sway slightly back and forth. It was comforting. As fast as she had lay on me, she sat up and kissed my chest.

“I need a shower and some food.”

All I could do was bark a laugh at her suddenness. I kissed her forehead and nodded.



## *Chapter 14*

### Pine

It's been a month already since the incident with Jackson's ex and we still haven't heard from her. Things were back to being the way they were before I went out of town. I have spent more time over Jackson's these past few weeks and we've definitely grown closer. We were both excited lately because it was only a couple months till Valentines Day. When I found out that he liked old cars, I ordered him a custom made replica of a Model T Ford. His name was engraved across the bottom of the driver's side door and I knew he'd love it. I couldn't wait to see his face.

Between work and spending time with Jackson, my life felt complete. That is until I received a phone call early one Saturday morning. I was asleep in Jackson's bed when I groggily reached for my phone on the side table.

"Hello." My voice was low and half asleep.

"Why are you not home? I'm at your door."

My eyes immediately opened and I sat straight up. The screech that left my throat woke Jackson up and he leapt from the bed ready to fight anything that was coming for us both. His eyes were wide and his mouth opened and closed as he tried to swallow his fear.

“What’s happening?!” He cried out.

I covered my mouth apologetically and I held up the phone. He let out a relieved sigh and put his fisted arms down. I hurried the phone back to my ear.

“When did you get here? I’m getting dressed now and on my way.”

I hung up the phone and threw it on the bed as I rushed out of the sheets and grabbed my discarded clothes from the floor.

“What’s going on? Where are you going?” Jackson asked as he sat back on the bed.

The smile was still plastered on my face as I rushed my pants on.

“Myliah’s here!” I squealed.

Jackson smiled wide at the excitement in my voice. “Did you know she was coming?”

“No! I’m totally surprised.”

I ran around on his side of the bed and gave him a large kiss and picked up my shoes to run out the door.

She sat on her large suitcase in front of my apartment door. I screamed and ran towards her as she stood. The smile on her face showed all her teeth as she opened her arms to me. I about knocked her over as our bodies collided.

“Oh my god, I missed you.” I whispered to her.

She chuckled. “I missed you too.”

“If I’m dreaming, don’t wake me up.”

“I think you’ve already woken everyone up on this floor with that scream. We need to get inside before they call the police on us.”

My eyes searched around us as I still held her in my arms. I quickly pushed her off and pulled the keys from my pocket to open the door. As we crossed the threshold, I hugged her once more before grabbing her luggage and rolling it further inside.

After hurrying through a shower, I ran and jumped on the bed that Myliah was laying on and we talked for hours about her stay in Europe and Jackson. She finally fell asleep due to the jetlag and I sat and ran my fingers through her hair as she slept. I missed my best friend and having her here was the best feeling in the world.





## *Chapter 15*

### Jackson

I didn't see Pine for three days after her best friend came home. At long last, I got to meet Myliah. I've seen pictures and heard of how Pine sees her, but she was even better in person. Her voice was light and her features soft and feminine. Where Pine was tall and curvy, Myliah was small and petite. They were complete opposites. I treated them both to dinner and felt as though I was intruding. I smiled at how animated Pine had become while talking to her friend. We always had good conversations, but her eyes were wide and bright with every word she said to her friend. I was so overjoyed when Tin showed up to the restaurant. We drank our beer while watching the ladies still catch up with each other. I was starting to feel like the third wheel. Finding out that Myliah was taking the next semester off for a break was welcomed news. Pine now had someone other than me to go and mingle with and that gave me an opportunity to do something I'd been putting off for a while now.

Later that week, I grabbed Tin and went to the mall. I took back the ring that I had bought for Tricia and purchased a promise ring for Pine. I wanted to live the rest of my days with her and knew she was the one. My heart had never been more content and even though it's been half a year since we've known each other, I didn't want to let her go. Knowing that I

was going to propose to Tricia on Valentine's Day, I decided that Pine deserved something different. I would give her this ring the week before. There was no way I'd let the memory of Tricia ruin anything I had with Pine.



## *Chapter 16*

### Pine

Time flew by and by the time I looked up, it was already time for Myliah to go back to England.

I pouted once again as I hugged my friend. “Are you sure you have to go back?”

Myliah chuckled and patted the top of my head. “Yes. I’ve been here for two months already.” I was grateful that I was able to have her for Christmas this past year. She initially wasn’t supposed to be here until the first of the year, so I’m beyond happy. I hadn’t prepared a gift for her so we decided on no gifts this year. Me, Myliah, Jackson, and Tin spent part of the day cooking, drinking, and laughing before Tin had to leave to visit his relatives. Now, it’s already February and she has to go back for the new semester.

“But it seems like yesterday.” I groaned.

“Oh, you’ve got Jackson now, you don’t need me.”

I let her go and gave her a stern look. “I will always need you.”

“Okay, okay. Calm down.” She chuckled. “Valentine’s Day is next week, are you ready?”

“Yep! I got his present already wrapped and he booked a fancy restaurant.”

“I’m happy for you, Pine. You deserve this.”

I looked down to the floor and smiled. Yeah, my life has been full of highs and lows but this felt different. Jackson brought me out of the shell I’d been living in for years and it felt good.

“I’m sorry I can’t be here to witness your first Valentine’s Day but I’m sure you’ll manage just fine without me.”

“Looks like I won the bet, huh?”

“You’re still on that? I wouldn’t care if you had a relationship or not. I just want you happy.” I poked my lip out and she laughed. “This time last year, you were in a bad place. I’m not sure which higher power sent Jackson your way, but I’m grateful. I haven’t seen you this happy in a long time.”

“I am happy.”

“Good. I told Jackson that I’d hurt him if he ever hurt you. I’m just a plane ride away.”

I felt the sigh rise my chest as I exhaled. Myliah leaves in three days and I’m not ready to let her go yet.

“Pine, your phone is ringing.” My thoughts were broken by Myliah’s voice.

I shook my head to clear it and hurried to the table to grab it.

“Hello?”

“Open the door.” I smiled at hearing Jackson’s voice.

While holding the phone to my ear, I walked briskly to the door. As I opened it, my eyes were drawn downwards to a kneeling Jackson. My mouth dropped open and I felt Myliah walk up behind me.

“Jackson? What are you doing?”

The phone slid through my fingers as Myliah reached forward and took it from my hands.

“Before you came into my life, I was depressed and didn’t think I could trust a woman again. You have made me see myself in a better light and taught me how to stand on my own

in any relationship. I don't want to see my life without you. I know we haven't known each other that long but you're it for me. Pineapple Dream, will you marry me?"

My whole body shook and I could feel the tears welling in my eyes. I didn't trust my voice so I nodded.

"Is that a, yes?" He asked.

"Yes." I whispered.

He stood and slid the ring on my finger with a huge grin on his face. His lips crashed onto mine and I held on for dear life. Myliah was clapping behind us and I laughed as I broke away from him to look at her.

"My best friend is getting married!" She sang as I showed her the ring.

Standing in between the two most important people of my life had me closing my eyes and thanking the universe for sending them to me. I looked over at Jackson who still wore a huge grin.

"Valentine's day is next week, why now?" I genuinely wanted to know.

His arm wrapped around my waist and pulled me close. "Every day is Valentine's Day when you love someone."

Myliah made a retching sound behind us and we all laughed. Life is beautiful. Who'd have thought that the man who cried after sex would be the man, I'd spend my life with. If I hadn't gone to the bar that night and had a chance encounter with a man who had just broken up with his girlfriend, I wouldn't be standing here smiling with the love of my life right now. From a bet to a ring, my life is complete.

## *About the Author*

Greetings and Salutations!

My name is Tamara Whitlow and I've been a self-published, multi genre author since 2018. I have written everything from paranormal YA, romance, small town and even publish under T. Whitlow for my darker/bully romance. I reside currently in the great state of Ohio and work full time as well as write when I can. Losing yourself in a book has always been my go to escape, so to write these twists and turns have really helped my imagination soar. I look forward to meeting some new readers as well as hearing from the ones who have followed me from day one. Books take you on a journey and I can't wait to go on one with you!

Click the link below to follow me on social media or read my other works!

[https://beacons.ai/author\\_tamarawhitlow](https://beacons.ai/author_tamarawhitlow)

# *The Date*

Tonya Ink





## *Blurb*

### ***HER***

Having a sister in love is a nightmare.

It should end there, but it doesn't. Having a sister in love and thinks everyone should be, too. Barf. With a track record like mine, I've learned a few hard life lessons. When it comes to men, I've learned they fall into two categories. They're either trying too hard and pretending not to be assholes, or their assholes trying too hard to be assholes. That's it. So, when my sister convinced me to go on a blind date, I never expected him. Or to find out he wanted to be there as much as I did—which wasn't at all. The date sets off a series of events that changed my life forever. All because my sister loves love.

### ***HIM***

Decker is done trying to find what his brothers in MC have. He doesn't believe he will ever find a woman to call his own. He tried that and got a stalker hell-bent on making him pay for saying no. He returns to the club, where he has old friends and family at his back. He wants to get settled and leave the past behind. His past isn't willing to let him go until his future gives him a fighting chance.

What happens when two people who have sworn off the opposite sex are thrown together? Will sparks fly? Or will

there be something else?

This is a Motorcycle Club Anti Valentine's Day romance where the FMC and MMC aren't looking for what they find. This is *not* a meet-cute, so be ready to have your heart broken just a little.



## *Note*

### ***Content Warnings:***

Crude Language

Stalking

Acts of Violence

Cheating (NOT between main characters)

Alcohol use

Gun Violence

Sexual Content

Binding

Mention of Sexual Assault (but none occurs on page)

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*The* **DATE**  
Lucifer's Saints MC Next Generation

T O N Y A I N K



## Chapter One

### DALIA

*“A shot of whiskey and silence. Happy fucking Valentine’s Day.”*

I’ll never be *that* girl. You know, the girl that walks into a bar, sees a hot guy and says. *Fuck me, big boy*. I’ll never allow myself to be that vulnerable or that stupid. I’ve been there and done that. Ask the fucker I was seeing last year around this time. But I’ll get back to that. Anyway, I’ll never be the girl who lets a man become her everything. I’ve seen how that works out, and it isn’t a good look. Okay, maybe it works out in very, very special cases. But I know the truth. I know the truth behind the pretty eyes and even prettier lies.

Men are pricks because they use their man bits as weapons. You can’t say I’m wrong. We’ve all been dickmitized in our lives at least once. Men are dickmitizing liars, which I’ve already said, but it’s worth repeating. Men are born manipulators and users who have no problem using your heart as a battering ram to beat you into submission. They promise you the world only to leave you swinging by their dicks, unsatisfied and wondering how you got there. I’m not a man-hater per se. I’m just not willing to end up with two-point-five kids, a dog named Jelly Bean, and a big house that isn’t a home but an unhappy yet beautiful prison. Men are the fucking

worst. So they can fuck right off. Especially the fucker I left lying on his dining room floor, bleeding like a stuffed pig.

There I was going to surprise my whatever he was for V-day. Happily puttering along. I had my favorite Chinese food and movie because who doesn't love *Die Hard*? It's a classic. On that day, I even wore my comfy Netflix and chill outfit; sexy—I was not, but fuck sexy. I'm not about to get all gussied up for a *Netflix and chill* night. No thanks. I told whatever his name was that, I didn't want to do anything. I guess he thought I meant I didn't want to see him—at all. That slight miscommunication is why I caught him bumping uglies with some rando on his dining room table.

What got my hackles up were the lit candles and the house's ambiance, low jazz music played through the surround sound. And for some reason, I knew. For me, that fucker had always been a burger at a fast-food joint and let's pay half-zies kind of guy. I didn't care, even though that should have been a warning enough. He didn't see me, didn't appreciate me. I know that now. He gave me a few decent orgasms. Maybe that's why I let things slide. Maybe that is why I never called him out on his bullshit. Shaking my head. The one time I keep a guy to myself, he turns out to be a big old giant cheap-ass cheating prick.

I got played.

After finding them, I stood there watching because the two were going at it, like their lives depended on finding their release. I was shocked and slightly impressed by the minute man's stamina. I'm not saying he was a one-pump chuck, but I'm not—not saying he wasn't. Whenever I was with the prick, he was as vanilla as they come. All missionary and wham bam, thank you, ma'am. My chuckling at the thought of our abysmal sex hadn't caught either of their attention, not his, because the asshole was *focused*. And well, she couldn't see me and was too busy squealing. You know how women do when we are faking it because a guy isn't hitting the right spot, but we want to be nice and be done. At least, that's what I do.

I couldn't see her eyes because Mister, whatever his name was, had them covered, and her hands were bound behind her



back. Freaky, and I liked it. If I wasn't pissed, I probably would have watched more of the show. It was erotic as fuck. Whatever his name was, he had her bound hands in a white-knuckled grip and his other hand on the back of her neck. You ever hear the saying ass up, tits out? That's exactly how she was positioned, her ass was up, belly flat on the table. As I said, very erotic stuff.

I watched them, him with his face as red as a *red delicious apple* and sweating like a stuffed pig. Something about her fake moans and his dog-like grunts made me chuckle—loudly. Which, of course, had the show coming to a halt. Words were exchanged, fists were thrown, threats were made, and I was taken out in cuffs.

After two hours in lock-up that night, I went home and iced my hands. Bruce *the* Willis and I had a fantastic night in my apartment with my battery-operated boyfriend, Tom. At least I can remember *his* name.



At twenty-two, I don't know what I'm looking for outside of work. I love my life the way it is. I own my home and my car and have a generous retirement plan, and I answer to no one. Well, no one except for my meddling sister. Which means being willing to be set up is me placating her. It's not my idea of a good time. But what Danika wants, Danika gets, and it has always been that way. Her big, scary biker husband, who seems to be one in a trillion, is about getting his *wildflower* whatever she wants. He isn't the first man in our lives to put Danika first. Being that he's her husband, I get it.

Danika is blissfully happy. And I don't begrudge her—her happiness. She went through some shit, but Danika isn't like me. She wants all that flowery crap, and she fought for it; I broke for it, and she has the life she dreamed of. I'm happy for my soft-hearted sister. But that isn't me. I never had dreams of

become a wife and mother. I'm not saying I don't want to, but I don't see it happening.

So here I am, listening to my sister go over *itinerary* for *the date* she planned for me. She is insistent that the guy needed her help in planning things. So, she took the reins in the way she does. What is life if Danika Masterson can't meddle?

"...sipping on a drink that costs too much and tastes like heaven on your lips. You need this..." I've been gritting my teeth for the last half hour listening to Dani, with the same mantra on repeat in my head. Don't snap. She's pregnant. Don't upset her because if she cries, Nitro will have my ass.

"... he's perfect for you."

*I doubt that.*

I'm not saying he won't be good for a night or two. I'm not a monk. I like sex, love it even, all it is—is stress relief. Looking down at my watch, it's been thirty-five minutes—she's still going. Fuck me.

"Are you even listening to me?" The annoyance in Dani's voice means she knows I wasn't. But I got the gist of it, which is what I repeat.

"Umm, yes. He's a brother who just transferred from another chapter, and he's dreamy, *just my type*." My eyes roll at the last part. "He's twenty-five, six-four, brown eyes, and is built like... what did you say..." I chuckle humorlessly. "He's built like a *gawd*." I sigh. "He's never been married, has no kids, has a bit of a record, and only a little drama. That drama is about his ex-girlfriend, who is a little psycho and got butt hurt from being broken up with and sicked her cop brother on the club. Instead of ridding it out, he and the club thought his coming back to Sacramento, where he is from, was an easier solution. So bye-bye, Vegas. You've known him for two point five seconds and think he's perfect for me. Does that cover it?" My voice is even and matter-of-fact.

And *then* the sniffing starts.

For fuck's sake.

“*Who the fuck are you talking to?*” I hear my brother-in-law, and I groan.

Great, just great.

I hear shuffling, and I let out a resigned sigh. I can guarantee that Dani is now perched on Nitro’s lap, giving while he rubs her back, whispering sweet nothings in her ear. It’s their thing. I have to give it to Nitro. The man is good at understanding all the crazy that is my sister.

“Go on the damn date. Will it kill your little ass to be nice?” Nitro growls.

His sudden entrance into the conversation startles me, and I nearly drop my phone. I want to scream, yes... yes, it would. But I don’t

“Well, hello to you too, brother-in-law. And you know damn well it would.” I say, exasperated.

I hear more sniffing and muffled words.

“*Wildflower, come on now. I can’t make her do a damn thing.*”

I want to laugh when I hear the *hiccups*; so damn dramatic. Through all of her dramatics, she says something I can’t understand. And I know what will happen next; I pick at my nails as my sister snuffles and explains why she’s so... upset to her man. All the while, Nitro is huffing, puffing, and growling like the love-sick biker he is.

I’m going on this damn date.

Damn.



## Chapter Two

### DALIA

*“Family first. And they use it against you.”*

My body flushes as I think about what I’m doing. I’m doing what we women do when getting ready for a date. Pick ourselves apart. I don’t want to look too available even if I am. And I don’t want to give off an unavailable look either, because a girl needs to get laid. So here I am, deciding on cleavage or no cleavage.

“Cleavage, lots and lots of cleavage. And wear that one bra that makes the girls do that thing,” Danika says, showing me exactly what she means, only to wince when lifting her ginormous pregnant boobs. My eyes roll at my well-intentioned sister.

Staring down at the options for tonight that I have on my bed. My eyes close as I shake my head at how ridiculous being nervous about a date is. Daria is only halfway listening as she clicks away on her phone.

So she’s no help...

“Yeah, because no one can ever see those monstrosities from space as is.” Daria snickers.

I chuckle. She is paying attention. When I look over at her, there is humor in her eyes.

“Shut up, brat.” I huff, tossing a shirt at her face. Her phone drops to the floor, and she gives me a heatless glare. I roll my eyes as she does the same, bending down to retrieve it.

“Oh, to be young and to see your feet,” Danika says from behind me wistfully.

Which has us laughing. The laughter follows me while I head to the bathroom, where I finish getting dressed for my date. I’ve kept it simple yet sexy-ish. Dani will be pissed, but I’ll not dress like someone I’m not for, one of the club brothers. If he is looking for another Dani, he is out of luck.



## DEKKER

*“No means no, not just no, but hell no.”*

*Two weeks earlier...*

“So, she’s Dani’s sister.”

I’m only half listening because Nitro is the Prez’s brother, and I’m new. Not brand new, but new enough. I left Sacramento for Vegas after I patched in. The transfer happened because I wanted and needed to be out of my Pop and older brother’s shadow. I’m a legacy, and with that comes expectations. Expectations to be like Hound and Hound Jr., and that wasn’t me. Now I’m back, which means I don’t want to start over by having the club officers pissed at me.

Nitro and his ol’ lady have been trying to convince me to take Dalia Danika’s sister on a date. I’ve explained to them more than once. I don’t date. I tried that shit, and when I say I’ll never do it again, I mean it. No way in hell do I want that headache-inducing drama in my life again. The little stalker I once called my girl ensured I learned my lesson. How is it

when women say no, we should listen, but when we say it, we get stalked and our lives get turned upside down?

Veronica and her cop brother were relentless ruining what I had in Vegas. Veronica lied, manipulated, and had me put in jail on trumped-up charges, all because I said No. No to her moving in, no to making her my ol' lady, no to her trying to make me her baby daddy. That was the shit that fucked with me. She tried to pass another mans kid off as mine. Fuck that. Hell yeah, I said NO. Apparently, No was her crazy switch. Within a week, my house was raided, my bike impounded, and I was in jail for assault on a chick I hadn't seen since she was kicked out and banned from the clubhouse.

So, hearing about the little hellcat who beat up her boyfriend on Valentine's Day last year and ended up in jail. That is not the kind of chick I plan to date—ever.

“Brother, listen, my ol' lady is riding my ass about this. She likes you.” He growls like saying the words leave a foul taste in his mouth. “And my *wildflower* doesn't like many people.” I can hear the love he has for his woman in his voice.

I clocked that as soon as I got settled here. Dani is the sweetest woman I've ever met, and if she likes you, she's an angel. But that woman is queen cold shoulder if she doesn't. Just ask the club whores and Axel. She can hold a damn grudge. When I got here, she instantly took a liking to me. Of course, I tread lightly because she's my brother's old lady, but she wasn't having me put distance between us because she liked me. And the saying that whatever *Nitro's wildflower wants, she gets*—is no joke.

Being in with Dani means I see her almost daily and have been invited, along with a few brothers, to the Masterson family dinners. At first, I was standoffish, even though I've known the Mastersons all my life. I'm closer to Axel and Nitro than I am to Prez. But when I left to go to Vegas, coming back became something I did very little of, so we all drifted apart. I wasn't even here when my brother Hound Jr. got married.

“Seriously, man, it's one damn date. Dani did all the legwork. All you need to do is show up. No muss, no fuss.”

His hand slams down on the bar top, and I look down at it and back up at my club's SAA, brow raised.

“What the actual fuck? You're paying me to take this chick out. That's fucked up. You know that, right?” I stare him in the eyes with shock. Is he paying me to take this chick out?

“Look, I get your reluctance. I know you've heard about how different Dalia is from my wildflower. But she's a good girl. She doesn't listen sometimes and is pigheaded. But she isn't a psycho. The prick she beat would have gotten his just deserts when we found out why she beat his ass.” He chuckles, and a few brothers chuckle and give words of agreement.

“Brother, listen. I'm sure she's a great girl...” Before I can finish, my phone lights up. And I can guess who it is. Lifting the phone to face Nitro after letting out a resigned sigh. “I've changed my number five fucking times, and she finds it every time. This is what going on a few dates gets me. I'm not that guy, brother. I'm good with getting my strange and using the club girls. Anything else...” I sit the phone down and shake my head while it vibrates.

“*Shit*, you didn't get one of our phones. My bad brother. I'll get that handled.” He pulls his phone out of his pocket and sends a text. “My nephew will have a new one in my office by morning.” He says sheepishly and gives me an apologetic pat on my shoulder.

“Not the point, brother, not the point,” I say as I let out an annoyed sigh.

“You know what's funny, Dekker? I've listened to my boy and Dani discussing you and your... love life. Dani speaks highly of you, as does my son. Let me tell you something, Dekker. Life is too short to live with regrets. Dalia is...” She sighs and a smile plays on her lips as her eyes glitter. “Dalia is more than the sum of her mistakes. She is a woman who knows what she wants and what she doesn't. She isn't a doormat. But what she is... is kind, loyal, and honest. She is a good girl and a bad girl when she needs to be. One date. And I think you will see what I do. Maybe you will see in her what no one else seems to see.” Vera, the club's previous matriarch,



pats my back. Her eyes scan the room contemplatively. Something plays behind her eyes when she looks up at her son. When I think she isn't done. I realize she is. She gives us a sad smile, turns, and walks away.

“Whelp, you're *screwed* now, brother. Because when momma V wants something, she gets it. Ask every man with an ol' lady that's *happy*. She's had a hand in damn near every one of our relationships,” Torch says as he and a few other brothers' belly laugh as I stare at my half-empty beer.

“Fuck, guess I'm going on a damn date. *Fuck.*”

“Finally, he sees the light.” Talon, our club Prez, who I didn't know was here witnessing this shit, muses as he pulls his woman to his side and strides toward the bar.

Gabriella pats him on his chest with mischief in her eyes. “I blame your mother and her meddling.” And another round of laughter ensues.



## Chapter Three

### DEKKER

*“Even the best-laid plans always go to shit.”*

*Two weeks later...*

Leaving the clubhouse, not for the first time since dragging my ass out of bed, have I wanted to do anything, but be doing what I'm doing. I'm not a pussy, but after the shit Veronica pulled, I'm not a masochist, either. I want to drink, smoke, and fuck with no attachments. My problems all started when the brothers in Vegas began pairing off. My mistake was saying, why the fuck not? I saw the appeal of having a woman who was only mine, someone to go home to every night, and who thought the moon and stars rose and fell because of me. I saw the hearts and shit in the ol' ladies' eyes when they looked at my brothers. And I wanted that. And I thought I found it, and quickly my *why the hell not* turned into *why the fuck ever?* Never again.

The annoyance curls in the pit of my stomach as my resolve set in. I keep reminding myself that it is one date. One damn date, and I'll make sure she understands that. I'm not a complete dick. I won't do any foul shit, but I sure as shit not going to put on the charm. Which is why I rode my bike rather than drive my cage.

The way Dani has been fluttering around me and giving me *advice* and Nitro practically shoved money down my throat made me think this little experiment is for her benefit more than mine. Knowing what I know and have heard, men within a ten-mile radius keep their distance from Dalia.

“You gonna sit out there all night, or are you going to get off your ass and knock on my door like a gentleman?” I hear a voice, and my head snaps to a second-story window.

My eyes connect with the owner of the smooth, husky voice that’s like taking a shot of Tennessee whiskey after a long ride. Taking in what I can see of her. I don’t know how much time has passed, but I watch her watch me. I smirk when her eyes widen. And my smirk drops when I realize I fucked up. Nope, not fucking happening. One date, one damn date. That’s it. I hear a few feminine shouts, and the little spitfire breaks off to turn to speak to whoever is with her.

Letting out a sigh, this is fucking bad.

My chin hits my chest as my dick jumps in excitement. Fuck no. Don’t do it. *Do not do it*. Yes, I was expecting a Dani replica, not that brown-skinned beauty who has me harder than granite. Nope, she is nuts; she is from *crazy town*, USA. I’ve had enough crazy to last a lifetime. Veronica is all the reminder I should ever need. I jumped on that and have regretted it ever since. No permanent pussy for me. Just. Say. No.

“Dekker?”

“Dek?”

“DEKKER,”

Shit, three matching feminine voices break the internal conversation I’m having with my dick. And for fuck’s sake. Why the hell didn’t anyone warn me? I mean, I saw her a few times at the club, but it was in passing, not this damn close. Not looking the way she does now. Shit.

My eyes take her in from head to toe. And my mother fucking dick, the traitor, gets harder. *Fuck you, dude. You are*

*not ruining my damn plan.* My eyes leave her, trying to do anything but look at those luscious...

Nope.

Not fucking happening.

She, Dani, and their youngest sister, Daria, stare at me expectantly. Triple shit. Slowly, I take the keys out of the ignition, pull my leg over, and stand to my full height while the three watch me. I fiddle with shit on my bike for a minute, adjusting shit in my saddlebags, making sure the bitch bar is secure. Anything to give me time to force my dick to deflate. I think of anything and everything, from hot onions and mayonnaise to rotting corpses. What does it, what has my dick deflating, is my mind going to Veronica and the shit she put me through. That's when a plan forms, and I decide.

She's Veronica.

I turn, and I smile as I take steps toward the sisters. I may not want this despite what my dick thinks, but I'm also not an asshole, so I'll play nice. "Sorry, ladies, I was lost in thought," I say. My eyes go to hers.

She is Veronica. I repeat over and over in my head.

"What was that?" Dalia says as she crosses her arms with a raised brow.

Shit, did I say that out loud? Shit.

"Oh no, I was saying I should have used some arnica. You know the flower. It helps with swelling and pain. Bum knee." I pat my knee for added effect.

Dani and Daria giggle, but Dalia's eyes narrow as she turns away with a skeptical *hmm* and walks back toward the front door, which is still wide open. And that's when I see it. Damn.

"You coming or what?" She yells over her shoulder.

Despite my reluctance, damn, do I want to cum all over those luscious... No, no cumming, not on her tits, not in her. No fucking where. I follow her despite the beast eyeing me, and when I pass Dani and Daria. I hear a loud sigh and giggle, which has me turning to catch their eyes on me, both with

strange expressions. Dani is looking at me with hope, while Daria is looking at me like I'm about to lose a damn limb, and she feels sorry for my loss.

“You got this. And don't fear the beast. Be a man. Show him who's boss.” Dani says.

Good luck.” Little D whispers with a giggle.

When I raise a brow at them both, they say nothing else. That's when I take them in. Dani has her purse and keys in hand, and Daria has her bag slung over her shoulder and her eyes locked on whatever she finds so important on that damn phone that is welded to her hand. And I realize they are leaving. *Shit*. Guess I can't use them for a buffer.

This is going to be a long damn night. I run my hand over my face as I watch them go.



## DALIA

*“Men are assholes, the end.”*

That low-down, dirty bitch. She did this shit on purpose. Fuckety fuck. He is supposed to be a troll, a popped belly, mole having a troll. Anytime I saw Dekker at the clubhouse, it was from afar, never close enough to see the damn dimples. Or those damn eyes, nope, never, not once. If I had, if I did, I wouldn't be here staring at the wall in my entryway, trying to figure out how I'm going to stop myself from jumping his ass like a tree.

Men are assholes.

All men.

All the time.

Men are assholes. Dekker is an asshole. He and his dimples, big giant *assholes*.

I slowly nod to myself, convincing my libido, the whore, that Dekker is like every other man. He is an asshole.





## Chapter Four

### DEKKER

*“I’m an asshole.”*

My attention turns back to the door, and the beast that stands between me and getting this damn date started. I’ve heard stories about Dalia’s beast. So it did not surprise me to see him, just surprised at how big the damn thing is. His intelligent eyes watch every step I take. Am I having a fucking stare-off with a dog? Yes, the fuck I am. Will I let the giant beast that looks like he can eat me for dinner intimidate me? No, the fuck I’m not.

My eyes trail past him, and connect with his owner. The amusement in her eyes is clear. I also see a challenge, and I chuckle to myself because even if I don’t want to be here, I’m no fucking pussy. I smirk at her, but keep an eye on her beast. Ain’t no fucking way I’ll be intimidated by a dog. So you damn right. I stride past them into the house. It took a little maneuvering, but just like she was making a point, so was I.

Once I crossed the threshold, making sure not to touch her as I squeezed between her, the dog, and the door. I stride wordlessly into her living room and sit my big ass on her couch. Of course, I make a show of it and spread my arms and legs wide.

Fuck, I’m still hard as hell.

I look around the room. Her place is nice. Not that I thought it would have her crazy out on display. But even so, I figured it would not be as girly as it is. My attention, although peeked, doesn't stray from them for long. I smirk when she mutters something before taking off down a hallway. The beast doesn't follow her. No, he strolls into the living room, his eyes on me. He stops in front of me, and I watch him because I may not let her see me be intimidated, but I'm not dumb. Dogs can be unpredictable on the best day, and new people in their space means they will test you.

Slowly, I take one of my arms from the back of the couch and rest it open, palm up on my thigh. His head tilts like he is trying to tell me something, and after a few seconds, he steps closer and sniffs me. It doesn't take long for him to take in my scent; when he does, his eyes return to mine. And then the damn thing jumps up on the couch and plops his ass next to me and rests his colossal head on my lap. I chuckle, knowing that I've won him over. A few minutes later, that's how she finds us. Me sitting on her couch, rubbing her beast's head as he snores like it's an Olympic sport.

“You gotta be shitting me.”

My head snaps up at the sound of her voice, and my eyes connect with the gorgeous yet annoyed ones. Her eyes aren't on me, but on the beast I'm petting in my lap. I can't help but smirk as I watch the annoyance filter through her eyes while ignoring how my body reacts at the sight of her. I don't miss how her eyes are narrowed. *This* was not how she saw things going. She says something that has the dog lazily rising from his spot, giving my hand a very wet lick, and walking toward her. They both disappear down the hall with a huff, a few muttered words from her, and a lazy stretch from him. I stand and head to the door. I hear her before I see her.

“Let's go.” She snips as she stomps past me.

She walks down another hallway opposite the one she had left through before. I can't hold my chuckle as she opens a door that leads to her garage. She presses a button on the wall. I don't realize what she's doing, but I watch her. Dalia is making it clear she's as excited about this date as I am.

Besides calling me out when I was sitting on my bike, she hasn't spoken directly to me other than to snipe at me. I may not have wanted to do this, but her annoyance is amusing. I plan to use it because she has no plans to take it easy on me. That is clear when she gets to her Harley Sportster 883. With mischief in her eyes and a smirk on her lips, she saddles her ride, looking back at me and starting it up. She reeves the engine a few times as I watch her.

"The door." She points to the garage door. "Will close when I leave, so you might wanna..." She makes a shooing motion. With a shake of my head, I walk out of the garage, not looking back at her, making my way to my bike. Once I throw my leg over my girl and start her up. Before I look back to see where she is, she flies past me, giving me a two-finger salute.

I guess I'll meet her there.



## **DALIA**

*"He wasn't supposed to look like that."*

Was I being a bitch when I left him to fend for himself with Titus? Maybe. Am I being a bitch for refusing to get on the big sexy brutes bike? Yes, yes, I am. There is no way in hell I'd be able to keep my shit together being so close to him. I want to fuck him and chuck him. And that can't happen. I've never crossed that line regarding men in LSMC, and I won't start now.

I know what they think of me. I'm not my sister. I'm wildly opinionated and not one to stand behind my man, but next to him. And bikers are alpha males through and through. As great as the guys are, I'll never be the kind of woman to be left in the dark. I've seen and heard about the shit that has gone down

in some of their personal lives. As much as Dani says, *not all club brothers*. Cheating and withholding shit is not something I can handle. I also know that if shit went wrong, it would put my soft-hearted sister in a shitty situation, and that's not my thing. Danika has been through enough because of our family. She has her happily ever after. I'm not about to fuck that up for her, no matter how much I want to jump the man like a damn tree.



## *Chapter Five*

### DEKKER

*“She is Veronica.”*

Pulling into the restaurant’s parking lot, my eyes automatically find her without effort. The woman is hard to miss. She stands leaning against her bike, and once again, my dick goes hard. Fuck. So much for the ride, allowing me to get my shit together; one fucking look at her, and I’m back to square one. My head is fucked, the twenty-minute ride allowed me to get my dick under control, but it also gave me time to think. And thinking right now is a bad fucking idea. I can’t let this attraction turn into anything else. I told myself when I left Vegas that I would not jump from one fire to another, and I’m sticking to that. I still have shit hanging over my head. Veronica is still on her shit, and until I know for sure she is out of my life, I’m staying single. The problem is that my resolve wavers the second my eyes trailed from Dalia’s denim-clad legs to her nearly makeup-free face. Damn it. I groan, knowing there is fuck all I can do about my body’s reaction to her. And nothing that flashes through my mind calms my dick. Not a damn thing.

Pulling up next to her. Dalia watches me with a mischievous smile on her face. Her eyes glitter with amusement, and damn if she isn’t the most beautiful woman I’ve ever set my eyes on. Her curly, wild hair is windblown from the ride, and my

fingers twitch with the need to run my hands through it, which causes me to shake my head. Parking my bike, she continues to watch me. I smirk, knowing she's playing games. I'm cool with that. The little spitfire is used to running all over the guys she's with. That much is obvious. We are both here because of the people in our lives, so I plan to make the best of it but also make it clear that this is it. There is nothing after tonight.

My strides are confident, and I watch her watching me, taking me in. I don't miss when her eyes trail from my boots to my dick. I don't miss the flare and heat in her eyes when she sees how hard she is making me. Nor the way she bites down on her lower lip, which has me smirking. Yeah, baby girl, two can play this game. When I reach her, my hands rest on her bike on either side of her, boxing her in. My eyes bore into hers; my lips lift in the corner, and her breath hitches. Leaning forward slightly, my face so close, our lips nearly touching.

"Since you wanted to be a hardass at your place." Her eyes flare. "I guess now is the time for introductions and to make some shit clear. This was neither of our ideas. And I know we are both feeling whatever the fuck this is..." I shift, leaning forward so my lips are next to her ear. "I'm not like the little fuck boys you toy with. You want to be an alpha female, sweetheart? You go right ahead. But be prepared because I'm not a man to be played with." I lean back, not missing the shiver that runs through her. I lean back so I can look into her eyes, eyes that are now narrowed on me.

"This can go one of two ways. We can make the best of the night, or you can keep playing these little games, and we can end this shit here and now with no hard feelings." Then I pull away from her so that I can see her entire face. She shifts her lower half forward, pushing against my dick, and she stares into my eyes. It is quick, but I see the moment she realizes exactly what I mean. Her eyes flash with a hint of frustration, which makes me chuckle as I turn away from her.

Instead of giving her a chance to respond because I do not need whatever smart-ass retort she plans on spewing, I take confident strides toward the restaurant, never turning around to

see if she is following. While still in earshot, I stop, unwilling to turn around. “By the way, I’m Dekker, and I’m fucking starving. So let’s eat.”



## DALIA

*“He is supposed to be a troll.”*

Cock sucking motherfucking son of a bitch that man is too fucking hot for his own damn good. *Fucking dimples.* My body vibrates with need as I watch him walk away. I felt how hard he was even after what he said to me. Him making it clear his intention isn’t completely unexpected. I expected little from him. Regardless, the moment I saw him, I knew he was the kind of man who could have me on my knees without saying much. His words were like a bucket of water. Reality slaps me in the face. One night, that’s it.

My eyes stay on him as I try to get my muddled brain to cooperate. Arousal, anger, curiosity, annoyance, need. How in the hell am I supposed to deny what we both know? Then again, I don’t have much of a choice.

This is a pity date for him, something I’m sure he had to be convinced to do. He isn’t the only one that needed convincing, so I’m not holding shit against him. Danika can be very persuasive when she wants to be. And with what I know of his past, he probably isn’t looking for what my sister believes to be some earth-shattering love story. Dekker is making the best of being tasked to take out the crazy, wild, uncontrollable sister. It makes sense that he would do this and wouldn’t want to make waves with Nitro by denying what Danika wants. I smile because it is nothing new for Danika to get what she wants. It makes sense that he would end them before things



even got started. I respect that. Because he could have told Nitro and Danika and whoever else to fuck off.

When he pulled into the lot, my eyes never left him. And when he got off his bike, I did not show my outward response to him. Dekker is not a small man. He's a little over six feet, two hundred pounds, and has a body of solid muscle. He has dark brown hair that is faded on the sides and longer at the top. He has it braided in a single plat that falls nearly to his mid-back.

My mouth watered when he leaned into me and spoke. My breath hitched, and my heart raced at his words. When those soulful brown eyes looked into my own, the depths behind them nearly had my knees buckling. I'm not an idiot. I recognize that this man could wreck me in ways I may never recover from, which has me strengthening my resolve not to take things too far with him. A little banter and flirting is as far as this can or will go.

“You coming or what?”

I'm jerked out of my thoughts and realize he is using my earlier words against me. Fucker.



## *Chapter Six*

### DEKKER

*“You can’t hide who you are.”*

Taking a sip of my beer, I’m not surprised that Dalia and I seem to have a lot in common—we both served. It impressed me she was a Master-at-Arms, the Navy’s version of military police. She was mainly stationed in the States and aboard a few ships while I was overseas serving in the Seals. More than once, I thought during our dinner, what would have happened if we had crossed paths naturally? Because from where I’m sitting, she’s someone I would have pursued. That realization has made it more challenging to keep an emotional distance. She’s beautiful and a little spitfire, that much I already knew. I have to keep reminding myself that isn’t all. Her history is a reminder that I can’t go there. I have to stay the course. Knowing who and how she was, I still wavered.

“So, a fucking love triangle. That shit’s fucked. How the hell did they figure the shit out? The easiest way to eliminate the evidence is to chuck the chit overboard, and wham bam, all clear.” I say with amusement.

Her eyes glitter with laughter while telling me about her time in the Navy. I’ve tried and failed to keep my eyes from straying from hers to her full lips as she speaks. But fuck me. All I want to do is lean across the table and devour them.

“Oh no, the dumb fuck wiped off the blade and put it back and tried to act like nothing happened. Come to find out, it wasn’t even a love triangle. The guy whose face got sliced only flirted with the chick and told his buddies he wanted to fuck her. And shit went down heel from there. After being found out, the guy who did the deed told us that, and I quote, *no little E-2 would disrespect him or his girl*. He said it as if it was normal to sneak a lick on someone while they slept in their bunk. That’s not even the craziest shit that happened while I was deployed.” She says, shaking her head, amusement in her eyes.

“So, what happened to them?” I say, leaning forward because I am interested in every word.

She smiles. “They returned him to the States on court-martial, charged, and dishonorably discharged. The fucked up thing is the guy he cut and the girl are now happily married with a few kids.” She chuckles, taking a drink of her wine.

“Well, shit. These bitches ain’t loyal.” I say offhandedly, causing her to laugh and me to chuckle.

The sound of her laughter does something to me, and I fucking try damn hard to ignore it. This is one night, one date, nothing more. It can’t be more. I don’t want or need more. I still have shit to deal with in Vegas, and it wouldn’t be fair to pull anyone into my shit; it’s bad enough that the club has to deal with Veronica and her fucked up brother.

“Is there anything else I can get for you tonight?” My head snaps up, and my eyes narrow on the waitress. She stands beside our table, pushing out her chest and biting her lip suggestively. Her eyes focused on me as they had been all night. The bitch is obvious in what she wants from me, and she isn’t getting it. I’m not that much of a dick to be on a date and act as if I’m not. Any other time, maybe I would go there if I were here with my brothers or anyone else, but I’m not.

Dalia’s stare burns into the side of my head. She hasn’t hidden her annoyance every time our conversation has been interrupted. This waitress can’t seem to get the fucking hint; she has stopped at our table far more than needed. A few

times, she had the nerve to touch me. Of course, I shut that shit down and have been doing my best to ignore her—fuck me eyes. It's clear the bitch has no sense of boundaries, and I may not want more from Dalia after tonight, but I sure as shit will not allow her to be disrespected in my presence.

I stare up at the waitress, my head cocking to the side.

“If I wanted something else, I would have asked for it the *five* times you've come over here and interrupted my date with the beautiful woman sitting across from me. I don't know how they train you, but you need a few lessons. I've made it very clear that I'm not interested in *anything* you're offering. So, when we are ready for the check, I will let you know. Until then, stay your ass from over here.” My words were firm, and my eyes bore into hers, letting her know I was not impressed or interested. Wide-eyed, mouth open and closing like a fish; her cheeks turn redder the longer her eyes bounce between Dalia and me. Raising a brow at her, her eyes widen comically, and she turns without a word and stalks off.

“Well, that's one way of putting the bitch in her place. She's been pissing me off since we sat down fluttering those caterpillars, but I refused not to make a scene.” I look back at her when I hear her sigh. She's slumped a little in her seat, her face looking pensive. “I have no doubt the guys have told you about me and shit I get up to and have done,” Dalia says. Something in the way she spoke makes me think she may not like what the club feels about her, but she leans into it because it's easier than trying to correct them.

Her small, humorless chuckle makes my brows furrow as I look at her. Really, look at her. I say nothing as I take another pull of my beer, leaning back in my chair. And what I see, what Mamma V said, is starting to make sense. Aww fuck, those sneaky motherfuckers.

Fuck me, I want Dalia, and not just for one night.

Shit.



## *Chapter Seven*

### DALIA

*“Too good to be true.”*

*Two weeks later...*

Something changed after Dekker told the waitress to fuck off. Our conversation for the rest of the night became stilted. We had been having a good time, talking about our time in the military and stories about things we got up to and saw, the places we've been. His being a seal means he saw a lot of fucked up shit, but he kept it light. He told me a few stories about things he and his team got up to. And about how they are still in touch; a few are prospecting for the Vegas club, with a few more planning to come here to Cali and do the same once they're discharged.

The entire night, I kept searching for that feeling of being annoyed and bored. It never came. I never once made an excuse to go to the bathroom to psych myself up and put my game face back on. I didn't need to send my best friend an SOS text to call me with an emergency to get me out of there. Things had been going well until they weren't.

My phone rings, pulling my thoughts away from the man who has been the focus of my illicit dreams. The one who was true to his word.

“Yeah,” I say, answering as I take a few more money shots of the cheating prick I’ve been tailing.

“We got a problem,” Jackson says over the line. His tone has me sitting up from my perch. Jackson always sounds like he’s bored, so the tone of his voice has my interest peaked.

“Okay. Hit me with it.” I say.

“Your boy...” There is a pause, as if he is waiting for me to correct him. I could, but then it would give him credence to his assumption. And best friend or not, I’m not opening that can of worms. “He has a warrant out for his arrest, and the award is two hundred k.”

“First, who is *my boy*? Second, don’t start shit?” I snipe. “Shit.” My foot slips.

“Boss, boss, you hear me?” Jackson’s deep voice pierces through.

Quickly shove my shit in my bag and head to my bike. If Jackson is talking about Dekker, I need to go to the club and speak to him and Talon; if I have this info, others may have it, too.

“Yeah, I’m here. I dropped my shit and nearly broke my damn camera. Again, who is my boy? And what else do you know?” I say as I straddle my bike.

It should only take me about an hour to get from where I am to the clubhouse.

On my ride, Jackson fills me in on what the report says and the charges. And then he fills me in on what he could gain independently. Because I run my own private investigation and bail bonds company. I have alerts set up for all the brothers in the club. I did it after shit went down with Danika. As much as Jackson hates it, I’m determined to keep my sisters shielded by knowing who is in their lives and whether they will bring or be a problem. It makes me feel better. It has always been my job to protect my sisters from the darkness in the world. Jackson has spent all our lives trying to get me to put myself first, but it’s how I was conditioned and raised. I’m already broken; why bother changing who I am now?



There is a possibility that the club already knows. Gabriella, the Prez's ol' lady, runs a security firm. Just in case, I need to make sure they have all the information I have. Her people are good, but she has asked me and Jackson to join her on more than one occasion. He and I are well-known in our industry. We have a way of getting information and getting to people faster than most. We were the ones who could get Danika back after her kidnapping. This is also why I am adamant about knowing about everyone in my sister's life. I enjoy being my own boss and making the rules. Occasionally, I work with her on cases, but I do my thing otherwise.

Jackson tells me that Dekker's ex is an idiot, and her brother is in on it. From what he found, they claim Dekker has been harassing, stalking, and threatening Veronica—the ex. The idiot and her brother claimed that two weeks ago, Dekker broke into Veronica's place and assaulted her, not sexually. The report shows she had some cuts and bruises because of the attack. The problem is it supposedly happened the night Dekker and I were on our date. He couldn't be with me here in Sacramento and Vegas simultaneously.



## *Chapter Eight*

### DALIA

*“You can’t handle the truth.”*

Walking into the clubhouse, I spot Dekker almost immediately. My strides are confident as I walk toward him. My face is neutral as I say my hellos. I don’t know what I expected, but the look in his eyes is not it. I’ve seen him in passing over the last few weeks. And have tried not to be where he is or make things awkward. Dekker made his stance known. Who am I to try to change his mind? I don’t chase men.

“What you doing here, Dalia?” He asks, sounding bored. His eyes narrow as the whore nearly sitting in his lap sneers at me.

To anyone else, that question may seem normal and mundane. But it’s not. Dekker’s face may be neutral, but his eyes are void of warmth and hold a hint of hostility. The man before me wasn’t the one who laughed, joked, and flirted with me. A resigned breath leaves me. This is always how it goes.

My brows crease, I didn’t expect him to welcome me with open arms. The hostility rolling off him is unexpected and unwarranted. I know the date was a one-off, but why be an asshole now? My head bobs up and down slowly. I’m not all that surprised. I know what the brothers in the club think of me. Why would I believe one date would make someone like

him see me differently? I wasn't looking for anything with him, but I expected us to be cordial. Guess that's too much to ask. I didn't come looking for him until now, and the only reason I'm here has nothing to do with the date.

Of course, instead of getting to know me, he listened to them, to her. My jaw clenches. It doesn't matter. My face blanks as I look at him and say what I came to. Cold indifference laces my voice.

"There is a warrant for your arrest in the state of Nevada." My eyes remain on him, ignoring the whore next to him, who is trying to put on a show by rubbing against him.

His head tilted like it did when he addressed the waitress that night. His eyes narrow on me and then he smirks. Internally I roll my eyes because I know he's gearing up to be a dick. Something all dicks do when they don't know how to be a decent human. He pulls the whore closer. She snuggles into him and rubs him in places that make me want to rip her arm off. But he isn't mine, and I don't care what he does. With a chuckle, I shake my head. *Yeah, keep telling yourself that.*

"I came here as your friendly neighborhood PI, but now. I don't give a shit to be *friendly*." My eyes trail from him to the whore. "You have two choices, Dekker. You come with me on your own so we can get this shit handled. Or wait until the cops arrive, and you end up in cuffs, and they can deal with your ass." I shrug. "Either way, I don't give a shit. I don't want your shit touching this club or my sister." I give him a hard look.

There are a few what the fucks, and is this bitch for real? I ignore them. I may know these men, but they don't know me. I'm Danika's sister, someone they tolerate. My eyes never leave Dekker's.

His eyes change, and the hostility is replaced with humor. His laughter fills the room. I don't move or say a word. The whore next to him joins in, as did a few others. He looks at me like I'm a joke, as if my being here is a joke—it isn't.

A voice comes over the coms. "We are on standby." He doesn't wait for a response before continuing. "I spoke to

Officer Bradley. He's giving us an hour before he comes in with the warrant. And you know he'll have his boys looking for more if he can get away with it. It would be best if you were careful. I didn't like the smugness in his voice. That prick has a hard-on for the club." Jackson says. I can hear the annoyance in his voice. He wanted me to wait, but I thought I could come here and talk to Dekker and do this quietly and without fuss.

"Standby," I say loud enough for Jackson to hear me.

Dekker's laughter dies when he sees the look on my face. He sobers and sits up. The arm around the club girl is now resting on the back of the couch as he stares into my eyes, probing and watching me, seeing if I am fucking with him. I'm not.

"So, you..." he lazily points at me. "...are you telling me you were here to take me in on some bullshit warrant? This has to be a fucking joke?" He looks around like someone is going to jump out, saying, *gotcha bitch*, they won't. "I mean, I know the brothers said you were bat-shit crazy. But this... fuck me." He shakes his head and stares at me like I'm doing this with some fucked up ulterior motive.

My brows crease when my chest constricts. He isn't the first to ever say something like that to me, and he won't be the last. So why are his words affecting me?

"Like I said. Two options, Dekker." My tone is cool, and my voice is low.

"Fuck me. I left one crazy stalker bitch only to be pushed toward another." He shakes his head in disbelief. Believing his own bullshit, he continues. "My fucking gut said not to take Niro's money. My gut said that my brothers were fucking with me, paying me back for the shit I caused in Vegas. But fuck off, you all are taking shit too far," He growls out. The anger in his eyes is palpable.

"Excuse me..." I shake my head. "You know what..." I huff out in annoyance. "...it doesn't matter. I get it. But this isn't that. Everyone here may think I'm some callus, unhinged chick who's too loud, reckless, and not worth your time. Think what you want. I'm not a part of the club, don't want to be,

and give two shits what anyone here thinks about me. I'm here to do my *job*." My anger, frustration, and annoyance don't bleed into my words.

"That's what you think?" Nitro's cold hard voice comes from behind me.

I don't turn around. But I answer.

"Yes."

My eyes remain on Dekker. "So, what's it going to be?"

"Hold the fuck on. Wait a minute. How the fuck do you know before we do? You got something you want to say to me, Dalia?" This time, it's Talon who speaks up.

I've not had a lot of interaction with him, but from what I know, he takes the safety of his club seriously after shit went down a few years ago between his then-wife and his now-old lady. He has tightened the reins. Breaking eye contact with Dekker, I turn my head, and my eyes connect with Talon's. His brows crease as he looks at me. Before he or anyone else says anything, the whore pipes up.

"You take a psycho on one date. She's so pathetic they had to pay you to take her on. And now she's obsessed. Dekker, you know she's probably lying about the warrant. You know what they say about her. She's crazy making excuses to get you alone because you won't give her desperate ass the time of day. Danika said she gets *attached*." She looks at Dekker and then around the room, noticing what I do. Everyone is looking at me as if everything she said makes perfect fucking sense. No matter how much I bite into the inside of my cheek, no matter how much the taste of copper floods my mouth. I'm done.

I chuckle. And instead of addressing the president. I manage the whore.

"No, sweetheart. I *work* for a living. My job is to ensure that the really bad guys go to jail, cheating husbands and wives get their just deserts, and thieving pricks get what they deserve. I'm not a psycho for not being like my wallflower soft-hearted sister. I'm not a psycho because I don't wait for shit to happen

to the people I care about... let them fix my problem and act like they are the bad guys because of it. And I sure as shit don't put someone else down to build myself up. I'm *not* my sister. But she is my sister, so I have everyone around her and Daria on a watch list to ensure that nothing and no one can do what my father and Jasper did. I'm not a psycho; I'm prepared, cautious, and capable of doing what needs to be done, which is why I'm here to do my *job*. So instead of trying to make me look like something I'm not, how about you shut your pretty little mouth around Dekker's dick and stay out of grown folk business, *Thanks*." The smile I give her is less than kind. And I turn and look back at Talon, ready to address him.

A breath hitches, and I know what I'll see when I turn my head. My chin hits my chest. Fuck me.

"My office, NOW,"





## Chapter Nine

### DEKKER

*“Being an asshole is not who I am.”*

When I returned to the clubhouse, the guys and Danika were on me, wanting details. Of course, I played it like it was no big deal. I couldn't tell them the truth. The truth is, I'm not sure if I can stay away, but I know I need to.. Dalia wasn't what I thought she'd be. I didn't expect to have so much in common with her. I saw in her eyes that she had layers to her, and I don't think many people, including her sister, see more than she's willing to show.

I'm not too proud to admit that the more time passed, the more the brothers spoke about her. Maybe it was a play, like she was hiding behind a mask. A few of the brothers kept talking shit about her, telling me stories about how crazy she was and how she was no different from Veronica. I think differently, but I also know having Veronica still lingering in my life I can't start anything with Dalia even if I wanted to.

When she showed up with cold indifference in her eyes, it set me off. We saw each other in passing over the last two weeks. I wanted to talk to her, but with everyone watching us, I didn't want to make shit awkward. So her being here giving me attention pissed me off. And I can't even explain why.

The words were out of my mouth before I could think better of it. I felt like a prick. She did a good job not showing how they hit their mark. And because I'm an idiot, I leaned into it. Watching her being torn down by the whore Candy, she kept her composure until she spoke about her sister. That's when I saw her, saw who she was. And everything she said about what the club thinks of her makes sense. She isn't who she lets people believe she is, not at all. A pang of regret hits me in the chest. Her shoulders sag, and she walks toward Prez's office without making eye contact with any of us.

Everyone takes a seat around the conference table in Prez's office. Danika watches her sister. Her normally calm, kind demeanor seems forced, but the tears that run down her face seem real. It's her who breaks the tension-filled silence.

"What...." She clears her voice. "What's going on, Dalia? What..." Danika says as she looks around the room.

Nitro could give a shit for why she's here. He is focused on his woman and Dalia's words hurt her. His glare is angry and he cuts Danika off, getting to what he cares about. "That's really how you feel about your sister. The most kind, loyal, loving, and dedicated person I know. You think she let *shit* happen? You think she leaves you out to dry? That's fucked up, even for you."

For Fuck's sake.

Nitro's anger is palpable, and I can see it in his eyes as he holds his crying woman. He will not let this go. He will not let sleeping dogs lie. My head slowly turns to Dalia, who looks at him like she doesn't know who the fuck he is.

Letting out a resigned breath, Dalia sits forward. "You want to know. You truly want to hear what I have to say?" Giving him one last chance to back down. He doesn't. He raises a brow.

"You asked for this, so don't say I didn't give you a chance to back the fuck down. I didn't come here for this. I came for him." Here, eyes trail blankly toward me. And I wince at the coldness in her eyes. "But since you don't seem to want to let

this go, fucking fine.” She huffs, slamming back into her seat. Taking a breath, she squares her shoulders.

“You know I was an oops baby, yeah. Born eleven months after Dani. My mother was happy for another girl, my father... my father wasn’t. Long story short, when it came to Danika, as you know, he treated her like a Princess...”

“Us... us... until all that stuff happened, and he lost his way. He treated *us* like princesses.” Dalia doesn’t acknowledge Dani, which has everyone in the room narrowing their eyes on her. With a soft chuckle, Dalia shakes her head and keeps going.

“She was his world, the best of everything for *his girl*. But his girl wasn’t perfect. She tried to be...” She smiles softly at her sister, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “... most of the time, she was. But when she wasn’t, I paid dearly...”

Dani shakes her head furiously. But I have a feeling that Dalia isn’t lying.

“Dad shielded her from his life. He kept her out of the business. Dad wasn’t blatant. He never lost his way. He had always been a cold, evil son of a bitch. He didn’t show her that part of him.” A humorless chuckle leaves her as she looks into Nitro’s eyes. “I learned early on that we wouldn’t be the only people in my sister’s life who make *me* pay for not getting what they wanted from her.” She says, her hands unclenching, laying them flat on the tabletop. “When Dani was sixteen, she dated a senior. He wanted more, but she didn’t. Instead of taking from her, he took from me. Round and around it went. That has *always* been my life. I was always paying to keep her who she is. I’m always the bad guy, the crazy one, the *whipping girl*. Those are facts. When Dad sold her off. I was again a part of the deal. While you were protecting her, so was I, and again, I paid. So, yes, I believe my sister turns a blind eye. I don’t blame her because that is how we were raised. She knowingly or unknowingly perpetuates what people around her think of me. You guys aren’t the first; I’m used to it. I honestly don’t think it is intentionally meant to hurt me, but Dani enjoys being liked and enjoys being the good one.

Nothing wrong with that. I don't love her any less because of it. I know my place and my role, and I play it." She shrugs.

"So yeah. I have to be stronger, wiser, and better. My world is dark; there is no light unless I have my sister; their happiness is everything to me. I'm more than willing to suffer for it. Their safety is everything to me." Her eyes come to me. "I will do and have done everything to protect them, even when neither of them sees it or appreciates it, even when they will let people believe that I'm some unhinged stalker psycho. But it doesn't matter. I'm not here to make anyone like me. I honestly don't care if you do. I'm here because of my job. I wanted to help. This shit with your ex is easily remedied. That's why I asked you to come with me, and that is the *only* reason." Her tone is impersonal, and indifference burns in her eyes. Prez looks from her to Danika; then, he has a silent conversation with his brother Nitro, whose brows are furrowed.

And I have had enough. I fucking. Fuck.

The door flies open before I can speak, and all hell breaks loose.



## Chapter Ten

### DEKKER

*“When I fuck up, I fuck up.”*

*A week later...*

When officer dickhead busted into the clubhouse, shit happened fast. They hauled me out in cuffs. He couldn't use my warrant to fuck with the club. He used every door and wall to let me know. If it weren't for Jackson Dalia's partner, the club lawyers wouldn't have been able to get what they needed. Jackson and Dalia saved my ass, which had me feel like an even bigger dick for how I treated her. Having time to think, I planned to make up for it. At the very least, Dalia deserves an apology.

After processing, they sent me back to Vegas to answer to the charges against me. What Dalia and Jackson gave them was enough for the charges to be dropped. They made a case against Veronica and her brother. At first, I was going to decline, but the moment I saw her sitting in the courthouse looking smug, I told the lawyer to do what needed to be done. After my case was dismissed, they put Veronica and her brother up on charges.

After all was said and done, my brother knew I needed to ride back on my own, my bike was waiting for me at the

clubhouse in Vegas. I needed to get my head straight; the long ride would help.

My heart breaks for Dalia. As corny as it is, it was me, not her. Something I doubt she will believe me. From what she said in Prez's office that she is used to being treated like shit. She deserves better, not just from me but the club and her sister, and I'm going to show her that, even if she wants fuck all to do with me.

A resigned sigh leaves me as I park my bike and head into the clubhouse. Looking around, the brothers are partying hard. They act like I've been gone for months when it's only been a few days. I receive back slaps and nods while making my way to the bar. I chuckle as I signal the prospect for a beer. Any excuse to party, the fuckers will take it. Turning, I lean against the bar. My eyes skim the room. I'm not surprised by the notably absent faces. I didn't expect to see Dalia, Danika, or Nitro. My blood brother Hound has been keeping me in the loop while working with the lawyers and Jackson to deal with my shit. From what he says, things between the sisters ain't good—apparently, more was said after they took me in. And no one has seen or heard from Dalia since she left the clubhouse. Nitro isn't doing any better; Hound didn't get into much—he isn't one to gossip. I have a feeling shit isn't good between Nitro and Danika, and I feel partially responsible for it. A slight pang hits me in the chest when I don't see her. I don't know why I thought she'd be here. The way I treated her. I shake my head. Yeah, that girl wants nothing to do with me.

“Shit has been fucked, brother. Nitro is...” Axel says, pulling up a barstool. My eyes look over at him. He shifts and leans back into the bar. “I heard about everything that went down when I returned from the run.” He shakes his head. “Nitro is fucked up over it. Dani has been his world, but shit between them ain't good.” He lets his words hang. I know what he means. Danika has always been his light; she's soft, kind hearted, and no one would ever believe she'd hurt a fly. To find out that she ignored her sister's pain makes Nitro and all of us see her differently. Axel takes another pull of his beer, looking forward. “Nitro has been trying to rectify the woman he loves with the woman she is. He's been staying here, and

she's been staying at their place with Daria. Ain't nobody seen or heard from the girl."

"Dalia."

"What?" He looks at me, confused

"Not *the girl*, Dalia. Her name is Dalia."

"Yeah, well, congrats on getting your shit handled, and glad the crazy bitch and her fucked up brother are getting what they deserve. Glad to have you back, even if you brought a world of shit with you." He chuckles. I grunt in response.

We sit silently, both in our heads, and a commotion at the front of the room draws our attention. Without second-guessing, we make our way over to see what is happening.

"You tell him you were lying. You tell him you were upset because Dekker didn't want you. *I don't fucking care*. You are *my sister*. A few misunderstandings between us shouldn't mean that I lose the love of my life." Dani and Dalia are standing in the parking lot. Dalia looks tired and like she wants to be anywhere but here. Her eyes are pleading with her sister, but Danika is single-minded. She wants what she wants. And even though this is exactly the type of shit Dalia said she did, Danika doesn't see what she is doing as fucked up.

"Dani..." Dalia says, looking down at the ground. "Let's not do this. Let's... let's just." She lets out a resigned sigh. "You said you needed me to talk to him. I'll do that, but I will not *lie*. I know you didn't mean for any of that shit to happen, but you didn't..." She cuts herself off. She looks up and her eyes connect with mine. And for a minute, I see the girl she hides away. As quickly as she's there, she's gone—cold indifference takes over, and she looks away.

"Dalia, this isn't on you. You weren't in the wrong. You're allowed to feel how you do. Dani, this..." Nitro waved his hand around to the growing crowd. "This isn't the time. I told you we could talk after your appointment tomorrow. You... manipulating her to get her here, to talk to me..." He shakes his head. "This... tonight wasn't the time for this and a shitty



thing for you to do.” Shaking his head, Nitro walks to his bike, gets on, and takes off without looking back.

Danika’s tears flow freely as she watches him go. I see the indecision in Dalia’s eyes. She wants to leave, but she also wants to comfort her sister. I decide for her. With a nod to Gabriella, who made her way out here at some point, she goes to Danika and pulls her into her arms, ushering her towards the clubhouse, and I make my way to Dalia and try to do the same. She is rooted in place, watching her sister go. I wrap my arm around her and her body stiffens. She looks up from the corner of her eye with wariness. And I want to punch myself in the dick for making her feel the way she does.

Pulling her closer to my side. “Me and you are going to talk.” She says nothing, letting out a long breath. Her body relaxes as I steer her into the clubhouse.



## *Chapter Eleven*

### DEKKER

*“When I fuck up, I fuck up.”*

Once we get to my room, I close the door behind us. Her eyes take in the space, which isn't much. But what I have is me. Shifting from her side to her front, I wrap my arms around her. It shocks me in a good way when she leans into me and buries her face in my chest. When she releases a shuddering breath, I squeeze her closer to me, feeling her, having her in my arms. My body hums with the rightness of this moment. The beat of my heart slows as I inhale her soft scent of honeysuckle and coconut. There's so much I want to say to her. So much I need her to know.

“I'm...” Releasing a breath. “I'm sorry, Dalia,” My voice is filled with emotions I'm not used to showing.

My arms tighten around her when her body stiffens. She didn't look up at me, but her breath hitched. My chin goes to the top of her head, and my hands itch to run through the coils of her hair and lift her eyes to mine. The urge is overwhelming. I need her eyes on me. Walking backward with her in my arms, I sit on the edge of my bed and adjust her to sit on my lap. She doesn't resist, but her body remains tight. Her hands go to her lap, and I want to curse not just myself but everyone who has ever made her feel the way she does at this

moment. Dalia looks like she is barely holding it together. It breaks my heart to know I'm a part of why she feels the way she does.

My hand goes to her chin, pulling it to look into her eyes. "You are so damn strong." Leaning forward to rest, my forehead rests against hers as I breathe her in. Her scent calms me in a way nothing else ever has. "When my brothers first told me about you." She shifts in my lap, and I have to hold in a groan, hoping she doesn't feel how her closeness is getting to me because right now isn't the time for my wayward dick to get any ideas. My arms tighten around her because I know she will not want to hear my following words. "When they told me about you. I heard all the rumors, and with my past..." I let out a long breath. "With everything I was dealing with... I'll admit, I wanted nothing to do with you." She pulls away, eyes boring into mine. Her look is filled with conflict, insecurity, and hurt. Shaking my head because this shit is coming out all wrong.

"Stop and listen to me." Moments pass before she calms enough so I can continue.

"After being hounded by Nitro, Danika, and a few others. I finally agreed. Yes, Nitro gave me money for the date, but ... he didn't *pay me* to take you out. That was a fucked up thing for me to say, and I'm sorry for being such a dick. I just... Fuck woman, you had me all twisted and shit. I wasn't expecting you. I wasn't expecting to like you or to want more of you. I'm a guy. I'm a dick. I don't think before I open my mouth and sometimes have my head up my ass before I even know it." I smile at her, and she chuckles to herself.

Shifting her onto the bed, I stand; she says nothing as I pace in front of her while she sits perched on the edge of my bed.

"For the first time in my life, I felt the shit I heard about. And I didn't know what to do about it. You weren't supposed to be...you," I stop standing before her and point to her. She raises a brow at me, and she looks confused.

"What the hell does that mean, Dekker? All I can be is me." She says.

“Yeah, but I wasn’t supposed to like you. I didn’t want to like you. I wasn’t supposed to want you. I didn’t want you. But I fucking do, fuck’s sake, woman, all I want or have been thinking about since the date is you.”

My knees hit the hardwood floor at her feet and I sit back on my hunches in front of her. My hands go to hers, and my eyes are focused only on hers.

“You were unexpected, yeah. But never unwanted. I needed to get my shit together. I didn’t want my past to fuck with my future. And me being an idiot, I thought the best way to deal with shit was to ignore what I felt for you until I handled my shit. I stupidly thought I couldn’t have you. And then shit blew up in my face. And now you’re pissed at me; my brother and his woman are on the outs and fuck.” I lean forward, my forehead going to hers.

“Yeah, you did well and truly fucked up. The shit you said to me was very dickish of you.” Letting out a long breath, she looked at me with a smile. “But listen, the shit between my sister and I wasn’t isn’t your fault. That shit has been brewing for a long time. Danika is who she is; she’s lived a sheltered and oblivious life. Partially, it’s my fault because I let her. So, I don’t blame her. I’m who I am because of my experiences. It pissed me off that after an amazing date, you ghosted me, but I’m not the type to go chasing a man. You may be hot as fuck, and I may have, for the first time in a long time, wanted to see where things could go, but...” Her words trail off.

“You shouldn’t have to. You are an amazing woman, Dalia. Right here, right now, even though I was a complete and utter dick to you. I’m saying that I’m sorry and that I want to try with you. I want to see where things go because I’ve never felt about anyone like I do about you. I have been fucking sick to my stomach with the thought of my actions and words hurting you, and I promise that from this day forward, I will do everything in my power to not be like every other dickhead you’ve allowed in your life.”

Leaning in, I take her lips. Fuck, if I wasn’t already on my knees for her. This kiss would put me there. We may still have

shit to work out, but to have her here right now, letting me take her in, I know this is the beginning.



## Chapter Twelve

### DALIA

*“When he fucks up, he fixed it.”*

Danika tricking me into coming to the clubhouse to plead her case with Nitro is the only reason Dekker and I could have our little heart-to-heart. It's been a few weeks, and I'm still not all that comfortable at the clubhouse, but it's getting better. Nitro and my sister are working through whatever it is they need to work through, and I'm staying the hell out of it. For the first time in my life, I will not fix shit for Danika. She needs to see that she can't keep shoving her head in the sand, and she can't keep dogging me out to make herself look and feel better. She is getting there.

Tonight, Dekker's taking me out for a do-over. According to him, tonight will be what *the date* wasn't. I don't know what the hell that means, but I'm not going with it. Dekker isn't what I expected. I've always put men, especially alpha men, in two categories, men who try too hard not to be assholes and the asshole pops out. And assholes are trying too hard to be assholes and aren't, because when they meet an asshole, they become pussies. Dekker is neither, although I thought he was the former initially. He surprised me with the man he is. Dekker sees me, which is why I've been so willing to forgive him.





Walking out of the restaurant, everything is different. I feel different. Dekker pulls me to the side, and I smile, knowing this big hunk of man is mine. Pulling me toward his bike. He helps me climb on; the ride to his place has been exciting. Tonight, I'm making him mine in all ways. Dekker has been a *gentleman*, which is horseshit. But I've let him play his games; the little touches and searing kisses that have left me wanting to climb him like a tree have all been building up to this.

Pulling into his driveway, I wait for him to put the kickstand down before I get off his bike. My body vibrates with excitement. I have been to Dekker's many times, so when I get to the front door and put in the code, I am on the move before he can say a damn word. I'm done waiting for the time to be right.

Except once I walk through the door. I'm stunned at what I see. My eyes burn, knowing what he's done. Tonight has been nothing short of a dream. I'm not a girly girl, knowing that Dekker has shown me that I can be myself and still be treated like his queen.

Arms go around me, and I'm pulled back into a hard chest. Dekker's breathing is soft and tickles the hair on my neck.

"You, my sweet little hellion, need to learn patience." Dekker kisses behind my ear, and one of his hands trails from my waist to my chin. His warmth and the field of his hard dick pressed into my back, causing me to moan. My head turns to his eyes as heated, and their need tells me everything I need to know. He wants me as much as I like him.

Without releasing me, Dekker pushes me forward, following the sea of lavender petals leading to his room, and my breath hitches, and my pussy floods. His bedroom is filled with the scent of Lavender; there are candles on every surface, illuminating the room. Tonight, I will make him mine because

I'm already his. For the first time in my life, I don't think the man that consumes my mind and soul is an asshole.

All men are not dicks.



## DEKKER

Wither her back to the wall, and my chest pressed into her. I pull my lips from hers, moving them over her jaw. Enjoying the feel of her warm skin on my lips. I continue to kiss the skin of her neck. It is taking everything in me to slow down. Dalia tries to hurry me along, but I don't let her. We stand facing each other; I am in my boxer briefs, and Dalia is in her bra and panties. Reaching around her back, I unclasped her bra and let it drop to the floor. She moaned as I dipped my tongue into the hollow of her neck, where it met her collarbone. Her body trembled under my touch, subconsciously leaning towards me, a silent plea for more.

“Dalia, if you don't want to get fucked against this door, I suggest you slow down,” I warn her, meaning. My dick is painfully hard and has me second-guessing my words. He is finally getting what he wants and twitches, begging to be buried deep inside of her.

“Fuck me, Dekker.” Her words are husky and laced with need

Lift her in my arms, swing around, and in two strides, lay her down and follow her onto my bed. Hovering over her. Fuck foreplay. I need her now. Right the fuck now, my need to take it is all-consuming. Her scent is intoxicating, like a man possessed. I rip my boxers off and her underwear without a second thought. Once naked, I gripped the backs of her thighs and lifted her, sitting back on my haunches. My eyes are on

hers as my hips shit forward, rubbing her hard nub, she is soaked, and my dick twitches again as I release a moan of anticipation.

“Dekker.”

Her pleading tone has my dick even harder. Her eyes are begging me to give her what she needs.

“Don’t worry, baby, I will give you everything you need. I am going to take you in every way I can. Because you are mine, Dalia. Mine to fuck, mine to protect, mine to love. I knew it that night. I was too stupid to believe that I had finally found you. And now that I have you. I will never fucking let you go. Tell me, Dalia... Tell me your mine.”

“I’m your Dekker, please baby, please give me your dick. I am your; you are mine, forever and always.”

Her eyes burn with need and the truth. Shifting my hip, I plunge into her warm heat, and my eyes close on their own accord as I fall forward. My arms go to either side of her head as I attack her lips, kissing her hungrily, possessively, promising her everything in this kiss. Promising my heart, my respect, my protection, my life. This kiss seals her fate.

Dalia moans into our kiss, her fingers tangling in my hair. Once I feel her walls adjust to me, I thrust into her hard and fast over and over. It takes everything in me not to cum, but I don’t stop her when I feel her walls rippling around my dick. Once she started, she couldn’t fucking stop, and I was leading her straight through back-to-back orgasms like a fucking pro. “Dekker,” she whimpered. “I love you,” she blurts out, surprising the fuck out of me. “Oh, God!” she moans and clamps around my dick.

My heart hammers in my chest at her proclamation, and with a growl, I begin to take her with even more savagely possessiveness. Tangling my hand in her hair, I yanked her lips to mine, sucking so hard on her bottom lip that I made it bleed.

I roared her name as I finally came, my hand tightening in her hair as my vision momentarily darkened with the force of my orgasm.

“I love you too, Dalia. You are mine, my woman, my ol’ lady, my love. And soon my wife.” Kissing her lips, I roll to my back, taking her with me.

We both release a moan as our combined release gushes out of her pulsating pussy around my semi-hard cock. Thank fuck we had the foresight to make sure we were covered. Dalia told me with no uncertain terms that I wasn’t getting the cookie without getting tested, so that’s exactly what I did, as did she. We are both clean, and she is protected. I will never want to take my woman with anything between us. She feels too damn good. I chuckle, thinking about how quickly things can change.

“Who knew a date neither of us wanted to go on would lead us to our forever?”

Dalia kisses my chest.

“Who knew I’d find a man that wasn’t dick?”

## *About the Author*

As someone that likes to push boundaries, she writes outside the lines, underneath and between them. Pure chaos is the name of the game. As a firm believer in strong women who ‘strong women.’ You will find that Tonya writes female leads that give as good as they take. Like in all romance, you will find strife, pain, family drama, love, joy, happiness, laughter, makeups and breakups. But don’t worry, no third-act breakups here. But you will find very unconventional characters that SHATTER GLASS CEILINGS.

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# *The Solemn Gift*

**An Etherya's Earth Short Story**

Rebecca Hefner



## *Blurb*

It's Valentine's Day on Etherya's Earth, and grumpy Vampyre Leo is determined to find a gift for his bonded mate Adelyn—even if the holiday is a human tradition he's never experienced. Things have been a bit strained between the two soul mates, but their steamy holiday weekend might be the catalyst that sets things right. Enjoy your time in Etherya's Earth!

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## *Dedication*

Because I needed a bit more time with Leo and Adelyn, plus a dash of Sadie with a sprinkle of Nolan. Enjoy!



## Chapter 1

Leo, son of Alrec and Kilani, stood in Sadie's infirmary room as she placed the depressor on his son's tongue.

"Wow, you opened really wide," she exclaimed, her multicolored eyes sparkling. "Now say *ahhhh*."

Kellan responded with a forceful but warbled *ahhhh* as Sadie continued the exam.

"Perfect," she said, removing the depressor. "I think you might be the healthiest four-year-old in the kingdom."

Kellan beamed, causing Leo's heart to squeeze in his chest. The kid was adorable, and had the precociousness of his mother. His daughter, Briala, on the other hand, had inherited a fair amount of Leo's surly demeanor, but he inwardly admired her churlishness. The twins weren't even five yet and they were a force to be reckoned with. He expected no less of the children he'd created with Adelyn, his kind yet fiery mate who he loved to distraction.

"I'm ready for school!" Kellan exclaimed, pumping his fists in the air as Sadie chuckled.

"You sure are. Just remember to wash your hands. Your dad's blood gives you extra immunity, but you're one of the rare immortals to have Vampyre, Slayer *and* Nymph blood. That makes you very special."

"Speaking of that," Leo said, rubbing the back of his neck as he leaned against the counter. "I was hoping to ask you for a favor."

Sadie's eyebrow arched. "I thought you might be up to something. Addie usually brings the twins to their physicals together."

“Mommy’s mad at Daddy,” Kellan chimed from the bed, his legs swinging as he imparted the information.

“Is that so? Well now, why don’t you head to the waiting room and ask Tarin to give you a lollipop so I can talk to your dad?” Kellan slid from the table before beelining to the door. “Only one, okay? I don’t want to send you home high on sugar.”

“Geez, Sadie, you really owe me now,” Leo teased, crossing his arms. “Addie’s going to kill me if he stays up past his bedtime.”

Smiling with those kind eyes, she trailed to the counter and leaned her hip against it to look up at him. “So, what’s up? What did you do this time?”

“It will be fine,” he said, expelling a heavy breath. “I told her I want to join the army reserves. It will require me to pass Jack’s boot camp and report for training every third weekend after that.”

“That’s honorable.” Her eyebrows drew together. “I would think she’d be open to that since her father is the commander.”

He rubbed his forehead. “She is, but... It’s hard to explain. I think she’s worried I’m going to get hurt...or die. But strange things are happening in Eternal,” he said, referencing the secret immortal compound in the human world located in rural Pennsylvania. “If Dakath attacks, I want to be ready to fight. I want to defend her and our kids.”

“I understand,” Sadie said, patting his arm. “So what do you need from me?”

“I know Valentine’s Day is a human tradition that’s not really celebrated in the immortal world, but some of my extended family celebrate it. I overheard Arderin talking about the romantic gifts Darkrip gives her each year, and I want to do something like that for Addie.”

“Aw, that’s sweet. Do you want me to suggest something?”

Clearing his throat, he straightened. “Actually, I already have something in mind. She loves the quartz pieces that

Toross has given her over the last few years. I was hoping I could also give her something from her birth mother.”

Sadie bristled as her eyes widened. “Oh, Leo, that’s very thoughtful, but you know Addie’s adoption was closed and her mother passed away shortly after she was born—”

“But her Slayer grandparents are still alive, right?” he asked, holding up a finger. “And even if they choose to remain anonymous, I’m sure they would understand her desire to have something of her mother’s. Perhaps a ring or a trinket—I don’t know. Something that was important to her birth mom that I can give her on Valentine’s Day. I think it would make her really happy.”

“I’m sure it would,” she said, cupping his arm, “but closed adoptions are airtight. I can’t violate her birth mother’s family’s privacy, Leo.”

Resting his hands on her slight shoulders, he smiled. “You’re the only one who knows her birth family, Sadie. Adelyn has an intense need to understand her roots; to connect with parts of her past she can’t access. I know you understand that, considering what you went through to acquire the heirloom for Daphne that belonged to Nolan’s grandfather in England.”

Wrinkling her nose, she shook her head. “That’s the last time I ever tell you anything.” She swatted his chest. “And it was important to me that Daphne have something of Nolan’s heritage. Tordor and Esme were passing through England on their unification mission, and they offered to track down the heirloom for me.”

Leo cocked a brow. “Did they offer or did you ask them until they capitulated?”

Laughing, she lifted a shoulder. “Maybe a bit of both.”

“You and I both know I’m stubborn enough to wear you down until you do this for me, Sadie. Why not save us both the trouble and just say yes?”

Her lips fluttered as she contemplated. “Fine. I’ll approach her grandmother and see if she has anything. But this has to

stay between us,” she said, gesturing between them. “I’m violating tons of protocols by contacting someone involved in a closed adoption.”

Stepping back, Leo made an *X* over his heart. “Promise.”

“Dad!” Kellan called from the open doorway. “Tarin said I could have two lollipops!”

Sadie flashed a derisive grin. “You’d better take care of that. I’m on it. I’ll call you if and when I’m able to make progress.”

Drawing her into a firm hug, he whispered, “Thank you, Sadie. I owe you one.”

“Always,” she said, squeezing his waist before releasing him. “Now get that kid home. I can guarantee Tarin stuffed his pockets with candy.”

Leo’s features contorted into a playful grimace before he rushed to the doorway and scooped up his son. Balancing him on his hip, he waved goodbye to Sadie and headed home to his family.





## *Chapter 2*

Adelyn, daughter of Latimus and Lila, flitted around the kitchen as her children finished their dinner at the nearby table. It had been constructed by her bonded mate, along with most of the other furniture in their home...and the home itself. Leo was a talented craftsman and contractor, and the construction business he owned with Brecken was thriving.

Frowning, Addie slowly scooped the remaining chili she'd made for dinner into a container. Since the business was doing so well, there was no financial need for Leo to join the army. No, he just wanted to do that out of genuine honor.

It was extremely noble...and quite terrifying. Being the daughter of the greatest war commander in the kingdom had taught her that upholding one's principles could also get them killed. Every time her mother had put on a brave face and sent Latimus off to battle, Adelyn had stayed behind to see the fallout. Lila would pace and worry until Latimus eventually returned—and thank the goddess he'd always returned safely.

Many in their kingdom weren't so lucky.

Glancing at her children, Adelyn smiled at the tiny creatures who were a perfect amalgamation of her and Leo. They both had their parents' thick brown hair, while Briala had Adelyn's lavender eyes and Kellan had inherited Leo's deep blue orbs. They were her perfect innocent babies, and she wanted their family to remain in their little bubble free from war.

“Hey!” Kellan yelled, flinging a blob of chili over the table to land on his sister's cheek. “Stop kicking me under the table!”

Okay, maybe they weren't *perfect* children, she thought with an inward groan, but they were hers and Leo's and she loved them dearly.

"Excuse me, young man," she scolded, striding toward the table with the spoon in her hand. "Am I going to have to ground you for throwing food at your sister?"

"She kicked me!" he yelled, pointing at Briala.

"Did not!"

"Okay," Adelyn said, showing her palm. "I think dinner's over. No cookies tonight. You had enough sugar from the huge lollipop Sadie gave you earlier, and I know you snuck a lollipop to your sister too."

Kellan bit his lip as he glanced at Briala. She just flashed a knowing grin, and Adelyn knew the fight was over just as quickly as it had begun. Such was the way for her spirited children. One moment, they were in the throes of a heated argument, and the next, they were best friends.

Unable to control her smile, Adelyn decided that was fitting for her and Leo's offspring. After all, they'd sparred incessantly when they first met. Adelyn had shown up on his doorstep during a raging storm, and her grumpy mate had offered her shelter. Their attraction had been instantaneous—and their connection had been undeniable. Adelyn loved Leo with a voracity she treasured, which was why she didn't want Leo to join the army.

They'd just begun their lives together, and she selfishly wanted more.

That inner desire to clutch onto what she held dear had manifested into a rather heated argument a few days ago. Leo had informed her he wanted to join the reserves and that he planned on entering the next boot camp her brother Jack was holding in a few weeks.

"No," Addie said as she prepped for bed while they spoke. "I don't want my bonded in the army. I already live through enough fear around Dad and Jack."

“Sweetheart,” Leo said, his voice calm as he tried to soothe her. “You brought me into this world and now I have something to fight for.” He gestured toward the kids’ rooms. “It’s my duty to protect our family.”

“You do a fine job of that already,” she said, lifting her chin in the haughty way she couldn’t control when her temper flared. “And you already have a job.”

“It wouldn’t be for the money, Addie,” he said, sliding an arm around her waist as they stood by the bed. “I want to contribute to the kingdom. I want to be worthy of you and what we created here.”

Her heart cracked at his sincerity as she palmed his cheek. “No. I won’t ever agree to it. I don’t want to lose you, Leo. We need you.”

Anger clouded his features before he drew away. “I’m not asking your permission, Addie. I’m doing this and I’d like your support.”

Her cheeks heated as she bristled. “And if I don’t support this decision?”

“Then I guess we’re at an impasse.”

Fury ticked up her spine as she balled her fists at her sides. “Leo—”

“No,” he interjected, holding up a hand. “I don’t want to argue, and you’re not listening, so there’s no point in discussing this.” Snatching the pillow from the bed, he stuffed it under his arm. “Take some time to figure out if you really want to fight me on this.” Pivoting, he strode toward the door.

Adelyn picked up the remaining pillow and threw it at his head. Cursing, Leo turned back and jabbed his finger at her. “I’m sleeping on the couch so I don’t say something I’ll regret. When you let go of the stubborn witch routine and want to listen, I’ll be back.”

“You son of a bitch!” she hissed. “Don’t call me names—”

“You’re lucky I’m holding back my temper. There are a lot of things I want to call you right now since you’re really

peeing me off.” With a final nod, he exited the room, closing the door behind him.

Adelyn huffed and crumpled to the bed, burying her face in her hands as she struggled with deep emotion. She and Leo were passionate souls, and although they rarely fought, when they did cross that threshold, the arguments were intense.

She vehemently loved her strong, grumpy protector and would do anything to keep him out of harm’s way. Even during the angry moments when she, quite literally, wanted to strangle him.

“Can I wear the new jammies Aunt Callie gave me, Mommy?” Briala asked, drawing Adelyn back into the present moment.

“Sure, baby,” Adelyn said, taking the soft pajamas in her hand and leading her daughter to her bedroom. “Kellan? Are you brushing your teeth?” she called as she passed the bathroom.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Smiling, Adelyn helped Briala into the pajamas before sending her off to brush as well. Once the kids were set, Adelyn crawled on Briala’s bed to read to them. Leo had dropped Kellan off before heading back out to set the roof on a house he was finishing with Brecken. They wanted to set it after dark so it dried faster than it would under the blazing sunlight they experienced in their region of Etherya’s Earth.

Adelyn eventually noticed the kids’ eyes drooping and tucked Briala in before carrying Kellan to his room. After placing him under the covers, she sat on the edge of the bed and stroked his forehead.

“Good night, sweet boy.”

Kellan slowly blinked as he studied her. “Are you and Daddy still fighting?”

Emotion clogged her throat as she stroked his soft cheek. “Did you hear us arguing the other night?”

Brown hair shifted across the pillow as he nodded.

“I love your Daddy more than anything in the world,” she said, leaning down to kiss his forehead. “Along with you and your sister. Sometimes, mommies and daddies fight because they believe in different things.”

“Then you need to try and believe in the same things.”

Laughing at the simplicity of his statement, she nodded. “We do. I don’t want you to worry. Standing up for your beliefs makes you strong. It’s okay to fight as long as you make up after and say you’re sorry.”

“Like when I pulled Briala’s hair yesterday,” he said, frowning. “We fought but then I felt bad.”

“Exactly. You still love your sister, right?”

Contrition crossed his features as he nodded.

“And I still love Daddy.” Rising, she leaned over to place one last kiss on his forehead. “Sleep tight, sweetheart. Love you.”

His whispered “Love you” followed her across the room and out the door as she softly shut it behind her.

Exhausted, she finished cleaning up the kitchen before prepping for bed and sliding between the crisp sheets. She’d wanted to wait up for Leo—to tell him that Kellan was worried and they needed to find a resolution and move on—but she was so damn tired.

Settling into the comfortable mattress, she flipped to her side, curled her legs against her body and drifted into slumber.



Leo entered the house around two a.m., closing the door quietly so he didn’t wake the kids. After securing the locks, he turned off the stove light Adelyn had left on and trailed down the hallway. He checked on Briala and Kellan as he passed each room, a smile curving his lips at Kellan’s soft snores. When he reached the master bedroom, he clicked the door shut and walked toward the bed.

Perching beside his sleeping mate, he couldn't resist the urge to touch her. He tucked a thick curl behind her ear before gliding a finger across her jaw. Those gorgeous lavender eyes that invaded every dream since he first saw her slowly opened.

"Hey," she said, yawning as her hands rested between the pillow and her cheek. "Did you finish the roof?"

He nodded, tenderly stroking her face.

Drowsy eyes darted between his. "I'm still mad at you."

A deep chuckle welled in his chest. "I know."

Grinning, she playfully bit her lip. "We did say that being bonded wouldn't be easy."

"It's not so bad," he replied, leaning down to whisper, "except when you're being unreasonable."

"*Pfft.*" Mirth swam in her gaze before concern replaced it. "I can't lose you, Leo."

Nodding, he cupped her jaw. "I'm going to shower, and we'll make time to talk on Friday when I have the day off. We'll figure it out, little imp."

"Friday is Valentine's Day."

"Is it?" he asked, a smile tugging at his lips. "Are you into human traditions now?"

She shrugged. "I just think it's cute that some of the immortals have adopted it. But don't worry. I won't expect romance from you. Goddess forbid."

Leo playfully rolled his eyes at her teasing. "I'm romantic, woman. I lived in a solitary cabin for centuries, but I try. Give me some credit."

Her eyes drooped as she snuggled into the bed. "I guess you're okay. Go shower so you can cuddle with me. *That's* romantic."

Shooting her a sardonic glare, he rose and removed his clothes before stepping into the shower in the adjoining bathroom. As he washed off the grime of the day, Leo hoped Sadie would be able to grant his favor. He might not be the

king of romance, but he loved his bonded mate and knew a trinket from her birth mother would hold great importance for her.

Exhausted, he eventually slipped between the sheets and drew Adelyn close, splaying his hand between her breasts as he spooned her.

“I love you, Addie,” he whispered against her nape. “Even when you attack me with pillows.”

“You deserved it,” she said, laughter in her tone as she shimmied her back into his strong frame. “But I’m glad you’re back in the bed. You can stay...until you piss me off again.”

Snickering, he tightened his arm and buried his nose in her fragrant hair, content to lose himself in her scent as he succumbed to his dreams.





## *Chapter 3*

Sadie nervously approached the thatched-roof home that sat on the outskirts of Restia. Although she'd grown into her confidence in the years since she'd fallen in love with her husband and raised their daughter, apprehension prickled her skin at the task before her. Sadie was a rule follower, and breaching protocol to approach the birth family of a closed adoption was against her nature.

But she also believed family bonds were sacred. Leo's solemn appeal when he'd spoken of securing an artifact from Adelyn's birth mother had moved something deep in her core. She'd seen the same plea in his eyes that had reflected in her own when she'd asked Tordor and Esme to locate the trinket for Daphne.

That shared understanding had led her here—to the small home of the couple she hadn't seen in decades. Steeling herself, she lifted her fist and rapped on the wooden door.

She heard shuffling before the hinges creaked, revealing a woman with deep brown eyes and chestnut-colored hair the same shade as Adelyn's. Those eyes widened as a sharp intake of air passed through her lips.

“Sadie?”

“Hi, Marta,” she said, smiling. “Long time no see. You haven't been to the infirmary in ages so I trust you're doing well?”

“As well as can be,” she said with a nod. “Felton isn't here —”

“I came to speak to you,” she interjected softly.

Relief washed over Sadie at the man's absence. Her recollection of him from Adelyn's adoption was of a cold, hardened man intent on ensuring his daughter gave up her child for adoption. Marta, on the other hand, had always seemed much more empathetic.

"Is everything okay?"

Nodding, Sadie lifted her eyebrows. "Do you mind if I come inside for a few minutes?"

Marta studied her before drawing back and ushering her inside. "It's a bit of a mess. I'm going to mop before Felton gets home."

"It's a beautiful home," Sadie said, gesturing toward the loveseat. "Can I sit here?"

"Oh, of course. Where are my manners?" She led Sadie to the plushy seat before lowering into the nearby chair. "Do you want some tea?"

"I'm fine." Rubbing her damp palms on her thighs, Sadie decided to dive right in. "I'm here to ask a favor for Adelyn."

Emotion clouded the woman's features as her gaze turned wistful. "How is she? Did she send you here?"

"No," Sadie said, shaking her head as she crossed her ankle over her knee. "Her husband did, actually."

Reclining in the chair, Marta covered her mouth as tears clouded her eyes. "My baby's baby has a husband."

"Or her *bonded mate*, as the Vampyres call it," Sadie said, flashing a grin. "And he's a good one. He loves Adelyn with a deep passion and wants to do something special for her. Since understanding her heritage is important to Addie, Leo wants to give her something of Ellania's."

Marta gnawed her lip as she considered. "Isn't it against the terms of the adoption to ask me that?"

"Yes." Squaring her shoulders, Sadie held firm. "And this is the first time I've ever breached the closed adoption rules. If Miranda knew, she might sanction me."

“The queen holds you in high regard,” Marta said with a soft smile. “I’m sure she’d let it slide.”

Chuckling, Sadie ran a hand through her short hair. “Maybe. I think Felton would be quite upset, which is why I’m happy he’s not here—although I have no wish to lie to him.” She held up a finger. “I’m just glad I had the luck to stop by when he wasn’t home.”

Marta’s fingers absently plucked a wayward strand on her skirt. “He was livid when Ellania got pregnant. She was so young, and he was sure her life would be ruined...”

“I understand,” Sadie said, scooting closer and placing a sympathetic hand over the woman’s knee. “These situations are difficult for everyone. You did the best you could.”

“Ellania swore she loved Kal. She would plead for me to let her meet him in their secret spot. Felton discovered their meetings and forbade her.” Covering her face, she began to weep. “And then she got sick...”

Rising, Sadie circled the chair and slid her arm around the woman’s shaking shoulders. “There, there,” she said, rubbing her back in long, soothing strokes. “These things happen, Marta. It wasn’t your fault.”

Eventually, the woman’s sobs subsided, and she reached for a tissue from the end table. “And now she’s gone, and her baby has a husband...and babies of her own. Goddess, I wish I could hug them...”

“If you want me to set up a meeting, I’m happy to—”

“No,” she said, violently shaking her head. “Felton would have my hide. He blames Kal for Ellania’s death. It’s completely irrational, but we all grieve in the ways we can. Having distance from Adelyn helps him compartmentalize the pain.”

“But what about you?”

Sighing, Marta wiped her nose. “He’s my husband, Sadie, and we decided this chapter was closed decades ago. I keep an eye on Adelyn through all the royal missives I read in the paper, and that’s enough. She looks so much like Ellania...”

Sniffing, she shook her head. “I just can’t reopen that chapter.”

“Okay,” Sadie said, squeezing the woman’s shoulder before returning to sit on the couch. “But your reaction gives me a glimmer of hope you’ll help me.”

The corner of Marta’s lips ticked up before she rose. “Give me a minute?”

Sadie nodded as the woman headed into the adjoining room. Returning, she held up a silver necklace with a small purple quartz pendant.

“Kal gave this to Ellania,” the woman said, her voice gravelly with emotion. “The gift of a young man who fell in love with my daughter.” She affectionately stroked the necklace.

Sadie observed the glimmering silver chain. “It’s pretty. I imagine he made it for her?”

Marta’s lips pursed as she nodded. Gripping Sadie’s hand, she placed the necklace in her palm before closing her fingers over it. “Give it to Adelyn’s husband. Let him know it was a symbol of what her parents created together. My beautiful granddaughter.”

Tears welled in Sadie’s eyes as she clenched the necklace. “Are you sure? This must hold great value for you—”

“I’m sure. It already belongs to Adelyn. Somehow, I knew it would make its way to her one day.”

Sadie’s lips warbled as she smiled. “Leo will be thrilled, and I know Adelyn will treasure it. Thank you, Marta.”

“Will you do me a favor?”

“Anything,” Sadie replied.

“Squeeze Adelyn a little bit harder next time you hug her. Maybe she’ll sense it’s from me. And hug my great-grandbabies too.”

Unable to control the surging emotion within, Sadie swiped away an errant tear. “I will. Do you want me to stay for a

while longer? We could have tea if you like?”

Marta anxiously glanced toward the door. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Felton will be home soon, and although I have no wish to lie to him either, I think I’ll keep your visit between us. I love my husband, but I’ve learned that we all have to choose our battles in marriage. Is that terrible?”

“Not at all,” Sadie said, drawing her in for a hug. “Some secrets need to be kept.”

After one last squeeze, Marta led Sadie to the door. When she’d taken a few steps across the gravel trail, Marta called her name.

“Yes?” Sadie asked, turning back.

“Give me a few decades. Or maybe a few centuries. One day, I might get Felton to come around. If that day comes, I’d love to meet Adelyn and her family. *Our* family,” she finished softly.

“Take all the time you need,” Sadie said with a salute. “Don’t be a stranger, Marta. And thank you.”

Marta waved before shutting the door. Lifting her face to the sky, Sadie breathed a sigh of relief. Clutching the necklace tight, she headed home to hug her husband and daughter, thankful for her own family after the emotional visit.



## Chapter 4

On Friday, Adelyn picked up the kids from daycare after completing her Nymph education class. She taught the weekly class at Lynia's middle school, and it was broadcast to the entire kingdom. Toross was slowly teaching Adelyn about the Nymph's vast and storied history, and Adelyn was intent on ensuring the kingdom understood her people's heritage. There was still much to learn, but the task was important to her and would only enhance connection within the realm.

After taking the children to lunch, she drove them to her brother's house as a mischievous smile curved her lips. Jack had never taken them for the whole weekend, but Adelyn was craving some alone time with her mate. Her parents usually performed babysitting duty, but her brother had offered and the kids adored spending time with him.

When she pulled into the driveway, the front door swung open and Jack stepped onto the porch. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he asked, "Is that my favorite niece and nephew?"

The kids leapt from the four-wheeler and sprinted to the cabin before jumping into his arms. Jack exhaled an "*oomph*" as he scooped them up.

"Can we make smores, Uncle Jack?" Brialia asked. "Mommy packed marshmallows."

"Heck yes, we can make smores," he said, smacking a kiss on her cheek, and then Kellan's, before setting them down.

"Yes, you'll be able to make lots of smores since Uncle Jack lives in a tiny cabin like a true bachelor who refuses to grow up," Adelyn teased, climbing the porch stairs and extending

the kids' bags. "Sleeping outside leads to lots of smores-making."

"Hey," he said, frowning as he took the packs. "Why are you insulting your amazing brother who also happened to offer free babysitting?" He covered his heart. "Now I'm thinking I should charge you."

Adelyn swatted his chest. "Because you need to find a mate and have a few of these." She gestured toward the kids. "They're awesome. You'll see."

"I'm all set," he said, lifting a sardonic brow. "But these two are pretty cute. I'll keep them for a few days." He ruffled Kellan's hair.

"Seriously, I really appreciate this, Jack. Mom and Dad are at Uteria this weekend, helping with the royal Valentine's Day fundraiser, and Leo's parents are at their house in the woods for a month. You were definitely my *third* choice to babysit," she teased.

"Were you this annoying when we were kids?" he teased, rubbing his jaw. "I only remember slightly hating you."

Adelyn playfully rolled her eyes. "*Anyway*. Since you only have one room, I packed the kids' bags with everything they'll need to camp outside. Are you all excited to camp with Uncle Jack?"

"Yes!" Brialala and Kellan exclaimed, jumping up and down.

"They're all fed and ready to exhaust the crap out of you. Have fun." She patted his arm.

"Dude, this gets me out of having to attend the fundraiser. You're a lifesaver." Crouching down, he asked, "Do you all want to head out back and start stacking the logs? We can build the bonfire as soon as it gets dark."

Their tiny heads bobbed before they both turned to Adelyn for one last hug. Squeezing them tight, her heart thudded as they raced toward the back of the house.

"They'll be fine," Jack said, cupping her shoulder. "You and Leo can relax. I've got this."



“It’s hard to leave them, but we need some adult time. We’ve got some shit to discuss, and I’d also like to have sex without worrying the kids will walk in.”

“TMI,” Jack said, plugging his ears. “But I know Leo wants to join the reserves. He asked about the open spot in my next boot camp. I’m assuming you said no.”

“Of course I said no. He’s not a soldier, Jack.”

“Not yet,” Jack said, lifting a shoulder. “But Alrec taught him how to fight, and he’s tough, Addie. You forced him to live in the kingdom. Now, he just wants to defend it. Sounds pretty honorable to me.”

“I didn’t force him to do anything,” she said, stomping her foot. “He eventually understood there was more to life than living in the middle of nowhere. That’s all.”

“Mmm hmm.” Jack’s lips thinned.

Sighing, Adelyn rubbed the back of her neck. “I just wanted him to have a full life. To build a life with me.” Lowering her gaze, her features fell. “I didn’t think that was so awful...”

“Hey, stop making me feel bad,” Jack said, drawing her into his side. “You two obviously worked it out, and it seems like you’re happy. You’re happy, right?”

Adelyn nodded. “I love him so much, Jack. If he dies...” Fear snaked up her spine and she shook it away.

“We all face danger in our own ways, Addie. But you come from a family of soldiers.” Placing his fingers under her chin, he forced her to meet his gaze. “And your bonded mate wants to fight with us. I’d be honored to train him and have him by my side. I hope we never have to use our skills, but we’ve all read the prophecies.”

Adelyn recalled the Elven prophecies that foretold of one final future battle, although the details were cryptic. “It’s hard to imagine since Callie defeated Bakari.”

“The prophecy says there will be peace before the final war. And who knows? It could all be hogwash, but if Leo wants to

train, wouldn't you rather he learn now than when we're thrust into war?"

Expelling a deep breath, she nodded. "I guess. When did you start making sense? Symon is usually the one with the brains."

"Okay, I'm kicking you out before you piss me off more and I give the kids back," he joked. Ushering her down the porch stairs, he gripped her shoulders. "Have fun. You're picking up the kids around noon on Sunday, right?"

Nodding, she drew him into a hug. "Thank you." Drawing back, she flashed a grin. "Speaking of fun, do you have a spare pair of handcuffs?"

Jack grimaced. "I don't even want to think about what you plan to do with them. But, yes, I actually do. They're in there." He tilted his head toward the nearby shed. "Grab them if you want, but I need them back eventually."

"You're the best. I only like Symon *slightly* better than you now."

"Get out of here," he said, playfully shoving her. "I'll see you on Sunday." Waving, he walked behind the house to find the kids.

Adelyn headed toward the shed, finding the handcuffs hanging from the wall beside some rope. Contemplating, she grabbed the rope too, for good measure. Tossing both items in the four-wheeler, she hopped behind the wheel and revved the engine, already anticipating the sexy times she was going to have with her hot Vampyre.

*After* they discussed the heavy stuff.

Ready to resolve their issues, Adelyn's hair whipped in the breeze as she drove home.



Leo strode into Sadie's infirmary on Friday, excitement thrumming in his veins. She'd called him earlier in the week to let him know she'd procured the necklace from Adelyn's birth grandmother, and he couldn't wait to give it to her.

Not romantic? Leo huffed as he spotted Sadie heading down the hallway. He'd show his pretty little mate exactly how romantic he could be.

"Sadie?" he called, rounding the corner to her office. "I didn't see Tarin at the front desk, so I headed back—"

"Oh!" Sadie exclaimed, her cheeks reddening as she gazed at him over Nolan's shoulder. She was perched on the edge of her desk, her legs draped around her husband's waist.

"Looks like I interrupted more than a kiss," Leo said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Sorry, Nolan."

Nolan chuckled and released his wife, placing his arm around her shoulders to steady her. "That's what we get for being naughty in the infirmary. Right, dear?"

"*You* were being naughty." She playfully swiped his chest before hopping down from the desk. "And you're going to be late for the clinic at Lymia. I'll see you when I get home."

Nolan leaned down and pecked her lips. "Happy Valentine's Day, sweetheart. I hope you like the flowers."

Sadie lovingly gazed at the bouquet on her desk. "They're gorgeous. Now, get out of here so I can concentrate." She shooed him away.

Nolan patted Leo's shoulder as he breezed by. "Good to see you, Leo."

"Take care, Nolan."

Once they were alone, Leo flashed a grin. "Sorry, Sadie. Didn't mean to ruin the fun."

"My husband knows the office isn't the place for stolen kisses," she said, although her tone was affectionate. Walking behind her desk, she lifted the bouquet and inhaled. "But man, I like it when he breaks the rules."

"Never saw him as much of a rule breaker, but I've been wrong before."

Her eyes sparkled as she set down the flowers and reached inside the top desk drawer. "Oh, you'd be very surprised."

Clearing her throat, she shook her head. “Anyway, I think you’ve come for this.” Lifting a tiny pouch, she drew it open and shook out a necklace on her palm.

Leo approached, gazing at the chain that held a small purple stone encased in silver. Running his finger over it, he couldn’t contain his smile. “It’s pretty.”

“I think of how young Kal was when he gave this to her,” she said reverently. “A simple gift encompassing the stone of his people. It’s quite meaningful.”

Leo’s fingers encircled the necklace as he drew it up to examine it. “Adelyn is going to love it...and probably cry for twenty damn minutes,” he teased. “Which doesn’t seem romantic, but I think it will do the trick.”

“It’s such a thoughtful gesture, Leo.” Sadie patted his arm. “Well done.”

“You made it happen, Sadie. I don’t know how to repay you.”

“Just make our girl happy. She deserves it. You both do.”

Nodding, he placed the necklace back in the pouch and tucked it in his pocket. “Sometimes, I think she feels guilty. Like she forced me to move back here and that I’m not happy. But that couldn’t be further from the truth. I actually feel like I belong for the first time in my life, and that’s something worth fighting for; worth defending. That’s why I want to fight for our people. Does that make sense?”

“Of course it does. You two just need to talk. Jack has the kids this weekend, right?”

“Yes. I think he’s as happy as we are to skip the Valentine’s fundraiser.”

“Well, then, it looks like I’m not the only one getting naughty this weekend.”

Laughing, Leo cocked a brow. “Let’s hope not.” He pulled her into a tight hug. “Thank you, Sadie. You’re amazing. If you ever need anything, please ask. I want to repay the favor.”

Drawing back, she cupped his cheeks. “Just remember to communicate. It’s a lesson Nolan and I learned early on, and it’s done wonders for our marriage. You and Adelyn are kindred souls, but even soul mates get their wires crossed sometimes. Talk it out and remember to listen too.”

“Will do,” Leo said, backing away with a salute.

“And I’d tell you not to be grumpy, but Adelyn has confided in me many times that she likes your grumpy side.”

A chuckle welled in his chest. “For some reason, she does. See you soon, Sadie.”

With one final wave, he exited the office, anticipation swelling in his chest at seeing his bonded mate’s smile when he returned home with her mother’s necklace.



## Chapter 5

Adelyn scurried around the house, making sure everything was clean and the toys were put away. After all, having toys strewn around wasn't exactly sexy, and she was ready to blow Leo's socks off.

At first, she thought they would talk and hash everything out. But when she pulled the new sexy lingerie she'd purchased on her last shopping excursion with Callie and Rinada out of the back of the dresser, she'd changed her mind. Holding up the black, lacy material, Adelyn decided she'd seduce her bonded mate first.

Sexy times, then talking. Hell, Leo hated to talk anyway, so she figured he'd be on board.

Once everything was tidied up, she slipped on the nightie and glanced at herself in the mirror that hung above the dresser. Running her hands over her abdomen, she noted the extra inches that had landed there since she'd had the twins.

Wrinkling her nose, she sighed. "He always says he loves your curves, Addie. Get over it."

Her palms continued down the silky fabric, reaching her thighs and the dimples that resided there. She'd had those for ages, and Leo swore he loved every hollow and crevice, so she bolstered her confidence and straightened her spine.

"You will *not* spend the weekend doubting your appearance. It's time to show your husband how to celebrate Valentine's Day properly." With one final nod at her reflection, she headed back to the main room.

Grabbing the handcuffs she'd borrowed from Jack on the kitchen counter, she strode into the living room and lay across

the couch. Positioning her legs across the soft fabric, she rested her head on her fist as her elbow dug into the pillow. Keys jangled in the lock, and the front doorknob turned before Leo entered and shut the door behind him.

Lifting the handcuffs with one finger, she let them dangle as her lips curved into a sultry grin. “Welcome home, dear.”

Leo’s eyes widened as he froze. Those deep ocean-blue eyes roved over every inch of her skin, setting it on fire before he breathed, “Holy shit.”

A low-toned chuckle escaped her lips as the handcuffs swung from her finger. “I decided we can talk after we have some fun. If you’re up for it.” She cocked an eyebrow.

He removed a tiny pouch from his pocket and set it on the counter. “That’s for you. I’m going to give it to you later.”

“Aw, my sweet husband,” she said, rubbing her legs together as he advanced toward her. “So romantic in his own way—”

Leo scooped her up, causing her to yelp as he tossed her over his shoulder. He placed a firm smack on her ass before gripping the flesh to steady her as he carried her to the bedroom.

Adelyn’s back hit the mattress before Leo drew both arms over her head. Securing her wrists in one hand, he leaned over her, his warm breath rushing over her face.

“That’s enough talking for now. Shut those pretty lips and I’ll show you some romance, baby.”

Adelyn extended her tongue, licking her lips in a slow, measured swipe. Desire flared in Leo’s eyes, causing arousal to gush between her thighs. Arching toward him, she whispered the two little words she knew would push him over the edge.

“Make me.”

His deep growl reverberated in every inch of her body as he yanked the handcuffs from her grasp. He wasn’t gentle as he secured one wrist and then the other, anchoring her to the bedpost above the pillow. Adelyn reveled in the gruff way he



handled her—she always had. Something about the way her mate’s body vibrated with unchecked lust when he was about to fuck her opened a primal desire that hadn’t existed before him.

*Nothing* remotely close to the burning passion she felt for Leo had existed before him.

Leo loomed over her, slowly tracing his palms over her extended arms, then down her sides, causing tiny bumps to prickle on her skin in their wake. Heavy breaths exited his lips as he caressed the fabric. “It’s silky.”

“Mmm hmm,” she said, wiggling since the handcuffs prevented much of her movement. “You like it?”

“I fucking love it,” he breathed, running his hands over her thighs. “You’re so pretty, baby.”

Lust roared at his silken tone and the approval in his voice. “I never lost the baby weight when I had the kids—”

“Shh—” he interjected, sliding his hands between her thighs and opening her legs. “You know I love your body, Addie. Every single inch.”

Expelling a wistful sigh at the reverent way he gazed at her, she spread her legs wider, offering herself to him. “Take me hard,” she said, her voice raspy with desire. “I want you.”

Leo’s gaze cemented to hers as he dragged his fingers through her slick folds. Blue eyes simmered as he slipped a finger inside her. “No panties? That’s very naughty.”

Adelyn bit her lip, anticipating the “punishment” she was about to receive. Pushing into his hand, she undulated her hips.

A curse left his lips before he removed his finger. Lifting it to his mouth, his eyes simmered as he licked it dry. Shivering, she waited as he tore off his clothes, tossing them on the nearby chair before he climbed atop her quaking frame.

“Such a bad little Nymph,” he whispered, placing his knees at her sides as he inched up her body. His cock jutted from the nest of hair at the juncture of his thighs, thick and turgid as he

advanced. Placing the stiff flesh over her lips, he commanded, “Open up.”

Adelyn flattened her lips, controlling her urge to smile as his nostrils flared. Goddess, he was going to destroy her—and she was ready.

His broad hand slid under her chin, gripping her jaw and forcing her to open. Leo’s thick cock slipped between her lips, and she closed around him, loving the taste of him inside her wet mouth.

“You little tease,” he gritted, sliding his swollen flesh over her tongue. His hips moved in a sexy rhythm as he set the pace. “You like it when I make you close that pretty mouth don’t you?”

She nodded around him, hollowing her cheeks to increase the pleasure. A ragged groan leapt from his chest as he increased the pace, his hips forcing his cock farther back in her mouth with each deep stroke.

Sliding his hand to her hair, he gripped the curls, tugging her head back to give him greater access. “Fuck, I miss this. It’s been too long since I had your mouth around me like this.”

Adelyn relaxed her throat, staring at him through desire-laden eyes as she welcomed him deep. He groaned her name—his tone raspy and ragged—as he inched past the tight ring of her throat. “Geezus, Addie. You take me so well, sweetheart. That’s my good little imp.”

Her body flushed at his praise, acknowledging how much she craved it. Craved *him*. She’d never connected with anyone sexually the way she did with her mate. His muscles rippled under the skin of his chest and arms, evidence of his reciprocal desire.

Adelyn purred around him, ensuring she remained relaxed to give him greater access.

“I’m going to come down that tight throat, baby, and then I’m going to feast on you.” Tremors racked her frame at the silken words. “Swallow me whole, Addie. Good girl.”

His other hand speared into her curls, holding her head immobile as he fucked her mouth with measured but relentless thrusts. Short, labored breaths shot from his lungs as he moaned her name...

Eventually, Adelyn watched his body tense, admiring the beauty of his toned frame and tanned skin. Love and desire warred deep in her belly as pulsing jets of release shot down her throat. Leo groaned, his fingers tightening in her hair in the intricate balance of pleasure and pain her mate always bestowed when he loved her. She swallowed every drop, accepting her intense desire to please him. It roared inside as he emptied his release, sighing her name as his cock jerked between her lips.

“Fuck, Addie,” he whispered, releasing her hair and running a finger over her cheek. “You’re perfect.”

She smiled around his sensitive flesh as it began to soften. Adelyn knew he didn’t need much recovery time, so she prepared herself for an assault from his talented tongue on her slick core before he fucked her properly.

“I see those dirty thoughts,” he teased, popping himself from her mouth as he leaned down to kiss her lips. “My proper little princess...” His lips kissed a path down her neck to the valley between her breasts. Staring deep into her eyes, he trailed his mouth to her breast. “Nobody knows how naughty you are, do they?”

With those gorgeous eyes locked onto hers, he closed his mouth over her nipple.

“Oh, goddess,” she cried, arching toward him as she squirmed. “Leo...”

His tongue swirled around the pebbled bud before dousing it with his self-healing saliva. Taking it between his teeth, he gently bit the tender flesh before tugging it, sending shards of desire through Adelyn’s body.

Having her hands restrained created an extra level of vulnerability which, in turn, led to extra sensation in her already-sensitive nipples. Her hips bucked violently, back and

forth, as Leo sucked and played with her nipple. When her body was a mass of frayed nerves, he kissed a path to her other nipple and repeated the delicious torture.

Eventually, he took pity on her throbbing nipples and continued a lazy trail down to her navel. After dipping his tongue inside, causing her to moan, he moved lower and slid his arms under her thighs. Draping her legs over his broad shoulders, he buried his face in her sopping wet pussy and began to feast as he'd so passionately promised.

Adelyn whimpered, arching into his talented tongue as it delved between her slick folds. His moan rumbled against her sensitive flesh as he lapped her up, drinking her essence as blood rushed to her clit. Her arousal permeated the room, and Leo briefly ceased the ministrations to gather the silken honey on his fingers before moving to her swollen bud.

He circled her clit, his fingers skilled and unyielding, as he resumed kissing her wet opening. His tongue speared inside, fucking her in long, deep strokes as he claimed her.

"Damn it, I need my hands," she pleaded, desperate to clasp the thick strands of his hair as he tongue-fucked her.

His murmured denial against her pussy only managed to inflame her desire as she accepted her loss of control. She only ever gave control to him, and goddess, the reward was magnificent. Closing her eyes, she gave in to the pleasure, opening herself to him in every way possible.

Approval laced his tone as his words of desire and praise mingled with her passionate cries. Squeezing her eyelids tight, she concentrated on the deft movement of his fingers on her clit...and the pleasurable slide of his tongue inside her...

Ecstasy exploded in the base of her spine as the orgasm ripped free, drawn from her by Leo's expert strokes and possessive claiming. Wet, slippery arousal flowed from her body as she fell into the abyss, pushed over the edge by the man who owned her soul.

Her body quaked and shuddered, her still-stinging nipples pebbling in the cool air as Leo drank the evidence of her

desire. Vampyres were primal creatures, and she felt thoroughly claimed as her body grew lax with sated desire.

Lifting his head, Leo's lips formed a satisfied grin. His confidence and dominant nature had drawn her like a moth to a flame from the first moment they met. It should've put her off, but damn, she'd always loved his self-assurance.

"Someone's awfully proud of himself," she teased, rubbing her calf against his shoulder.

His lips twitched as he carefully maneuvered himself up her body, positioning himself between her thighs. The head of his cock found her core as he rested his lips on hers.

"I'm always proud when I make you come," he murmured, his lips brushing hers as his now-swollen cock nudged at her entrance. "I was born to suck your pretty little pussy, Addie."

Her ravaged body trembled at the dirty words before he began to ease inside her. Leo took his time, sliding his fingers into her hair once more as he worked his hips. The slide of his steel against her wet folds filled every crevice, and she drank in the desire that lurked in his smoldering eyes.

"How long can Jack keep the kids?" he teased, softly kissing her as he loved her. "A few weeks?"

She playfully bit his lip as he chuckled.

Craving a deeper connection, she wrapped her leg around his waist, tugging him closer as he pushed against the spot that drove her wild.

His lips grazed her jaw before moving to the pulsing vein at her neck. Adelyn's curls shifted across the pillow as she angled her head, offering her lifeforce to him.

Wet laps of his tongue swiped over her skin before he plunged his fangs into her flesh. Thick pulls dragged blood from her straining body as his cock hammered the spot that was suddenly filled with a thousand inflamed nerve endings.

Their bodies melded as sweat coated their skin. Leo's heady scent encompassed her, threatening to drown her in a pool of

limitless passion. They moved in tandem, Adelyn reveling in their bond, until their ravaged bodies could take no more.

An intense tingling resonated at the base of Adelyn's spine before she arched her back, her mouth flying open in a wordless shout of unyielding pleasure. Leo tensed below her before the dam broke free. Clutching her with his fingers and strong thighs, he poured his release into her shuddering frame.

They came, violent and raw, each uttering the other's name from trembling lips. Wave after wave of endless pleasure ricocheted through Adelyn's body as her mate collapsed above her. His weight against her flushed skin was heavy, but not uncomfortable, and she sighed as contentment washed over her.

Leo's face was buried in her neck, and he softly licked her wounds closed. They lay still for a small eternity, sweat mingling as they regained their breath.

"Where's the key?" Leo mumbled into her neck.

"On the bedside table."

Reaching over, he patted the table, finding the key before lifting it to the handcuffs. After releasing her wrists, he kissed each one, his eyebrows drawing together at the red bands on her skin that had formed from the pressure.

"I'm okay," she reassured him, drawing him down to cuddle. She slid her leg over his thigh, pulling him close, aligning the front of her body with his. They gazed into each other's eyes, cheeks resting on the pillow as they caressed each other in the aftermath.

"The handcuffs were hot," he said, waggling his brows. "And the silky lingerie. I did *not* expect to come home to that."

Addie bit her lip, her cheeks reddening as she grinned. "I was hoping you'd think so. I wanted to seduce you."

"Mission accomplished." He kissed the tip of her nose. "And you never answered me about the kids."

Laughing, she shook her head on the pillow. “You know they’re coming home on Sunday, but that gives us two days to do whatever we want.” Tightening her leg around his back, she cupped his cheek. “And you’d miss them if they were gone any longer. We both would.”

He nodded as his hand trailed lazily over the curve where her back met the swell of her ass. “They’re pretty cute. I give you all the credit.”

“They’re our mini-mes” she said, smiling with affection as she always did when she thought of the tiny creatures she’d created with the man she loved. “Our own little family. It’s so special. Two adopted kids who finally have our own babies...”

“Okay, don’t cry,” he teased, swiping away the tear that trailed down her cheek. “They’re little heathens sometimes too. But damn, I love them more than anything in the world. And their mama,” he finished, love etching his features as he stroked her.

Inhaling a deep breath, she studied him. “I was a *bit* unyielding on the military discussion. I see that now. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He pressed a tender kiss to her lips. “I probably could’ve broached the subject in a more thoughtful way.”

“Well, no one expects my grumpy Vampyre to be eloquent. Goddess forbid.”

Rolling his eyes at her teasing, he palmed her ass and drew her into his body. “You’ve given me something to fight for, Addie, and I want to do my part. I finally feel at home in this world. You need to let me honor that.”

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed her fear, along with the surging emotion that he felt comfortable in the kingdom. “You have no idea how much it means to hear you say that. Sometimes, I worry you resent me for forcing you to live here.”

His eyebrows drew together as he frowned. “You didn’t force me. It was time for me to come back. *I* made that choice, and I’ve never been happier.”

“Are you sure?” she whispered.

“Yes, woman,” he said, lightly slapping her butt. “You were the pain in the ass I needed to get my shit together and become the man I needed to be. And now, we have the kids, and I love the life we’ve built. The one we’ll continue to build together.”

“And I support you whatever you choose, but please promise me you’ll be careful. I’m terrified to have another person I love in the military. Of course I’m proud of Dad and Jack, but it’s hard not to worry.”

“I promise.”

She arched a sardonic eyebrow. “And I guess I’ll have to take care of the kids while you’re away at boot camp for three weeks?”

He flashed a sheepish grin. “I’ll make it up to you. You can take as many spa days with your cousins as you want when I finish training.”

“And you’ll have to report for reserve training every third weekend of the month for eternity. You’re really going to owe me, buddy.”

Laughing, he pressed his forehead to hers. “Name your price.”

Cuddling closer, she grazed his lips with hers. “I want another baby.”

A long, slow breath escaped his lips. “Already?”

She nodded against him. “Already.”

Leo drew her into a sweet kiss before answering. “Done. You know I can’t deny you anything, woman.”

Snuggling into him, her eyelids fluttered as sleep tugged at her consciousness. “I was counting on it.”

His deep chuckle surrounded her as she melted against his warm body, sliding into oblivion as he held her.





Leo stood in the kitchen, fiddling with the necklace as he examined it. He'd left Adelyn asleep in the bed and thrown on a pair of sweatpants to grab them both some water. As he traced the lavender stone, he wondered when he should give it to her. Tomorrow morning? Or should he take her to dinner and give it to her in a more formal setting? The woman did always chide him for not being romantic enough.

"Whatcha got there?" Adelyn asked, her voice heavy with sleep as she trailed into the kitchen. She'd thrown on one of his t-shirts, which dwarfed her, making her look adorable. Taking in her mussed hair and gorgeous lavender eyes, he decided to go for it.

"I got you a present. I thought it would be romantic for Valentine's Day, but I hope it doesn't make you sad. I was trying to do something special for you."

"Aw, I'm sure I'll love it." She advanced, curiosity in her gaze as she craned her neck. "Is it a necklace?"

"Yes." Facing her, he balanced it on his palm, extending it so it shone in the light. "With a Nymph quartz."

"Oh, wow." Her eyebrows lifted as she tenderly ran her finger over the silver chain. "Did you get it from Toross? I don't understand."

"I got it from Sadie...who got it from your birth grandmother."

Her quick inhale sounded before she lifted her gaze to his. "What?"

"I wanted you to have something of Ellania's. Something you could cherish and maybe pass on to Briala one day. Kal gave it to Elliana when they were happy and deeply in love."

Adelyn's chin warbled as she caressed the stone. "Oh, Leo. That's so thoughtful. I..." She worked her jaw, attempting to speak as tears sparkled in her eyes. "I never thought I'd possess anything from my birth mother."

He gently turned her so he could drape the chain around her neck. Clasp it, he kissed her hair and slid his arms around

her waist. “Now, you have something from each birth parent and each adoptive parent. I hope it makes you happy, baby.”

She turned to face him, cupping his jaw as tears streamed down her cheeks. “Leo...”

“Are these sad tears or happy tears?” he asked, his tone teasing as he studied her. “I never know with you.”

“Happy tears, of course!” She swatted his shoulder. “This is the most thoughtful gift anyone has ever given me. How did you get Sadie to bypass the closed adoption terms?”

“With a bit of negotiation and a lot of begging,” he said, arching a brow. “But she eventually came around. I might owe her our next child, so think carefully before you decide you want to have another one.”

Tossing her head back, Adelyn let out a joyful laugh. “That’s amazing. I guess you can be charming when you put your mind to it.”

His expression turned deadpan. “Funny.”

Her silken laughter surrounded them as she encircled his neck. “Seriously, Leo. This is amazing.” Rising to her toes, she pecked his lips. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

He rested his forehead against hers, stroking her hair as she gently ran her fingers over the necklace.

“Did I tell you that I also snuck some rope from Jack’s shed?”

Leo nipped her lips. “No, but I’m sure we can manage to put it to good use.”

Their chuckles mingled as they slowly swayed under the dim kitchen light, content to hold each other and bask in the tender moment.

Eventually, he lifted her into his arms and carried her to bed. When she was wearing nothing but the silver chain with the pretty stone, he made love to her again, overcome with the emotion in her purple irises.

It was all he needed to feel complete, and Leo would continue to strive to make his gorgeous mate happy for the infinite tomorrows they would share upon Etherya's Earth.



## Epilogue

Adelyn extended her arms, air jetting from her lungs when Kellan jumped into her embrace.

“Hey, baby. Did you miss us?”

He nodded and pointed at Jack. “Uncle Jack let us have so many smores, *and* we got to play in the river and build mud castles.”

“Oh, I can see that by your clothes and the way you smell,” she said, wrinkling her nose as she observed his mud-stained clothes. “Thanks a lot, Uncle Jack.”

“Hey, the terms of our agreement only stipulated I keep them alive,” he said, showing his palms. “Keeping them clean was never discussed.”

Rolling her eyes, Adelyn set Kellan on the ground, observing him greet Leo as she picked up Briala. “And look at you. I think you built some mud castles too, hmm?” She tickled her stomach through the dirty clothes.

Briala beamed. “It was fun. You should play with us next time, Mommy.”

“I think I’ll pass, but I do appreciate Uncle Jack taking care of you. What do you say?”

“Thank you, Uncle Jack!” the kids exclaimed in unison.

“You’re welcome, super awesome kids who I’m *really* excited to send home.” White fangs flashed under his freckles and red hair as he grinned. “It was a great weekend, but I’m exhausted. How do you do it every freaking day?”

“Ask her,” Leo said, balancing Kellan on his hip as he gestured with his thumb toward Adelyn. “She wants to have

another one.”

“They’re little angels, aren’t you, sweetheart?” she asked Briala, playfully nudging the little girl’s nose.

“This is pretty, Mommy,” Briala said, touching the necklace as her eyes grew wide. “Did Daddy give it to you?”

“He sure did. It belonged to your grandma Ellania. Remember me telling you about her?”

Briala nodded.

“How’d you manage that?” Jack asked Leo, his eyebrows lifting in admiration.

“Long story. I’ll tell you next time we grab a beer. Speaking of that, we’re going to be spending more time together. I got approval from my toughest drill sergeant.” He tilted his head toward Adelyn as she swatted his shoulder.

“He’s kidding—I think,” she said, shooting him a droll look, “but I’ve agreed to let him join the reserves. You’d better take care of him,” she cautioned Jack.

“He can take care of himself, but we’ll get him trained and ready. You can submit the paperwork online, and I’ll approve it, Leo.”

“Thanks, Jack. I’m honored to follow in Dad’s footsteps and do my part for the kingdom.”

“And Mommy is going to get lots and lots of spa days when Daddy is done training,” Adelyn said, waggling her eyebrows as Briala giggled.

“The kids were fed about an hour ago, but it was mostly smores and cupcakes, so I’d serve up some veggies for dinner,” Jack said, smiling. “I had fun, guys. Let’s do it again soon.”

Adelyn and Leo set the twins down so they could give Jack one last hug.

After the final goodbyes, Adelyn extended her hands to her babies, clutching tight as they began the fifteen-minute walk home.

She and Leo took turns swinging them high in the air as the kids chatted away about their visit. Glancing over, she gazed at Leo under the bright afternoon sun, overcome with everything they'd created in the few years since they'd decided to build a life together.

Placing her hand over the necklace, she locked eyes with him and mouthed *I love you*. His resulting smile from those broad, sexy lips still made her heart pound as violently as the first time they'd met.

*Love you too*, he mouthed back.

Deciding not to give in to her fear, Adelyn pushed it away, determined to trust her mate. There would always be danger in Etherya's Earth—history had taught them that. But with her strong, noble Vampyre by her side, Adelyn felt nearly invincible.

The time for prophecies foretold would come, but for now, Adelyn would cherish each moment with the tiny family she treasured deep in her soul.

## *Note from Author*

Thank you for reading Leo and Addie's short story. When the opportunity to write this story arose, I knew I wasn't quite done spending time with them yet. There will also be some turmoil ahead in Etherya's Earth, and I needed a reason for Leo to join the army, so voilà! I know he'll make Alrec and Kilani proud, and Adelyn as well.

If you're reading this and asking who Alrec and Kilani are, they're Leo's adoptive parents, and this means you haven't read *The Dawn of Peace* yet. It's the book that kicks off the Etherya's Earth series and it's **FREE in eBook or Audio** on my website. You can find it below along with all of my books.

Wishing you lots of happy reading and a wonderful Valentine's Day! Xoxo – *Rebecca*

Download *The Dawn of Peace* here:  
[rebeccahefner.com/books](http://rebeccahefner.com/books)



## *About the Author*

USA Today bestselling author Rebecca Hefner loves a steamy romance with a side of grumpy heroes and kick-ass heroines. She doesn't join a ton of anthologies, but she's a HUGE fan of P.S. Nail and April Berry. Therefore, she's joined this anthology and is grateful to her two author buddies for having her along for the ride with all of the amazing authors involved.

Rebecca also writes contemporary romance under the pen name *Ayla Asher*. You can find her on TikTok, IG and FB, and you can find her full reading order and checklist at [. Happy reading \(or listening\)!](#)

# *Hearted by the Ogre*

Saam King



## *Blurb*

Cassandra is one of the few refugees living in the kingdom. She's surrounded by ogres and growing up in the castle has shown her that they're kind and caring. But since she's only a part of the help, she knows that her place is not by the side of the ogre that she's fallen in love with.

King Maximus is the newly-crowned sovereign of the country, but he already has his eyes on his future Queen. She may not know it yet, but Max fully intends to woo Cassandra and have her by his side—as his equal.

With Hearts Day upon them, it's the perfect day to confess his feelings. But will she be willing to accept them? Or is the price of being Queen too much for her to pay?



## *Note*

### **Content Warnings:**

Sexually Explicit Scenes

Refugee Main Character

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## *Dedication*

*To CMNS. ROD for life. Love you guys.*



## *Chapter One*

Cassandra met her new king for the first time with her head bowed along with the other servants. She'd worked for the old king—King Magnus—until he'd decided to retire early with his beloved queen and gift the burden of the crown to his only child—his son.

Cassandra had been King Magnus' head-of-household and he'd left all of his trusted staff behind, knowing that the last thing his son would need was to break in a new routine while he was still getting used to his heavy responsibilities.

“Take care of him, Cass,” King Magnus had told her quietly, patting her head with his huge paw of a hand as he always had, since the day she'd first met him, at five years old and hidden behind her mother.

She admired him greatly, respecting him and the honest way he led the kingdom and his home. She loved Queen Grace, wishing she could one day grow up to be like her. She was unwaveringly kind and she'd cared for her people as if they were her own children.

Cassandra had watched the prince grow up, only a few years older than her, but they were worlds apart. She was only an assistant in the kitchen at the time that he left for school—working under her mother, assigned to various areas, learning the work that she hoped would lead to a brighter future for her.

Eventually, she'd earned her place as the head-of-household and had proudly used the extra earnings to push her parents into early retirement. King Magnus had generously given her mother a hefty pension and eased Cassandra's mind even more.



She loved the king and his family and she would serve her new king with the same loyalty—unwavering and absolute. Still, it was disconcerting to be bowing in front of the male who had just taken over.

Cassandra was a human after all, one of the few who had been able to seek refuge from their war-tossed land over the wide sea. Her parents had come over to the kingdom in a rickety boat while her mother was heavily pregnant. They'd been seeking a better life and found it.

While many species of creatures lived happily and safely among them, the majority of the inhabitants—including the royal family—were ogres. She tried not to flinch when her new king stopped in front of her.

“Cassandra.” Her name was a low whisper in his deep voice.

Her head raised with a smile plastered on her face and she had to swallow hard and bite her lip to stop herself from gasping. He was *huge*. She'd known when he left he was only a teenager but she hadn't prepared herself to be faced with *this*.

His broad shoulders were covered in the silk robes he'd worn to his coronation, but he stood three heads taller than her—*at least*.

“Y-your high—”

The grin on his face was welcoming, his curved tusks shined to a polished sheen and capped with gold ornaments. His white fangs shone against his moss green skin, making him look so handsome, Cassandra wasn't sure her shaky knees could hold her any longer.

“Please don't call me that,” he said in a low voice, shaking his head, his long dark rope-like locs hanging neatly down his shoulder. “I'm just so glad to see a familiar face.”

Her smile was tentative. “There are a lot of familiar faces here your high—”

“I'm just Max.”

“I can’t call you that, King Maximus.” She bit her lip and he gave a playful flinch at her words.

“Max.” He shrugged his huge, muscular shoulders at her. “Or I’ll call you by *your* least favorite nickname.” He leaned in closer, conspiratorially, and she caught a whiff of his heady, masculine scent. “Sandy Pandy.”

A heated flush crept over her cheeks. She was grateful for her dark skin that hid at least some of it. “How did you even know that, your high—”

One regal eyebrow swung up in challenge.

“Max.”

He nodded happily, but she still tried to argue.

“It’s against protocol—”

“Shouldn’t I be the one setting protocols around here?” He tsked at her, winking one dark glittering eye. Her breath caught at the intense look, but the small upward tilt of his lips implied his words were, at the core, a joke. He was just so intimidating and his mere presence had her heart fighting to escape her chest. The pressure his attention caused eased as he moved on to greet everyone else, leaving his demand and his scent in his wake.

Even as he left and they all dispersed, Cassandra stayed behind, staring after the sturdy oak double doors her new king had exited through.

*This isn’t good. This isn’t good at all. You can’t possibly have a crush on him, you twit.*

Biting her bottom lip, she shook her head, dragging in a deep, shuddering breath before she hurried to the kitchens to make sure his dinner was being prepared properly. She skidded to a halt as she saw him sitting at the table there, laughing with the chef—an old female ogre who had given the children of the castle a free-run of the kitchens, teaching Cassandra how to cook and bake traditional ogre-centric dishes that not many knew about. Vivian didn’t like to share her knowledge, but had softened that first day when Cassandra

had walked up and tugged on her apron, bold as you please, asking her what she was making.

When Max's eyes turned her way, the glint that she saw there wasn't something she was familiar with. It made something shift inside her—something that felt overly feminine and flirty. Something that she should squash before she forgot her place.

“My king—”

He sighed, shaking his head and turning to look at Vivian—the chef—sadly. “She doesn't seem to be able to follow orders, Viv. Keeps calling me by these atrocious formal monikers. What do you think we should do with her?”

“Boil her for soup, I think. Those bones don't have enough meat on them for anything else.”

They both laughed raucously, while Cassandra shook her head at them.

“You're supposed to be getting ready for a formal dinner, your high—” She paused, reconsidering as they both pursed their lips at her. “Max.”

With a satisfied nod, the king leaned back in his chair. “I know. Can we cancel it?”

His deep sigh sounded so put out that Cassandra actually scrambled in her head to figure a way out of it before bowing her head sadly.

“I'm sorry. This isn't for you so much as it's for—”

“Everyone else.” He sighed again, finishing her sentence easily, nodding. “I know. I tried to talk my way out of it with the Ministers and it had them all up in arms.”

He ran his palms over his face before peering over at her. “But you'll be there, won't you?”

She nodded with a smile, her knees not feeling any less steady as he stood, making his way closer. He stopped so close her nose nearly bumped his abs, as she craned her head back to keep eye contact with him, his eyes darkening with a

satisfaction that she could barely understand the source of, when he whispered the word, “Good.”

It took every ounce of self-control inside her not to moan and melt into a puddle at his feet. He turned to smile at Vivian—who was watching them curiously—before leaving abruptly.

She let out her pent up breath while Vivian chuckled from her place at the stove. “This brings back memories.”

Cassandra turned to look at her, confusion lighting her up inside. “What do you mean?”

“You’ll see.” Vivian winked, turning back to the huge array of pots with a grin.



## *Chapter Two*

*He's so handsome I could cry.*

Cassandra tried to push the unwanted thought out of her head as Max exited his bedchamber, adjusting the dark blue robes, tugging them away from his colossal chest. She felt drool gathering in her mouth as she surveyed him from head to toe and was forced to snap to attention when he stopped in front of her.

His dark eyes raked over her, burning with an emotion she couldn't quite place as a small smile crossed his lips. She couldn't ever hope that a king would have the same feelings she did. It was probably just the excitement of the day burning in his blood. "Do you approve?"

She nodded helplessly, noticing his personal butler smiling with pride as he hurried away from them. "You look very handsome." She couldn't stop the words spilling from her lips if she tried.

"I'll be sure to stick to blues, then." He winked, taking another step closer to her.

She back-tracked quickly, clearing her throat as her back met the balustrade behind her. His hand shot out toward her, gripping her elbow to keep her steady. Electricity fizzled up her arm where he touched her and she watched an answering response in his eyes, his pupils dilating wildly as he stared down at her, his eyes locked on her with hunger—like a predator watching its prey.

"I-I'm so clumsy." She cleared her throat. "Are you ready to go down to dinner?"

He sighed, stepping back slowly from her and giving her the space to breathe in air that wasn't filled with his blatantly male scent. "Yes. I'm ready." His smile was tighter than usual and she felt a pang of regret and guilt instantly. She was probably reading too much into this than there was. He couldn't possibly be interested in her. He was so outgoing and gregarious. Something she'd always loved about him. She was sure he acted this way with all females.

Pushing her feelings aside, she plastered a grin on her face that she hoped didn't look like a grimace as he swept down the stairs. For someone so large, he moved with unexpected grace and silence. Biting her lip as she stared after him, she tried to shake off the lingering ache in her heart while he left. This torch that she'd held for him for all these years was absolutely ridiculous and she admonished herself for it immediately.

Hurrying back to the kitchen, she listened to the booming greetings and congratulations from everyone seated at the table. They loved the royal family and were ecstatic that Maximus would be taking over leadership.

She knew it was a view shared by almost everyone in the country. That was one of the things that made her feel safe. It was easy to feel biased when you worked with the family but the adoration of the countrymen outside the palace truly made Cassandra recognize that they were in good, steady hands.

"To King Maximus!" The booming voice reached the kitchens, and Cassandra laughed as the cheer was echoed, glasses being lifted in celebration.



Cassandra hesitated outside of the king's study, her entire body stiff as she knocked gently on the door. She was used to ending the night with King Magnus, asking him if he needed anything and then being shooed out of the room while he snuggled with his queen on the sofa near the fire.

She wasn't sure what she would do if Maximus was snuggling with anyone. The burn of jealousy in her stomach

made panic sweep through her but she tried to reason with herself anyway.

*Eventually he'll need to find a wife. You can't scratch the queen's eyes out and then expect to keep your head.*

Swallowing hard, her brow furrowed and she knocked gently again. When there was still no response, she tried the door. It turned easily, but she didn't open it.

"Your highness?"

"I told you not to call me that," was the gruff response from behind her.

She squeaked in surprise, spinning to see Maximus grinning at her.

"You scare pretty easily." He rocked back on his heels, peering down at her with those dark eyes that she dreamed of from time to time. "You don't have to be scared here. I'll protect you."

Her face went hot and she knew she would be blushing for all she was worth every time she saw him. Clearing her throat, she took a step backward, landing her against the heavy wooden door to his study. "I just wanted to know if there was anything that you needed?"

She felt her knees quiver and her stomach clench with lust as his eyes flashed with heat, his strong jaw tightening.

"What did you have in mind?" He moved a step closer, his huge palm pressed against the door behind her, trapping her against the wood with his massive body.

She couldn't stop the low whimper that escaped her throat, her lips trembling as she stared at his. His gold-capped tusks didn't deter her desire to kiss him. They seemed like a challenge. She had no doubt she'd succeed if she tried, but in the back of her mind, her rational side was screaming at her that this was her *king*, not some random male at a bar.

"T-tea?" Her voice was so breathy, she wondered if he heard it.



The smile that crossed his face told her he did. “Tea? That’s what you’re craving right now?”

She swallowed hard, trying not to breathe since his scent was overwhelming her. “Your father always wanted tea around this time.”

He sobered slowly, nodding with a sigh. “I’m trying to follow in his footsteps, so I guess I should pick up some of his habits, right?”

“No,” she defended him instantly. “You don’t have to be just like him. You just need to be yourself. You’re going to be a fantastic king. I know it.”

“You think so?” The gentle curve of those lips she was lusting after made her legs feel like noodles.

“I know so.”

“Well at least someone has faith in me.” He stepped away from her, taking his heat with him and leaving her feeling cold and bereft. “That’s more than I can say for myself.”

“You’ll see,” she told him, reaching trembling fingers out toward his arm. He watched them, his lips slightly parted, but she yanked her hand back before she touched him. “You were born for this.”

He snorted out a laugh, his gaze still on the hand she’d pulled away. “Maybe we can have that tea. Will you join me?”

Startled, she was already nodding before she could stop herself, hurrying away from him toward the kitchen. When she got there, she leaned heavily against the wall, pretending she hadn’t just thrown herself at the king. “Know your place.” She gasped the words, squeezing her eyes shut as she remembered how good he looked leaning over her.

*I don't know if I can do this.*



## Chapter Three

“You realize that these titles are just for show?” Maximus was telling her as he paced in front of Cassandra while she sipped at her tea. “I asked them to put it to a vote but they refused. The people *refused* to vote because it would mean someone would have to contend against me!”

“I know,” she nodded. “I signed the petition.”

He turned incredulous eyes her way. “You signed the damn petition *against* democracy?”

She bit her lip to stop her smile, but she knew it showed anyway. “Honestly Max, is it a bad thing that we want you to lead us?”

He sighed, sitting heavily on the sofa next to her. “I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. I’m just saying that I shouldn’t be the only option.”

“I know quite a few ambitious ministers who’d love to go against you.” She turned toward him, tucking her feet under her—having slipped off her shoes at some point. “And I’d hate to think of them having access to the amount of power the crown wields. They’re nothing but selfish idiots.”

She’d forgotten all about decorum, getting comfortable as she listened to Maximus vent about his new role. They’d started with tea and it had somehow progressed into him confiding in her.

Cassandra didn’t even know what time it was. It only felt like a few minutes had passed, but the tea was cold and bitter and there was a gentle glow coming from behind the drapes that covered the windows.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” He rolled his eyes, leaning back into the cushions of the sofa, tilting his head so he could look at her. “Thanks for listening to me, Cass.”

She shrugged, her cup rattling as she put it down, suddenly hyper-aware that she was so close to him.

“And there you go again,” he groaned, tipping his head back so he was glaring at the opulent ceiling. “Getting awkward around me.”

“I’m not awkward,” she argued. “I just... there are rules.”

“Yes, so you’ve said.” He sighed. “I don’t know why we can’t be friends. You didn’t want to be my friend when we were younger either.”

She gaped at him. “What’re you talking about?”

“The first time I tried to talk to you, you ran away from me.” She watched his strong throat and chest move as he laughed. “I thought I was some kind of fiend, scaring a child.”

“Y-you were a prince and my mom told me to stay out of the way!” She bit her lip as she defended herself. “I thought you were joking when you asked me if I wanted to play.”

“Well I wasn’t.” He rolled his head on the back of the couch, turning so he could look at her, his expression carefully blank. “I tried again and again, but you never seemed to want to have anything to do with me. I should count myself as lucky, I suppose, that you feel obligated now.”

“I’m not obligated,” she insisted as she watched the hurt flash in his eyes. She reached out, touching his arm, struggling to ignore the jolt of electricity that arced between them. “It’s just that...”

She trailed off, biting her lip again. At some point soon, she was pretty sure it would start bleeding from the number of times she’d been gnawing at it.

“You’re obligated.” He smiled sadly, looking away from her.

“I’m... cautious.” She reached out to take his hand and he swung his eyes back to her. “I’m sorry, Max, but it’s hard for me when it feels like there’s this huge thing between us.”

He quirked an eyebrow and a mischievous smile spread across his face. Cassandra felt her face heat for the millionth time and she sputtered out a protest while he laughed.

“I meant your crown!”

He sighed, looking down at their hands—hers tiny compared to his. Her brown skin looked good against his green, and she felt her heart clench as he ran his thumb over the back of her hand. His claws were filed neatly and she ran the fingers of her other hand over them, feeling the blunt tips almost absently. She didn’t know why she felt so comfortable with him in that moment, but she did. It was like she was finally at home in this castle when she’d always felt like a guest.

“My crown doesn’t mean anything when it comes to us, Cass.”

She bit her lip again and gasped when he reached up to tug it free. “I... What do you mean by *us*?” She kept her gaze trained on their hands.

“Let’s start with friends,” he whispered, tightening his fingers on hers slightly.

“Friends.” She didn’t feel very friendly toward him. In fact, what she was feeling as she inhaled his scent, her entire body softening in readiness for him in a way that was *very* far-removed from friendship, would probably get her in trouble. But this male didn’t need that from her. He needed someone to be there for him, to listen and have his back during this huge transition. “Of course.”

His smile was so big, all his flashing white fangs showed. “Good. Then can we make this a nightly thing? Having tea and complaining?”

She giggled as he kept up the innocuous stroke of his thumb over her hand. “Definitely.”

“Thanks.” He hesitated for only a moment before he leaned forward toward her.

Cassandra froze as he brushed her cheek with a kiss, his lips grazing her skin as he carefully avoided touching her with his

tusks. A shiver ran down her spine but she didn't let her reaction show, keeping up her smile as he pulled away.

"I suppose we should go to bed." The words were a low murmur and she held in a whimper at the double entendre.

"Yes." She surged up from her place on the sofa, releasing his hand and backing away from him. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He waved at her as she left, his expression carefully masked. She didn't know what he was thinking about, but as she curled under her blankets, the only thing she could focus on was wondering what he would have done if she'd turned while he was kissing her—allowing their lips to meet.



"But the quantity matters—" Maximus cut himself off as Cassandra stepped into the room with the list he'd requested from her. She ducked her head and hurried forward toward him, but the silence in the room was deafening. Confused, she lifted her gaze to look around and saw all his advisors and his guests staring at her, perplexed expressions on their faces.

The question as to why they had stopped talking was answered when she looked up at Maximus. He was sitting at the head of the table, commanding the room easily, but he was staring at her with a grin on his face.

"My king," she murmured, placing the list in front of him. He snagged her hand from where she'd been about to move it away.

"Why don't you join us, Cass? I'd love to hear your opinion about this." She gave him a death glare but he'd already turned away to face the room. "I'm not sure if everyone's met Cassandra."

All eyes were turned her way—some curious and some critical—and she felt herself wanting to sink into the floor.

"I'm sorry, my king, I have to finish my duties—"

"Hrusth can handle it," he told her, referring to her assistant while standing to pull out the huge empty chair that was next

to him. “And you know I don’t like it when you call me *my king*.”

A round of murmurs accompanied the movement and Cassandra knew why. This wasn’t just an empty chair. It was one of the pair of thrones that sat at the head of the table. He was holding out the *queen’s throne* for her. *Her*. A lowly servant. She was shaking her head even as he all but pushed her into it.

“We were just discussing the possibility of doing trade with the orc colony to the north. It might be a bit difficult to get there, though.”

Cassandra was frozen in the throne, not sure what to do, but soon the discourse picked up where it had left off. She was able to relax eventually and when she finally found the opportunity to give her opinion, Maximus hushed the entire room to listen, smiling encouragingly at her.

When the meeting was over and everyone left, she turned to glare at him. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“What did I do?” He shrugged as if he was completely innocent, but he couldn’t keep that mischievous grin off his perfect, gorgeous, stupid face.

“You made me sit in the *queen’s throne* in the middle of a meeting that wasn’t my place to be in.”

With each word, his smile was becoming a frown. “There are no *places* here, Cass. You can sit wherever the hell you want to sit. Just because—”

“I can’t.” She shook her head sharply, biting her lip to stop the tears as she scrambled away from him, nearing the colossal doors. “You can’t keep doing this. I’m only a refugee here. I’m *human* and I just *work* in the palace. I don’t belong here.”

His eyes went dark and stormy as he stood, moving closer and crowding her against the door. “You *belong* here every bit as much as *I* do. As *anyone* does. It’s bullshit that you don’t think that. This is your home and you love it and its people more than any ogre I know. Stop putting yourself down and realize that the only person who sees you that way is yourself.

I—” He stopped himself, his hand freezing where it had been about to cup her cheek. “I have to go.”

She hurried out of his way while he slammed the doors open, making her wince.



Cassandra hesitated outside of the king’s study, her fist raised to knock, when the doors opened on their own. Maximus stood on the other side, his lips curved in a contrite smile.

“Hi.”

Relief filled her, allowing her to feel like she could breathe for the first time since he’d left the meeting room. He wasn’t angry with her.

“Hi.” She beamed up at him and she watched him relax in increments. “I brought tea.”

His usual grin was back, his cheerful disposition hard to keep away. “Thank the Gods. I can’t go a night without it.”

She laughed, moving over to the sofa that was fast becoming their preferred spot, positioning the tray so she could reach it easily. “You barely drink any. I thought you hated it if I’m being honest.”

“It takes some getting used to.” He shrugged, moving to sit next to her. “But it isn’t the tea that I appreciate anyway.”

She stilled, not sure she was ready to hear the rest of his words but her stupid heart clawed at her anyway. Cassandra looked up at him from under her lashes while she poured herself a cup.

“I can’t go a night without talking to *you*.” He was looking at her as though he was trying to tell her something important, but she was too focused on how fast her heart was beating in her chest.

“My favorite is jasmine.” She nodded toward the teapot. “If you don’t mind it.”

He sighed, reaching out to take the cup from her, placing his lips exactly where hers had been moments before. “Jasmine it



is, from now on.”

She smiled at him, so grateful he'd let her change the subject. At the same time, watching him lick his lips had her feeling overheated. He was like a magnet to her, pulling her in and she was exhausted from fighting the pull.

She moved closer to him and he sat very still until she rested her head against his colossal shoulder. The warmth that radiated from him had her relaxing at once. “Is this okay?”

He didn't hesitate, pulling her closer until their sides were pressed together and his face was buried in her curls. “Very okay.”

She was tucked safely into the comfort of his arms and it was as if she was finally where she was meant to be. “I've always wanted to do this.” She ran her fingers down the muscular span of his arm.

He nuzzled into her hair and pressed a kiss to her head. “I'm at your service whenever you'd like, Cass.”

“My own personal pillow?” She snuggled closer, striving to feel as much of his body as she could. Realization made her freeze, her face turning up to look at him. “As... friends, of course.”

His fangs were bared in a grin as he snorted out a laugh. “Yes. Friends for now.”

Cassandra tried to ignore the *for now* part of his statement, going back to just enjoying being in his arms.



## Chapter Four

“*Max*,” Cassandra hissed, tugging at his robes, struggling to get him to move toward the door. “You’ll be late!” No matter how hard she tried, she wasn’t able to even budge him. He was a huge male, and he wasn’t being helpful, smiling down at her.

“I don’t care. I’m not going until you tell me what I want to know.”

“Maximus Magnus Zadrurk, if you don’t get down there, I’ll—”

“The full name. Am I in trouble?” He laughed, still not moving an inch as she shoved at his muscular chest. Her fingers curled there greedily, absorbing the feel of him, but she also knew that his advisors were waiting for him.

“Down. Stairs.” She pointed toward the door, releasing him.

“Just tell me what the tailor wanted, Cass. That’s all I want to know.”

She sighed, rolling her eyes. “It’s none of your business.”

Irritation flickered in his gaze for the first time since she’d known him. Her heart stuttered in her chest at the look, but she chose to ignore it.

“Tell me.”

The tone was more unusual than the look. He might be a king, but Maximus was the furthest thing from demanding. Swallowing hard, she shook her head.

“It’s really none—”

He crowded her backward until she was pressed against the wall. Her eyes were wide as she stared up at him, their height

difference more obvious than ever.

“*You’re* my business, Cass.” The words were low and intimate and a slow, burning heat filled her veins as she felt the low rumble of a growl in his chest where he was pressed against her. “What did he want?”

“H-he wanted to take me to dinner.” The words were gasped and she watched as his expression got darker.

“And what did you say?” He lifted his hand to her face, cupping her chin and tilting it upward until he could lower his head—their lips almost touching.

“I-I said no.”

His growl was one of pleasure now and she felt her pussy clench around nothing, a trickle of cream slipping down her thigh. His nostrils flared and he tilted his head slightly to run his tusk along her cheek gently.

“Why?”

“I couldn’t miss our tea.” The confession spilled from her lips even though she wished she could hold them back.

His smile was slow—gentle now—and the satisfaction that brimmed in his eyes soothed something inside of her that had been tight with worry.

“Good.” He ran his tusk against her other cheek and then nuzzled their foreheads together lovingly. She was melting under him, lifting herself to press closer to him, but he pulled away. “I’m going to this ridiculous meeting, but I want a slice of your chocolate cake for my sacrifice.”

Her jolly ogre was back, all grins and sunshine. Cassandra didn’t know what had happened in those few moments after he’d walked in to see the tailor—a sweet red-skinned ogre named Jhor—stuttering while talking to her with flowers in his hand. She hadn’t accepted them, of course, but when Maximus had offered a suggestion that one of his winter cloaks needed a stitch at the bottom, poor Jhor had rushed out.

Maximus waved at her over his shoulder, baring his fangs in a beaming smile as he left her behind—a puddle of goo

because of him.

*What the hell am I going to do?*



“I think we should have the option of trading with the orcs,” Maximus sighed, his dulled claws tracing the pattern of lines on her palm. “But I know the people don’t have a high opinion of them.” His strong brow was furrowed and Cassandra found herself reaching up to smooth it out before snatching her hand back.

“I don’t mind you touching me. I actually really like it.” The whispered words made her feel like they were in a bubble of intimacy—a world of their own. He often made her feel like that. As though she was the only one there.

When he said things like that, it made her want more and she knew she shouldn’t. Six short months had passed with their daily tea meeting and she was falling deeper and deeper in love with her king. She knew it was inappropriate. She tried to talk herself out of it daily, but it was so hard being his friend, getting to know him more and more *without* falling in love with him. It was too easy—he was perfect in all the ways she’d always imagined. And imperfect in the ways that made him uniquely hers.

He snort-laughed with his head thrown back in the most adorable way, broke *all* of the china accidentally while gesturing too widely with his huge hands and was so stubborn it drove her up a wall. Every single one of his annoying attributes only made her sink deeper. Whenever she walked in to see another broken cup, his best puppy dog eyes already out and ready for her, her expression might look strict and annoyed on the outside, but her heart ached with love for him in her chest.

Cassandra didn’t know how much longer she could hide it from him. Even while she went about her daily duties, he would stop whatever he was doing if she entered the room. It didn’t matter who he was with. He treated her like she was the

most important thing to him and it was so difficult to pretend that he wasn't the same to her.

He lifted the hand he had been tracing to his cheek, rubbing his skin and stubble against her palm, his eyes closing and his long dark lashes sweeping against the deep green of his skin.

“Max.” His name escaped her without thought, but that brought his eyes open, heat simmering in their depths. “I didn't want to go out with Jhor.” The words were pulled from her, a confession that she didn't know she needed to make until it spilled from her lips. “In case you wondered.”

“I did wonder.” He reached forward to tuck a curl of her hair behind her ear. It was an impossible feat and sprung right back in place, but he only smiled at it and twirled it around his finger. “I wondered if you're only spending time with me because I'm making you.” He looked away from her, his eyes squeezed shut. “And I never want to do that to you.”

She grabbed his hand then, gripping it firmly until he looked at her, hope brimming in his eyes. Deep inside she knew what he needed to hear—even if she wasn't sure she was ready to say it yet.

“You're the only male I want to give my time to. I need you to know that.”

The worry that had creased his expression eased and it was replaced with one of his usual cheerful smiles. “You're the only female for me.”

The words felt like a vow—a promise of more than they were—but she let it go, along with his hand.

“Tell me about that proposal you were working on for the unified summit.” She wasn't quite ready for commitments, even if every fiber of her being jumped for joy at his words.

His deep groan made her giggle, shifting back against the sofa, tucked neatly against his side as he relayed the struggle he was having getting the foreign affairs teams to commit to one plan.



“My birthday’s next week.”

The words pulled Cassandra out of her own head as she snuggled against Maximus on the sofa that night—their tea cold and forgotten on the tray—and a teasing smile spread across her lips. “I know. I already have your present planned.”

“You do?” His answering smirk had her relaxing comfortably against the sofa. “Because I know exactly what I want.”

Her eyes narrowed at him. “And what’s that?”

“I want you to be my plus one to the Hearts Day Parade.”

Her heart stuttered in her chest. “T-that’s always been the place of the queen, Max. I can’t.”

“We said we weren’t going to use that word anymore, right?” He nuzzled against her hair, holding her close. “We don’t have places. You promised.”

“I did, but—” She cut herself off as he tugged her even closer, tipping her chin up with his neatly filed fingernail so she was looking up at him.

“No buts. It’s my birthday.” The exaggerated pout on his ridiculously handsome face was the cincher and she knew it, but the need to put up a fight was too difficult to ignore.

“I just think that Hearts Day has a certain connotation and since we don’t fit that... label... then it wouldn’t be appropriate if I attend the parade with you.” His lips parted to argue, but she shook her head. “I’ll attend, of course.” She bit her lip, looking away. “But I don’t think I want to be up there in front of everyone. Can’t we... celebrate in private?”

When she realized what that sounded like, she looked up at Maximus with wide eyes.

He was contemplating her, but didn’t have the usual mischievous grin that would accompany words like that.

“You’re not a secret for me, Cass. I don’t want to hide you from anyone. Tell me you know that.”

Her heart felt like it could pop out of her chest, but she gave him a tremulous smile, cupping his face in her hands and running her thumb along his tusk. “I know. I’ve never questioned that. I just... I don’t know that I’m ready.”

He nodded, searching her face for a few moments before he seemed satisfied with what he saw there. After that, he transformed his expression into another huge pout. “Even though it’s my birthday?”

Rolling her eyes, she released his face with a groan. “Why do you always have to have things your way?”

He pulled her closer into a hug, continuing his argument while she pretended to listen, focusing on his muscular forearms and how well they fit around her instead.





## Chapter Five

“Hi Viv,” Cassandra beamed as she swept into the kitchen, moving over to where the kind ogress was putting her last touches on dinner.

“Aren’t we chipper today?” Viv narrowed her eyes on her. “I wonder why?”

She shrugged, leaning over her shoulder to get a good whiff of the freshly baked bread. “You’re a genius.”

“I know,” Viv said smugly, poking Cassandra in the side until she giggled. “Now tell me what’s got you so happy.”

“I’m *always* happy,” she sniffed, but couldn’t hide her smile.

“No, no. That’s not *regular* happy. That’s *love* happy.” Viv pointed a spoon at her. “And I want to hear all about it.”

Cassandra’s face went hot, and her stomach swooped with guilt. “There’s nothing to tell.”

Viv sighed, shaking her head. “Fine. You can keep your secrets for now, but I’m on to you.”

She chuckled nervously, making her way over to a clear part of the counter, pulling out ingredients and bowls as she went.

“What’re you making?” Viv looked over everything and then smiled conspiratorially. “A cake? I see you’ve been feeding someone with a sweet tooth recently. This is your second cake in two weeks.”

“It’s a birthday cake.” Cassandra wished that hadn’t spilled from her, but Viv just hummed happily.

“For Max.”

When she nodded, Viv watched her closely. She tried not to give anything away, but she knew she was failing.

“That’s another one who needs to find someone. He needs a good, strong queen by his side.”

Cassandra’s shoulders drooped at those words. *A good, strong queen.* Not a pitiful human refugee. An ogress.

“Yes, of course. I’m sure he’ll find someone soon.”

Viv harrumphed, rolling her eyes. “And I suppose you think he hasn’t already?”

Cassandra froze, the stillness doing nothing to quell the sharp pang of pain in her heart. “Has he?” She tried to sound nonchalant but it was difficult when she felt like her world was crumbling around her.

“You’re both denser than dirt,” Viv told her calmly, turning back to the meal she was completing.

“Who?” Cassandra frowned as she turned to look at Viv.

The ogress grumbled to herself and didn’t bother to respond, waving at her over her shoulder as Max barged into the kitchen.

“How are my two favorite females?” He made his way over to hug Cassandra, bundling her against his body and slowly relaxing. He did this often and it was something that she loved. Whenever he felt stressed or overwhelmed, he would abandon what he was doing so he could find her and hold her until he was calmer. She ran her palms over the bulging muscles of his back, her eyelids going low with the pleasure of his heat and scent.

“I’m fine and dandy, in case you wondered,” Viv called from her spot at the huge oven, grinning from ear to ear. Cassandra almost jerked away from him at her words, but he didn’t let her, keeping her close.

“You’ll get your hug next. Give me a moment with her.”

Viv was cackling as she made herself a plate and headed out of the kitchen. “Help yourselves.”

“Thanks Viv.” Maximus nuzzled against her hair, breathing deep and slow. “I’ll come find you in a bit.”

She harrumphed on the way out, but the smile didn’t leave her face.

“Rough day?” Cassandra ran her nose over his chest, wrapping her arms around his neck now that they were alone. Her fingers played with the skin of his neck and she felt his deep shudder.

She bit her lip, ignoring the hard press of his cock against her. It wasn’t anything new—something she’d noticed early on in their ‘friendship’. She always pretended she didn’t feel anything, not bringing it up since *he* didn’t bring up the fact that her pussy was always soaked around him.

Growing up with ogres had taught her that their sense of smell was too sensitive for him to *not* know. And since he *adored* her scent, she knew that her constant state of arousal around him had something to do with it.

The only thing she was worried about was fitting him inside her—because while it was a fantasy she enacted often, with as many of her fingers as she could fit, she knew their size difference was substantial. Not that she should be thinking about that, because that *wasn’t* where their relationship was heading... especially if he had someone else.

Reminded of those cutting words, she tightened her arms around his back possessively, even as she rebuked herself for doing it.

“Hey,” he whispered, running his big palms over her lower back soothingly—and enticingly. “Are you okay? What upset you?”

She was silent for a few moments and he just kept up with the gentle massage, until she was almost putty in his hands. “Max.” Cassandra snuggled closer, wishing she didn’t have to ask, but knowing she needed to. “Are there any females that you’re considering to be your queen?”

He continued stroking his hands over her before sighing and pulling away to look at her. “Where is this coming from,

Cass?”

*That's not a no.*

“Viv said that you might have someone already.” She shrugged, trying to play it off, not meeting his gaze.

His grin was immediate. “Ah. My female’s jealous.”

“I’m *not* jealous.” Miffed, it was everything she could do to not lean forward and bite his strong pec, but that would have the opposite effect of what she was going for, aloof and confident. “And I’m also not your female.” Even though the thought of being *his* sent shivers down her spine and butterflies in her stomach.

“So you’ve said,” he sighed. He tilted her chin back so she was looking into his gorgeous, dark eyes. “You’re the only one, Cass. The only female other than Viv and my mother that I spend any time with.”

And she knew that. Jealousy must have made her temporarily lose her mind, because he made sure she was aware of every second of his schedule—mainly so he could try to bully her into joining him for his meetings and spending as much time with her as possible.

“I’m sorry.” She shook her head, fighting useless tears—holding them back so he didn’t have to see how ridiculous she was being. “I know that.”

“Hey.” He tightened his arms around her. “There’s nothing to be sorry about. One day, when things are clearer between us, we’ll grow beyond our insecurities. There won’t be a reason for petty jealousies. This is early on. We can give ourselves a break.”

“Clearer?” She swallowed hard, hope and fear both straining for prevalence in her chest.

“One day soon.” The words were a murmur against her hair and she felt herself relaxing into him, focusing on them instead of everything else.



## Chapter Six

“This isn’t the birthday present I *wanted*,” Maximus complained while he turned this way and that way in the mirror to admire the new blue beads that fit perfectly on the ends of his locs. “But I love them all the same.”

“I’m also baking you a cake,” Cassandra added, running her fingers along his hair, admiring how the beads shone in the light. He really was the handsomest male she’s ever seen.

“I do love your cakes,” he sighed, turning to face her. “But I also don’t want to be by myself for the entire parade. I get bored.” Another magnificent pout made its way onto his face and the rush of affection and love for him had her tugging on his robes until he lowered himself enough so she could press a kiss to his cheek. When he was close enough, she leaned forward, but misbalanced on the stool she’d stood on to put the beads in his hair. Instead of his cheek, her lips pressed against his own.

He didn’t hesitate to kiss her back, one of his huge hands sweeping into her hair and tilting her face until he had a better angle. His other arm wrapped around her and kept her securely against him instead of tumbling to the floor from the stool.

When she felt the brush of his hot tongue against her lower lip, she couldn’t do anything but part them for him to gain access. She wished she could part her legs the same way, but he was holding her too tight for that. Something nagged at the back of her mind but when she got her first real taste of him, she shoved it back, going absolutely feral for him instead.

Months of pretending—of acting like she didn’t moan his name when she touched herself at night—had culminated in the hottest kiss of her life.

She arched against him, pressing her breasts firmly to his chest, and he groaned, the sound driving her even further over the edge. She'd always wondered how he'd kiss, and now she had her answer. He was fully focused on her—on this. Her heart was beating so hard and fast that she could hear it. Or was that something else?

As the lust-filled fog lifted from her brain, she heard firm knocking at the door. She struggled against him, trying to put some distance between them. His annoyed sigh when he pulled away and screamed, "Fuck off!" cheerfully at the door startled her, but he was kissing her again a second later. She cupped his face in her hands, feeling the strength of his jaw under her fingers.

"I've wanted this for so long," he murmured, running his tusks against her cheek and neck, marking her with his scent.

"Max." She gripped his shoulders tight, the muscles there making her want to feel more of him. He growled, lifting her into his arms and taking her to the sofa as he ran his lips across her jaw.

He lay her down and followed her, covering her with his big body. The movement released her from the spell she'd been under. She didn't want the real world to intrude but everything rushed back to her at once.

"Max." His name was a moan, but it didn't stop him, only seeming to spur him on. His hands were everywhere—cupping her breasts and unzipping her dress at the same time. She fought against her body to lightly shove at his chest.

"Cass?" His brow was furrowed as he peered down at her. "Too far? I'm sorry."

She bit her lip, shaking her head and he relaxed, relief sweeping over his expression.

"Good. I'll wait as long as you want me to. I got carried away."

Her heart panged with love for him, but she felt trapped with her own actions. She'd kissed *him*. Her king. *I've fucked up now.*



“I’m sorry,” she shook her head, “I didn’t mean to—”

“Hey...” He cupped her cheek, beaming at her. “You didn’t do anything. It was all me. I just...” She watched his eyes lower shyly—something she never thought she’d see from him. “I didn’t think you’d pick today to kiss me.” He shook his head, hugging her tightly. “But it doesn’t matter. You chose me.”

“Max.” Her eyes were wide with horror as she looked at their reflection in the mirror. He was dressed in his formal regalia with his crown perched on his head—and she was wearing a simple uniform dress, her hair a complete mess. “I-I didn’t mean to kiss you.”

He stiffened, his arms that had previously been tight around her, releasing her quickly. “But...”

She shook her head, her hands covering her lips as she felt tears pooling in her eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

He swallowed hard, staring at the floor now, not saying anything. She reached out to take his hand, but he didn’t react.

“You’re a king, Max. I’m... nothing.”

“No.” He looked at her, shaking his head with a sigh, releasing her hand to stand. “You don’t get to use that excuse anymore. It’s never been about that, has it? It’s been me. You don’t want *me*.”

“Are you joking?” She stood, stilling him as he paced in front of her. “I want you so much it *hurts*, Max.”

Incredulous eyes turned her way. “You do?”

“Of course I do! It’s so obvious.” She turned away, covering her face with her hands. “But you’re *royalty*, Max. I’m the furthest thing from that!”

“Why the hell does that matter, Cass? I’ve told you again and again, that means nothing here.”

“Yes it does!” She spun to glare at him.

He moved closer, taking her hand gently. “How much do you know about our history, Cass? About my mother? I

thought you knew this entire time and you were holding back because you weren't ready. But is this really because of something as ridiculous as *your place* here?"

She shook her head, not knowing what he was talking about.

"I've been trying to get everyone to push you in the right direction, but they've clearly been slacking on the job. My mother worked in the kitchen with Viv before she was queen. Why do you think they're so close?" He rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "Viv thinks it's really funny that I'm taking longer to get you to fall for me than my father did with Mom."

Cassandra had always known that the queen could be found in the kitchen, joking with Viv and cooking up a storm, but she'd never known why. "But—"

"No, Cass. Tell me the truth." He cupped her face in his big palms, rubbing his thumbs against her cheeks gently. "Do you want this? Me? If the answer's no, I'll deal with it. But I'm not going to let you think that I'm better than you in any way ever."

She gripped his wrists, swallowing hard. "You've never made me feel that way, Max. I just... I thought—"

The knock on the door made Maximus growl with frustration, but Cassandra hurried over to the door, opening it to show the frazzled Minister of Culture. "I'm sorry to bother you, Cass, but is the king ready? The parade should have started ten minutes ago."

"Of course!" Jumping right into her role as his head-of-household, she turned to face Maximus, but the stubborn look on his face made her heart patter hard in her chest. "You have to go."

"Not until we're finished here."

Cassandra knew that tone. He wouldn't be budging one inch until she gave in. "Max, not now, okay? When you get back."

Maximus narrowed his eyes, glaring at the minister. Terror crossed the poor man's face, as though he'd just entered into a snake den. "I'll wait outside." The minister all but ran, not willing to get between them.

“We can finish this during the parade then.” Maximus was already walking toward her even as she shook her head. He didn’t bother arguing, reaching down and easily lifting her into his arms.

“Max!”

“You’re always talking about this *place* ridiculousness. So I’ll just *show* you where your place is.” He carried her down the stairs, passing everyone in the castle; who turned curious looks their way.

“Max,” she cried, covering her face. “This is crazy!”

He took her up the stairs of the red carriage that would ride through the streets along with their military, volunteers, and hundreds of bubbly children who would be taking part in their first parade. He settled her comfortably next to him, but when she tried to stand so she could leave, she found herself on his lap instead.

“Max!” She fought against his hold, but he just nuzzled her throat, moaning low as he did. When she stilled, she knew why. Her ass had been rubbing against his cock and she hadn’t even realized it. “Max.” This time his name was said in a quieter, more intimate tone.

“Your place is by my side.” The banked heat in his gaze along with his sweet words made tears clog in her throat. “Right beside me, at all times.”

She couldn’t look away from him, even as the carriage started moving. He ran his thick fingers through her hair, leaning in to press a gentle kiss to her lips.

“I love you, Cass. So much.”

She couldn’t stop the sob as she wrapped her arms around his neck, squeezing him tight. “I love you, too.”

They stayed like that for a long moment until Cassandra heard the screaming cheers in the background. She cautiously pulled away from her ogre to turn toward the massive crowds lined along the sides of the road. They were all happily cheering and waving madly at them.

“Oh no.” She scrambled off of his lap, back into the seat next to him. “I’m not even dressed properly!” She was wearing the simple black dress uniform that she’d put on that morning.

“That’s no one’s fault but your own.” He grinned, lifting his arm to greet his people. “I told you about this *weeks* ago.”

“You ogre-handled me into this carriage,” she hissed. He laughed, tugging off his blue cloak to throw over her shoulders. She found herself surrounded by his heat and scent and almost melted into the seat.

“I don’t think you *mind* being handled by me, per se,” he murmured into her ear and she felt her face go hot.

She elbowed him in the side, earning a grunt for her effort, before he lifted her hand and forced her to wave at everyone. “They don’t want *me* to wave at them.” She tried to tug her hand free, but he didn’t let her.

“Yes they do. They’re already planning our wedding.”

Cassandra turned her incredulous gaze his way. “*Wedding?*”

“Yep.” He popped the p, grinning like a lunatic as he kept up his own wave, reaching out to shake hands with anyone who could reach. On the other side of the carriage, people reached out toward her with huge smiles, expectantly.

She hesitantly reached out, but they took her hand happily, shaking it with enthusiasm.

“So nice to finally have a queen again,” one ogress cooed.

It was everything that Cassandra could do to stop herself from screaming that she wasn’t the queen. She knew better than to make rash pronouncements though, so she’d just leave it up to Maximus. He’d figure out a way to let them know who she was. She trusted him to handle the situation with the aplomb he always did. The sudden crash of insecurity as she wondered *what* she was exactly to him had to be pushed aside as she shook more and more hands.

Cassandra found herself beaming along with everyone in the crowd, enjoying herself more than she thought she would

have. When she spotted Maximus smirking at her, she rolled her eyes at him. “Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything.” He didn’t need to, though. The smugness was written all over his gorgeous face.

When they were finally at the end of their route, he took her hand in his to help her down. They were immediately surrounded by throngs of people and the chatter was so loud that she almost couldn’t hear anything. One of the ogresses nearest her squeezed her into a hug, shaking her from side to side.

“We’ve never had a queen as tiny as you.” She beamed up at Maximus. “You’re going to have a hard time getting this one to carry your babies.”

“We’ll figure it out.” He winked and the crowd tittered while Cassandra gave him a lethal look. He shrugged unrepentantly before taking her hand and leading her through everyone, his huge size easily parting the throng so they could make their way to the podium.

Cassandra was jolted by the many hands reaching out to pat her head and squeeze her hand. The joy in their eyes and the excitement amongst them was contagious though and after the first few times, she embraced them as well, just happy to be part of this all. They made her feel like she belonged. Like they *wanted* her as their queen.



## Chapter Seven

“On this Hearts Day,” Maximus proclaimed into a microphone, “I’d like to thank everyone for joining my future queen and I in our celebration.”

Everything screeched to a halt as Cassandra’s eyes all but bugged out of her head.

*This isn’t handling it! This is making it worse!*

Even as those words screeched across her mind, she couldn’t help the softening of her heart and the loosening of her knees. She loved this ogre and he was proud of her—making his announcement of their future in front of such a huge crowd. When she spotted the cameras aimed their way, she almost fainted. The *entire* country would know about this before the end of the day, she was sure.

He continued his speech, thanking everyone who participated and made the parade successful. When he was done, he smiled happily at her, his fangs gleaming in the sunlight. Walking down to her, he held out his huge palm. She slowly took it, allowing him to lead her back to the carriage. He stopped to chat many times, but he never released her, asking her opinion often while cheerfully introducing her to everyone he could.

By the time they were back in the carriage, she felt herself reflecting on the day, shedding a new light on everything she’d *thought* she’d known about their relationship and their country at large. He kept her hand in his, eyeing her silently while keeping up the rapport with everyone who reached out while they passed. She tried to do the same, but she was hopelessly distracted.

It didn't take them long to return to the castle and when they disembarked from the carriage, Maximus took her hand into his and led her directly to his chambers. Her shoulders were in his hands immediately. "Cass... What're you thinking? Why won't you look at me?"

Blinking up at him for what felt like the first time ever, she reached a trembling hand up to cup his strong jaw, her thumb running over his gleaming tusk. "You love me."

His furrowed brow eased slightly. "I do. I have for years."

"Years." She swallowed hard, shaking her head and choking out a little laugh around her tight throat. "Years that I pretended I didn't love you right back."

"I knew." His usual handsome grin lit up his face, joy shining through. "I've always known that we'd be together."

"I'm sorry." A slow tear tracked down her cheek and he swept it away with his thumb before pressing a gentle kiss to each of her eyes, his tusks bracketing her face.

"You never have to be sorry about this. You deserve to have as much time and space as you need. I won't rush this." His fingers clasped both her hands together and pressed them to his lips. "It's too important."

She lunged, throwing herself against him, her lips crashing into his. His response was to grunt gently, his body not budging an inch. Instead, he met her with fervor, his tongue parting her lips easily as she moaned.

"Tell me this means what I think it means," he purred against her mouth.

"If it means we're moving to that bed, then yes."

He laughed, nodding eagerly. "That too. But you're marrying me."

"Marrying you?" She pulled away to stare up at him with wide eyes. "Where did that come from?"

"That came from years of patience. You're mine and this is how we'll make it official. We'll get married next week."



“Next *week*? Max—”

“We’ll figure it out later. Just say yes.” His eyes were brimming with a hope that she couldn’t bring herself to dash. Love for her ogre filled her chest as she thought about him becoming her husband.

“Yes.”

Every single muscle in his body seemed to loosen as she gave him the response he wanted to hear, but there was a fire building in his gaze that she wasn’t used to.

“Max?”

“You’re mine.”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to give yourself to me, Cass? Tell me you’re ready for this.” His words were a growl and he leaned in, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply.

She trembled where she stood, a drop of cream leaking down her thigh. She was soaking her panties through at this point. “Yes.” The word was so breathy, she was about to repeat it, but he dipped to meet her lips, walking her backward until her legs hit the bed. She fell onto it, bouncing on his huge mattress.

“Spread your legs for me,” he purred, reaching down to run his palm along her thigh, upward, taking her skirt with it. “I’m going to taste every single inch of you.”

Her face was flaming hot, but her body complied with his instructions. Her legs spread wide as she panted on the bed under him. Her eyes roved over his huge body, looming over her and it was everything she could do to stop herself from yanking him down to her. He was the one in control here.

“Tell me what you want me to do to you, Cass.” He unbuckled her shoes, pressing gentle kisses to her toes, smiling down at them before running his lips over the top of her foot and nuzzling her ankle. “I want you to describe *everything* you’ve imagined between us.”

She bit her lip, hiding a smile. “That’s going to be a *long* description.”

His eyes shone with pride. “How long have you wanted me?”

“As long as I’ve known you.” The words were whispered, but his grin told her he heard her.

“Cass,” he sighed and ran his tusk along her leg, “from the first moment I met you, I knew it was you.”

“You did?” She bit her lip, shivering as he moved lower, kneeling on the floor. His large hands wrapped around her hips and before she knew what was happening he was dragging her toward him. Her dress dragged up her legs until her panty-clad pussy was bared to him.

“My blood sang as soon as I scented you.” He leaned closer, running his nose along the silk, groaning deep in the back of his throat. “I knew you were my mate.”

She sat up abruptly, eyes wide. “Your *what?*”

“I should have told you.” He looked up at her, smiling guiltily. “I’m so sorry, Cass. I should have said it a long time ago, but I didn’t want you to feel the pressure of that. I wanted you to... fall in love with me on your own.”

Biting her lip, she leaned closer to him.

He eyed her warily, conflicted emotions playing across his perfect features.

“And I *did* fall in love with you. Thank you for waiting for me.” A single tear leaked down her cheek as she kissed him softly. It wasn’t long before it became heated and then she was flat on her back again.

She moaned when he tugged on her dress, murmuring apologies against her inner thigh as he ripped it down the middle.

*I can get a million new uniforms if it means he’ll make me feel like this.*

She cried out as he swiped his tongue over her pussy through her panties, his tongue clinging to her clit lovingly. “Please.” Cassandra sobbed, her neck arched while she tried to hold back the screams that were fighting to escape her.

“I’ve dreamt of you like this.” He licked his lips as he tugged her panties down her legs, stuffing them into his back pocket.

She would have protested, but instead she yelped as he swiped his tongue completely through her folds, stopping to dip into her pussy for one breathtaking moment. “M-Max?”

“I need to taste you every day, Cass.” He groaned, running his tusks along either side of her pussy, bracketing her and covering her in his scent. “Every single day.”

She was about to sassily tell him that she wouldn’t exactly be fighting him off when he tossed her legs over his shoulders and dove right in—using his tongue and lips to drive her insane. His tongue was so long and thick that when he fucked her with it, she almost fell over the edge.

“Please, Max.” She didn’t know what she was asking for. Only that this was the most incredible experience of her life. When he took a long, hard suck of her clit, everything shattered.

She almost threw him off with how hard she bucked, her scream hurting her throat. Pleasure was assailing her from every inch of her body and *he wasn’t even inside her yet*. He didn’t stop, lapping at her greedily. She had to push him away with a trembling hand, unable to speak.

The low, aggrieved growl he released made her clit throb even as it reminded her that this male had instincts that drove him to please his mate and keep her sated in their bed for days at a time.

*Yes, please.*

She whimpered as she watched him strip for her, yanking his clothes off as if they’d offended him. He tossed them to the side before standing for her so she could survey him. Every inch was covered in hard muscle and his chest and abs were

dusted with dark hair. Her eyes widened as she got her first look at his cock. It was impossible for her to take her eyes off it. It was *way* more than she'd thought she was signing up for. He was *huge*. It was a deeper shade of green than the rest of him and the head was dark and swollen, leaking from the tip.

Cassandra panted at him, unable to speak a word, before holding her hand out in invitation. Pride swelled his chest as he towered over her, settling himself between her legs. He was so much bigger than her that he had to bend awkwardly to kiss her.

She reached out to touch him, her fingers skimming over the searing skin of his chest and going lower. Before she could reach his cock, he tsked, nabbing her fingers and pulling her hands over her head. He settled himself comfortably between her thighs and she found herself wrapping her legs around him as tight as she could, but she could barely get a grip on him.

*I need to do yoga.*

Flexibility would work wonders when her ogre was as huge as he was and she'd have to work on that. For now, she'd make do with what her body was capable of. "Make love to me, Max," she whispered the words, arching against him, pressing her bare breasts against his chest.

"Let me get you ready, Cass." He ran his palm up her thigh, caressing her before making his way to her pussy. "You're too tiny to take me right now."

"I've—" She blushed, looking away. "I've been practicing."

A grin crossed her male's face. "Practicing?"

She nodded, wishing he wasn't holding her hands so she could cover her face. "I bought a..." She cleared her throat, shaking her head. "Anyway, I've used it... a lot."

He groaned, deep in his throat. "You're going to have to put on a show for me."

She bit her lip as the tip of his cock pressed against her pussy. She arched her back, her heels digging into his back as she felt the first thick inch of him slide home. "Max!"

“Fuck, Cass.” His voice was rough as he pressed in another inch. “You’re so tight. I don’t know if I can fit.” He leaned down, running his tusks over her neck and breasts, laving her nipple until she was *certain* she was creating a puddle of wetness underneath them.

She was lost in him—in the feel of him over her. Of his cock slowly pushing inside her. It was everything she had ever dreamed it would be. “Max.” She ran her fingers down his back, digging her nails into his skin. Her eyes were rolling back in her head with every pulsing inch that slid into her. The stretch of his cock was *phenomenal* and it was so much better than the toy she’d been using that she couldn’t even fathom having anything else but the real thing inside her ever again.

His grunt as he pushed deeper made her hyper aware of the fact that they were only at the halfway mark. She whimpered at the next solid thrust, arching her back as he angled her hips so the slide was easier.

“Breathe, Cass.” The whisper against her ear brought awareness to the fact that her lungs were burning and she’d been holding her breath for the longest time.

One wheezing gasp later, he was able to gain another couple of inches. The twinge of discomfort only made her more hyper aware of the fact that she wanted him more than anything she’d ever wanted in her life. Struggling to help, she tilted her hips even more into the angle that he needed. The little pinch in her lower back was nothing compared to the rapture of him bottoming out inside her.

Her gasp was lost in the sound of his yell. He was still for what felt like an hour as her pussy worked to accommodate him—with her rocking her hips to rub her clit against him.

“Please tell me you’re okay.” The sweet murmur was followed by a moan that made her bite her lip. She would listen to this male’s sexual sounds for the rest of her life if she could.

“Okay.” It was clear at that point that her brain had taken a timeout. She wasn’t sure what response he expected, but the

masculine chuckle sent quivers to her clit that had her rocking her hips again. “Now.”

He groaned his agreement before slowly pulling out of her. She scrabbled at him, trying to get him back inside, her protest stuck in her throat. When he thrust back in—with so much force her teeth clattered—she screamed at the top of her lungs. She didn’t care if she hurt his ears because she came so hard, she was sure she went blind.

Blinking, realizing she’d only accidentally closed her eyes, she rocked on his cock for more. “Please, Max.”

The feral sound that left him didn’t scare her at all. It only ratcheted up her lust to death-defying levels. He didn’t hold back, his hips rutting into her, shoving her up the bed until he had to put his hand on the top of her head so she didn’t bang into his headboard.

Cassandra cried out with each thrust, her eyelids fluttering as a second orgasm began building while he grunted his pleasure against her hair.

“So good, Cass.”

She barely understood the guttural words, clinging to him as he fucked her, her hands weaving into his locs and holding on for dear life. With one hard, final thrust, he roared to the ceiling as he came, his cock throbbing inside her and triggering her own mind-melting orgasm. Her scream was silent, her lips parted, but no sound was released while she felt pulse after pulse of his searing cum fill her.

She didn’t know how long it took her to come back to her body, but he was looking down at her, his gaze filled with love and tenderness.

“You’re marrying me next week,” he huffed, his breathing as choppy and uneven as hers. She was proud of her body for handling that much male and thriving through it.

“I already said yes,” she giggled, kissing his soft lips gently.

“No backing out now.” He sighed happily, grinning as he nipped her throat with his fangs. “You’re going to be my queen.”

Biting her lip, she nodded, slowly running her hands over his back. “Do you think I’ll be any good?”

He snorted out a laugh. “You’ve been doing amazing so far. You realize that we’ve been making most of our decisions together? Our daily tea-time is the most important meeting of my day. I’ve been consulting my queen on every choice that has to be made.”

Her eyes were wide as she stared up at him, her mind boggled. “But—”

“It’ll be easier now that you’ll be by my side.” He happily ran his tusks over her shoulder, nipping the skin there, too. “We’ll even out the cabinet. Ensure that there’s more than just male ogres in there. For some reason, even with my parents involved, they weren’t able to drag this place out of the old ways. We will.” He ran his palm down her side. “Our population is diverse and we should be, too.” He swiped his tongue along her skin. “Deliciously diverse like their queen.”

“Max.” She wasn’t able to get past his name when her throat was clogged with tears. “Are you serious?”

He nodded, nuzzling her breasts. “Of course I am. You know I want to change things around here.”

“With me?” She bit her lip, cupping his face and in her hands. He’d been showing her for months how he felt about her. He’d even told her, but in this moment, when her entire life was changing she needed to hear him say it out loud again. Needed the validation so she knew she wasn’t dreaming this entire thing.

“I’d never want anyone else by my side. It took us a while—” He beamed at her. “—but we finally got it right. On Hearts Day of all days. It must be a sign”

Cassandra couldn’t stop the grin from spreading across her face if she wanted to. “Definitely a sign.” She leaned forward, pressing her lips to his. “I love you, Max.”

“And I love you, my Cass.”

THE END

## *About the Author*

Saam King is a Paranormal Romance author who writes about sexy, alpha werewolves and their sassy, badass mates. She's been a voracious reader and writer of all things romance since she was way too young to be reading it.

Saam lives in Ontario, Canada with her supporting and loving family, stressing everyone out with her crazy writing schedule. She writes happily ever afters with a heaping tablespoon of spice.

Link to her books: [linktr.ee/saamking](http://linktr.ee/saamking)



# *Matched*

Sheri L. Williams



## *Blurb*

Does anyone ever really meet their True Love at a speed dating event?

How about the next morning?

June is only looking to get laid. Aramis is ready to settle down. After a disastrous speed dating event where neither found a match, can an impromptu breakfast meeting change that?

Find out in *Matched* by Sheri L Williams

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# *Chapter 1*

Thur, Feb 14th 6:34 pm

“Welcome to Meet Your Match! I’m Mia and I’ll be your MC for the evening!” June watched her best friend work the crowd from her spot on the small stage at the back of the club. She sipped on her margarita and scoped out the crowd before she gave Mia her full attention.

“This is our third annual Valentine’s Day speed dating event and, according to the numbers, this event offers a great chance to meet your forever match. Now, don’t forget to be honest and open and of course, have fun!”

*Yeah right*, June thought. She hadn’t even wanted to be there for the speed dating mess, but she’d given in when Mia had told her point blank that she needed to get laid. As much as June wanted to argue with Mia, she couldn’t. It was a sad fact of life that June’s job kept her so busy that finding time to meet a man just wasn’t in the cards.

‘At the very least you can find a guy to clear the cobwebs in your vag, June.’ Mia’s words ran in a loop through June’s head as she scanned the men who littered the reception area. All the ladies sat at tables with a pink sparkly number in front of them and, according to Mia, every five minutes a new man would sit at her table and try to win her over.

As far as June could see, the only upside was that her sparkly number was 15, her college number. That number had dominated her life for four years and, even now, it still meant a lot to her. She made a mental note to thank Mia for the consideration.

June finished her margarita right as the first man sat at her table. For all that people say you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, June immediately knew that this man was not for her.

"Hi, I'm Darren. I'm thirty-five and work in tech. It's nice to meet you number fifteen."

*Ugh, tech*, she thought to herself before she pasted a smile on her face. "Hi Darren! I'm June. I'm thirty-one and I coach hockey." He nodded but didn't say anything else. "Are you into sports at all?"

"Ah, no. I make video games, so I spend most of my time indoors."

"Oh cool. What type of video games?" Not really her thing at all, but she didn't want to spend the rest of their time in silence.

"First person shooters, like *Call of Duty* or *Doom*. I design the backgrounds," he told her, his face lit up.

"That's cool. I never really got into gaming, but some of my team back in college used to have a laptop they took on roadies to kill time."

"So you played too?" he asked. She did her best not to glare, but who would coach if you didn't love enough to play?

"Since I could walk, I could skate. My mom is a figure skating coach but I fell in love with hockey at six and never looked back."

"It's cool that you're so passionate about it." He leaned forward, interest finally showing, but she knew he wasn't for her. The ring of the bell was heaven sent. "Well have a good night, June."

"Same to you, Darren." As soon as he'd left her line of sight, she crossed out his number on her sheet.

While she waited for her next tablemate, June caught a glimpse of a graying gentleman in a blue button down that piqued her interest, but she lost sight of him as quickly as she'd found him.

*Oh well*, June thought, right as a new man sat across from her.

"You're too young for me." Were the first words out of his mouth.

"Wow. Cutting it quick, are you?"

"I simply do not see the point in even pretending I'm interested when I have a clear desire for an older woman," the man continued.

"Luckily for you this is a public space so I can't go hockey goon on you. Also lucky for you, I also prefer an older man, so let's try this again. Hi. I'm June."

"Hockey? Oh, I'm Scott."

"Yes, hockey. I played my whole life and now I coach. I am fully capable of kicking your ass but my friend is in charge of this event and I don't want to upset her."

"Okay, fine." He held his hands up in mock surrender. "Hi, I'm Scott and I'm here to find a sugar mama."

"Jesus. Really?" June asked, dumbfounded.

"Yes. I've found that I enjoy being taken care of, and college is hard enough on its own, having to work to pay for coffee just seems dumb." He leaned back against his chair and June studied him, confused by his demeanor.

"Wow, and women just... accept this?"

"You'd be surprised what I can get away with being young, attractive and good in bed." He grinned and sent her a wink. June groaned.

"Interesting," she deadpanned.

"What? Don't act all self-righteous, June, who likes older men."

“Yeah, but that’s an experience thing, not an ‘I want them to pay for my life’ thing. I’ve been with guys my own age and in general, they’re all selfish and self absorbed,” she told him.

“You’re not wrong. I’d say you’re only a few years older than me, and all my friends are self important assholes.”

“I’m thirty-one.” She wasn’t ashamed of her age at all, nor her place in the world.

“Yeah, I just hit twenty-eight, and I’m in my second year of med school. I have a shit ton of loans and barely any time, hence the sugar mama thing,” he offered.

“Hey, to each their own, I’m not judging you at all, Scott. Just never met anyone who was looking for that.”

“Well now you have—DING!—and now I’m off to find my Miss Right. Good luck!”

“You too!” she called out as he left her.

*Two down, god knows how many left to go.* June met Mia’s gaze and stuck her tongue out. Mia rolled her eyes but sent a waiter over and June appreciated that.

“What can I get for you, miss?” the waiter asked.

“Another margarita please, and are there appetizers available?”

“Stuffed mushrooms, mini leek quiches, bacon wrapped water chestnuts, and miniature spring rolls,” he listed.

“Oh, could you also bring me a plate of mini quiches and mini spring rolls, please?”

“Yess, miss. Be right back with that order.” The waiter slipped back through the crowd and June searched for the man she’d seen earlier. She didn’t see him, sadly.

The waiter arrived at the same time as her next tablemate. She thanked the waiter and turned to start her spiel over again, but the man across from her clucked his tongue at the poor young waiter and demanded a scotch on the rocks. Immediately she wanted to hit him.

“Yeah, you can go now,” she said, coldly.



“What?”

“Assholes who talk to waiters like that have zero fucking chance with me, so you can go.” The asshole sputtered in outrage but June ignored him. “You just ignore him, okay? You know Mia, the coordinator?” The waiter nodded. “You go tell her that June wants to see her, okay?”

“Yes miss.” The waiter had left in a hurry. The guy had stayed across from her.

“I wasn’t joking. You can go now and I’ll be sure to tell my friend how you spoke to her staff.”

“You don’t need to.” June spun and there Mia stood, arms crossed over her chest. “Number six, we do not approve of assholeish behavior, so you’ll be blacklisted from any future events. Please leave.”

“He’s just a fucking servant!” The man exploded.

“Server, not servant. Clearly you don’t know the difference.” Mia glared at the man. “Now leave, before I get the bouncer to toss you out on your ass.”

The man stood with a huff and left, muttering under his breath the entire time. Both June and Mia watched until he got to the doors where the bouncer stood, having watched the entire ordeal. Once the man left, June leaned against Mia’s hip.

“Sorry.”

“Do not apologize. I love how you knock the assholes down a peg,” Mia told her. She leaned down to smack a kiss to June’s head. “Now, back to the fun.”

“Oh, is this meant to be fun?” June snarked.

“Yes!” Mia told her. “You just gotta put in a bit of effort.”

“I’m trying.” June threw her hands up. Mia laughed. “Okay, I’m trying a li’l bit.”

“Exactly!” Mia blew her a kiss and went back to overseeing the event. June was left at her table, the desire to eat gone. She sipped on the icy margarita, stared out at the crowd, and waited for her next potential match.

“That was brilliantly done.” The voice was deep. She turned and her eyes grew big. *It was him! The guy!*

“Oh, it was uh... nothing, really.”

“Sure,” he joked.

June looked away again, watching the people around her as she willed her blush away. A sound startled her and she turned to find the seat across from her empty and her mystery guy gone.



## *Chapter 2*

Fri, Feb 15th 7:13 am

Still cursing Mia and the whole damn speed dating event under her breath, June walked into her favorite coffee shop by the college campus. She ordered her latte and a muffin and found a table near the back. Sitting by the doors was awful on a busy winter day.

“June!” Her name got called out and she went to collect her breakfast. At the counter she’d stopped short, frozen in surprise.

“Number fifteen. How interesting.” The runaway man from the night before had miraculously showed up next to her, and she hadn’t a clue how.

“I see we need to talk, can I sit with you?” he asked. June nodded, still mostly frozen. “Let me grab your order with mine, I’ll be right behind you.”

June nodded again and then shook herself out of her stupor. She was smarter than that. “I’m at a table in the back.”

“Perfect.” She left him at the counter, glad for the few moments to compose herself.

“So, I really am sorry about last night,” he murmured after sitting across from her. It was eerily familiar.

“I believe you, I do. Can’t say I’m not curious about why you legged it as fast as you did.”

“Ah, well, an ex sort of... not really but...”

“Woah, complicated huh?”

“Yeah,” he huffed out, “you could say that.”

“So...” She grinned before taking a sip of her latte. “You wanna tell me about it?”

“Stacey, the dark haired woman at the bar, did you see her?” he asked. She nodded. “Last year she and her husband approached me. Apparently it was her greatest desire to have a threesome and Cal was up for it, so I said why not.”

“As one does,” she replied, before snorting.

“Yes, as one does. Now I’m pretty flexible, I guess you’d call me either Bi or Pan, not that it’s too important really. But Stacey was used to being the boss in the bedroom, and I uh... why am I telling you this?” He ran a hand through his messy, greying hair and June pushed his coffee closer to him.

“I have a trustworthy face?” June offered.

“Sure, it’s not that seeing her threw me off, it’s your face.”

“It is, so... go on.” June winked. The man laughed and shook his head.

“So yeah, I tend to run dominant in bed but so did Stacey and once Cal started to listen to me more then he listened to her, well she got jealous and it all spiraled into a mess.”

“Sounds fairly awful.”

“Yeah, it definitely did not end well.” He sipped on his coffee and gave her an appraising look. “Well now we know why I left so early, but I never did get my five minutes with you so I don’t even know why you were there.”

“My story is much less interesting,” she promised before going on, “I’m married to the job.”

“Aren’t we all?”

“Yeah well, collegiate hockey is grueling. I love it, but I don’t misunderstand just how much of my life it takes up. And Mia, that’s my best friend and the coordinator of the event last night, she all but demanded I show so I could at the very least, get laid.”

“And did you, Miss June, get laid?” He leaned forward over the table and she could feel the blush cover her cheeks.

“Nah, the only guy there,” she murmured, “Whose name I still don’t know by the way, that guy was the only one who sparked any interest and he left me high and dry before we even got to speak.” She raised an eyebrow at his cheery grin.

“Oh?” There was so much in that single word. “Well June, I’m Aramis. I’m 41, widowed, and a research scientist.”

“Hello Aramis, what an interesting name,” June replied.

“Ah, that’s possibly not a speed dating conversation.”

“What about a first date?” June asked.

“Is this what that is?” Aramis volleyed back.

“I would not mind that at all. I can’t deny that I prefer men older than me. I spent enough time with stick rabbits back in college, and now I want someone with more... experience. And like I said before, you definitely sparked my interest.”

“What in the blue hell is a stick rabbit?” he asked.

June laughed so hard she almost snorted out coffee. “Have you never heard the term ‘puck bunny?’” He shook his head no. “Ahhhh, so you know nothing about hockey. Interesting. A puck bunny is a female hockey groupie, usually only in it for the money, the fame, and the sex. A stick rabbit is the male equivalent,” she explained.

“And you had your own groupies?”

“Not personally.” She shook her head. “But I played D1 hockey at Wisconsin, so the team had groupies and I, like my teammates, partook.”

“I can understand that. I was widowed young, too young and the way I dealt with that was pretty much to sleep my way

through the research department I interned at,” he offered.

“I totally get it,” she agreed. “It’s hard to say no when sex is offered so freely, right? Especially if you’re stressed to high hell or—”

“Or dealing with a heavy dose of grief, yes,” he finished for her.

“Nothing wrong with that,” she told him.

“Oh, I know.” He smiled. “But it’s been years now and I’m past that. I know I settled too early, yet another conversation for later, but I believe I’m ready to try again.”

“Is that why you were at the speed dating thing last night?”

“Yeah, so you can only imagine my shock at seeing an ex there,” he joked.

“I sure can.” She finished her muffin and tried to figure out how to put into words her thoughts. “I’m not sure about settling down, but I’d like to see you again. Possibly have an actual planned date.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Aramis agreed. “I could tell you about my name and you can explain hockey to me.”

“I can talk hockey all day long, you might regret that.”

“Nah, I think I’ll like it just fine.” He grinned and June fought her blush. “Let me give you my number, yeah? And we’ll plan something. I’m guessing your schedule is worse than mine.”

“It sure is. This is the first time in over four years I’ve not had a hockey game on Valentine’s Day,” she confided.

“Hence your friend corralling you into getting laid,” he joked.

“Exactly. Though it certainly didn’t turn out how she hoped.”

“Well, we’ll see about that.” He winked and pushed over the paper he’d written his number on. “Now I do have to get to work, but I hope to hear from you soon.”

“Sounds great.” June watched him walk away, her thoughts whirled in her head. *Maybe not the worst valentine’s day ever.*





## *Chapter 3*

Sat, Feb 16th 4:21 pm

June had texted with Aramis for nearly the whole of Friday. With her team on a three day break, she had more down time than usual, and she was quite glad to use it getting to know Aramis. Every new thing she learned about him only made her admiration rise. Which led to her getting dressed in something other than yoga pants and old shirsey.

Her hair up in a high ponytail, wearing the dress from an awards banquet the year before, and black 1920's style shoes, June stared at the mirror and felt ladylike in a way her father would probably pay good money to be a regular experience. It was odd.

She didn't hate it though, when Aramis picked her up. His first date idea had been an underground speakeasy she'd heard one of her assistant coaches talk about, but she'd never been invited to before.

In his car they argued over music, his choice of classic rock wasn't awful but June had always chosen the Rat Pack era, since her grandmother had been a Vegas dancer back then.

"I may not love that type of music, but your choice only cements this plan as a great one on my part." He winked at her and she couldn't even disagree. Much.

“Let’s not count your chickens ‘til they hatch, bud.”

“Bud? *Bud?*” he snorted. “What type of pet name is that?”

“First, we’re not at the pet name stage yet, and if we were, my choice has always been ‘babe,’ second, I played and now coach ice hockey. The amount of Canadians I’m around should not surprise you.” She rolled her eyes at his fake annoyance and once again played with his satellite radio touchscreen.

“I can handle *babe*, though I must admit, it is quite close to *bud*,” he joked.

“Oh? And what’s your favorite pet name then? *Sweetheart?* *Darling?* *Baby?* There’s only so many to choose from. Unless of course you speak French, but if you call me cabbage we might go a few rounds on the ice.”

“Cabbage?” he asked, his voice full of amusement. “Oh, we’re here. Hold on, let me get the door.” I waited for him to park and then make his way around his car to open my door. *What a gentleman.* “Okay, we have a short walk, so explain the veg to me.”

“One of the pet names I hear the most with Canadian brethren is *mon chou*, which pretty much translates to my cabbage and or sweetie, depending on who ask. But it’s like THE pet name they use.” June laughed at the drawn eyebrows, amused with his confusion.

“That’s weird and I really want to ask more, but we’re here.” He stepped forward to a wall covered in graffiti. June watched him press a button that she hadn’t even noticed.

“Password.” The voice was scratchy. June looked for an intercom but didn’t see one.

“Tippy Elf.” Aramis winked at her while she goggled at the whole interaction. A buzz and then the woosh of a door opening drew her attention. “Come on. I’ve heard great things.”

“You’ve not been here?” she asked as they made their way down the stairs.

“No, but one of my co-workers’ brothers owns it. Bill told me if I ever wanted to check it out he’d give me the password.”

“Wicked,” she breathed out.

“Let’s hope so. I’ll kill him if this is totally underwhelming.” Aramis led her right to the bar where he ordered for her. It was lucky he did, as June could not stop taking it all in. The ceiling was low and covered in Edison bulbs. The walls were covered in antique concert posters and things like that, and each table had a jar filled with red flowers. With drinks in hand, Aramis led her to a table near the small stage that was still open.

“Okay, so preliminary thoughts and grading?” he asked while they sipped on French 75’s.

“You want me to grade our date?”

“One thing you should know about me, June...” He leaned in so close, she swore she could count each individual piece of stubble on his chin. “I’m a slut for praise, giving and receiving.”

“Fuck.” She leaned back and dragged her teeth over her bottom lip. “So it’s like that is it?”

“Like what?” He sat back, exuding innocence that she knew was fake.

“You trying to ruin my panties.” She sipped on her drink before leveling him with a stare that made her players quake in their skates. “If you want to play ‘let’s one up each other with dirty talk,’ I should warn you that not only will I win, but I’m not wearing panties. There’s nothing to ruin.”

“Really?”

“Would I lie?” she countered.

“My immediate response is no, but I’m not sure I know you well enough. So I’ll ask again. Are you really not wearing underwear right now?”

“Nope.” She said, popping that p. “No pantyline to be found here.”

“Good lord.” He threw back the rest of his drink, snorting at the fizz from the champagne. “I’ll go get us more drinks before I do something truly stupid.”

June snorted and watched him weave his way back to the bar. She hadn’t lied, when he told her about the place he was taking her, she wished she had something 1920’s appropriate but she didn’t nor did she have time, so her dress was figure hugging, and there was no way to hide lines, so she was completely nude under it. She knew exactly how most men reacted, and Aramis did not disappoint.

He came back with two fresh drinks and a tray of snacks. “Here you go, you little minx. Another French 75 and a plate of nibbles. Which I shit you not, is what the bartender called them. I have no clue how he kept a straight face.”

“Ooh, snacks. We are getting dinner later, right?” He nodded. “Good. I need a ridiculous amount of calories and while these are adorable—she lifted a lobster canape off the plate—this will do nothing to feed me.”

“Oh, I’ll feed you,” he mumbled. She heard him.

With a smirk on her face she leaned in. “What *do* you plan to feed me, then?”

“You are a dirty girl,” he responded with a growl. “Be good and I’ll show you later.”

“We’ll see,” she responded, before she popped the canape in her mouth. “Ohh, this is fucking delicious.”

“Let me taste,” he demanded. She went to offer him a canape of his own, but he ducked in and stole a kiss from her lips. His tongue swiped into her shocked mouth. The kiss delved into a frenzy so quickly, she grabbed his shoulders to hold on.

“Fuh... Ara... we’re in pub-public,” she gasped out when he finally pulled back to breathe.

“You’re right, of course. Come, let’s sit and enjoy our appetizer.” His hand sat low on her back and they sat side by side until the singer walked onto the stage. The beautiful

woman started to sing and Aramis turned to June. “Will you dance with me?”

“Yes, yes I will.” She held her hand out and he took it, easily leading her to the dancefloor.

The first song was slow and haunting, Aramis held her close and they moved together. The first slow dance melded into a second and a third before it turned upbeat. His grip tightened and they moved quickly around the other dancers.

June laughed with joy as they moved until they stopped close to the edge of the dancefloor, his arms tight around her.

“Goddamn woman.” His thighs caged in one of hers.

“Hockey thighs, a thing of beauty right?” she responded

“This is what decades of hockey does to you?”

“Yeah, remember that conversation at the coffee shop about stick rabbits? You’d be surprised how many men out there really want to be crushed between thighs like these.” she winked. He groaned, the grip of his thighs went even tighter.

“I want to take you home and lay you out on my bed and worship your fantastic body,” he told her, low and directly against her ear.

“If you promise to feed me at some point, I’m in your hands.”

“Are you?” he asked.

“Yes.” A simple answer.

“Let’s go.”



## *Chapter 4*

Sat, Feb 16th 6:07 pm

The drive to Aramis's house was a blur of bright lights, too loud AC/DC, and cold fingertips dug into the flesh of her thigh as her dress rode up. June half paid attention to the homes they drove past once they made it to a cute neighborhood outside the city but the largest part of her brain was focused on those five pinpricks of touch on her naked skin.

"How much longer?" she asked. Impatience wasn't new to her, but then it burned under her skin.

"Less than five minutes baby, we're almost there."

"Oh, good," June sighed.

"Impatient?"

"Unbelievably so." She rolled her head against the seat back and grinned at him. "Mia wasn't wrong when she told me I needed to get laid."

"I'll fix that for you. We'll clean those cobwebs right out," he joked.

"Hey! There are no cobwebs! I keep her happy with multiple toys, but as Mia says, "a BOB ain't got nothing on the real thing.""



“You got toys, do you?” he asked as he pulled into a well lit driveway. “Tell me about them.”

“You wanna scope out your competition, Aramis? Worried you won’t measure up?” June skirted the hood of his car once they were inside his garage, cataloging everything she could see.

“Baby girl, Mia is right, your toys ain’t got nothing on me. You’ll see. Now in you get.” He swatted at her ass before he took her wrist and brought her towards the door into the house. “You want a quick tour or you want me to do that in the morning?”

“You can show me around after breakfast.” She spun around to face him, smirking. “You made some promises in that car that I’d like you to keep.”

“Whatever you want. You’re in control tonight, you understand?”

“You told me you liked to dominate?” she asked as she followed him to his room.

“Yeah, I definitely do, but not the first time. That kind of dynamic needs trust.” He pulled her tight, his hands slid up her thighs to bunch her dress up and he leaned in to whisper, “I hope we get there. I’d love to play with you that way.”

“Y-yeah,” she muttered. “I think I’d like that.”

“You would,” he said with no question. “Now, strip and lay on the bed. I’ve been dying to get my hands on you since yesterday.”

June considered saying no, and telling him to strip her, but she’d never been shy about her body—there was no reason to be. So she reached behind herself and slowly lowered the zipper. The dress caressed her body as it slithered to the floor, leaving her in nothing but pale skin and the perfume she’d put on before he picked her up.

“Fucking hell, June. Can I?” His hands hovered over her body until she gave him the go ahead. Then he moved quickly, his hands mapped every inch he could get to.

“I’m clean, uh, both ways and I can’t actually have kids so...” June got out before he dragged a moan out of her. His large hands trailed up her hips, over her small rounded belly, and headed directly to breasts. Averaged sized, she’d never really had anyone pay attention to her tits, not when she had the thighs and the ass she did, but Aramis seemed to want to worship every bit of her.

“Thank you for telling me. We’re still using condoms, but damn June... if I can keep you for any length of time I would love to feel you bare, and if you want to talk—she shook her head no before he could finish—then that’s fine. But again, not for a first time.”

“O-okay.” Her head fell back when her neck went under assault by lips and teeth. She knew she should tell him not to mark her, the locker room was harsh after all, but she cared more for his lips than for the fines she might get.

“How bout you get on the bed, gorgeous, and I’ll get a condom,” Aramis offered.

“Yeah, but you gotta get naked too,” she volleyed back.

“I’m planning to, June. Just gonna get a few other things too.” He ducked into the bathroom she’d caught sight of and while she was left alone, her eyes closed and she did her best to calm her heartbeat. There was no point in getting so excited that she shot off early. He popped back out fast enough that her quick meditation didn’t do shit anyways.

June leaned up on her elbows and watched him come through the doorway. He was down to just his boxer-briefs, which was honestly quite a good look on him. When he turned to drop a strip of condoms and a small bottle of lube on the nightstand she caught a tattoo on his right ribcage.

“What’s the tattoo?” she asked.

“Oh. Ha. That would be my nerdy side showing up, uh... it’s the chemical compound of sulfurous acid. Okay, really I’m just a nerd, sorry.” He sat on the bed and she curled into him, her fingers traced the ink on his skin.

“It’s pretty. And hey,” she paused to poke him in the side. “I think being nerdy is cool. So don’t worry about that.” June rolled back onto her back, letting one hand trail down her body until she reached her clit. “You should, however, worry about the lack of orgasms.”

Aramis huffed out a laugh before he tackled her, locking both of her hands at her sides. “As the lady wishes.”

His kiss stole the breath from her lungs. Once she was gasping, he left her mouth and trailed kisses down her throat and over her sternum. He paused his trek south only for a moment to press more kisses to her tits, leaving them pebbled with goosebumps.

“Your body is insane.” His lips brushed her stomach as he spoke, making her tremble under his words. “One night is not going to be enough.”

Before she could respond, his mouth lowered over her pussy. Her hips jumped up, but his large hands had her pinned easily. His tongue slid across her wetness and she moaned. Her hands flew to his hair and one leg wrapped around his back. Aramis chuckled in response and the vibrations traveled across her entire body.

“Fuck, I’m so close already,” June murmured.

“I know. You’re fucking soaked.” His tongue delved deeper, followed by a finger. He crooked his finger and gently bit on her clit and underneath him, June exploded.

“Ho-holy fuck.”

“You okay up there?” He looked up from her waist, a smug grin coated with her slick.

“I wanna smack you for that smooch grin but since you deserve it...” She tugged his hair. “Come up here.”

Aramis crawled up her body, caging her in. “Yes?”

“Kiss me.” She pulled him down and took over the kiss he gave her. Their tongues danced together, keeping him distracted. Her foot trailed up his leg until she hit the waist of his boxer briefs, which she immediately tugged down.

“Hey now, you want me naked, all you gotta do is ask,” he told her after breaking from the kiss.

“I did tell you. Since you were taking your sweet time, I figured I’d help.” She winked at him and he ducked down to kiss her again. June sighed into the kiss, her hands ran up and down his back until he pulled away. “Where you going?”

“I’m getting naked!” He rolled over and shucked off his remaining piece of clothing. She grinned and reached for him, but he pushed her hands away and rolled again, this time over her. “I gotta get the damn condom, woman. Damn.”

“Fine.” She fell back, arms by her head.

“You’re a bit demanding, aren’t you?” he asked. She nodded with a smile and he shook his head. “Not gonna lie, I don’t hate it.” He dove in for a quick kiss before he took a second to rip open the foil package and roll on the condom.

“It’s been a while, remember?”

“Well, I’m about to fix that. Now I grabbed the lube, but I honestly don’t think you need it. Thoughts?” He moved between her legs, his cock bobbed with each movement he made.

June held back a laugh and looked him square in the face. “Fuck me.”

“Yeah, I’m planning on it. You ready?”

“Been ready,” she replied with a wiggle of her hips.

“Brat.” He swatted at her hip. He rubbed her slit with his thumb, spreading moisture as he went. “Fucking gorgeous.”



## *Chapter 5*

Sat, Feb 16th 7:02 pm

“Fuck, fuck, fuck...”

“You okay?” Aramis grunted.

“Why is your dick so fucking thick? Holy...” she groaned the last word as he finished his slow slide in.

“I wasn’t blessed with length, so I got girth. Are you complaining?” He pulled out just a bit and steadily thrust back in. “Fucking hell, you’re tight.”

“I won’t be much longer,” she joked. “Ooohhhh...”

“That’s what you get for joking.” His hands gripped her hips, holding her still while he started with deeper thrusts.

“Oh, you fucker.” Her arms flew down, her hands grabbing his forearms. “Oh, yeah... fuck.”

“Gonna... harder, yeah?” he asked. She nodded and wrapped her legs around his waist. He let go of her hips to lean forward, his grip transferred to his headboard for better leverage. Her lower half lifted to meet the new angle and her hands moved to his sweat slick back, nails digging in. The slap of skin on skin echoed in his bedroom, in chorus with June’s moans and his grunts.

“Your... fucking... thighs...” he groaned out. One hand left the headboard to slide down her body to land on her thigh, slick and tight around him.

“Uh, huh, yeah... just... I’m gonna come,” she got out.

“Yeah, okay.” He moved his hand from her thigh to her clit. He thumbed the small bud in time with his thrusts, chasing her orgasm before he let himself. “Come on.”

“Ara... yes, yes... fuck.” Her orgasm slammed into her, making her whole body shake. Aftershocks gripped her body as he slammed into her one last time before he finished. He slumped over, landing on June with an ‘omph.’

“You alive?” She poked his ribs, amused by his squeak.

“Woman. Yes, I’m alive.” He pushed himself back up and gently pulled out of her. After tying off the condom and dropping it into his trash, he flopped over onto his back. It was undignified but he did not care. She rolled, laying her head on his sweaty shoulder. He draped an arm over her waist and wished, oddly enough, for the ac to kick on.

“So...” she started.

“So?”

“Did you still want grading?” she asked with a wink.

“You brat!” He rolled, trapping her under him while he tickled her sides. She laughed so hard she snorted, but he didn’t stop.

“Okay, okay! Mercy!” she shrieked. He stopped tickling her, and rolled them both so they were laying side by side. “I was gonna give you a gold star,” she grumbled.

“Oohh, gold star performance, eh?”

“Until you tickled me,” she told him. “You definitely lose points for that.”

“Okay, I can handle that. But really? You okay? I didn’t hurt you or anything?” He leaned over her, making sure she was good.

“I’m fucking golden, Ara.”

“Oh, is that sticking?” he asked.

“You know what, I think it will. And I think this might be the perfect time to explain the name.” She snuggled in close, looking up at him.

“Why the hell not.” He settled in better and dragged the blanket over them. “It’s not long or anything, just pretty embarrassing. Both my parents are English professors, let me lead with that, and my mom is the daughter of a Classics professor—” he paused.

“Ahh.”

“Yeah. So her name is Calliope, because why not name your kid after a Greek goddess, right? Well my dad put his foot down, so luckily I’m not Theseus or something like that. But Aramis was one of the Three Musketeers from Alexandre Dumas, which is one of the three novels dad did his dissertation on,” he finished.

“Kids must have been so mean to you,” she murmured. He shifted his hold on her to pull her closer.

“They were, until my little brother came along. Atticus is almost an equally awful name, but where I’ve always been nerdy, he’s always been sporty. Two years younger than me, but once he was in school he kept the other kids from being too dumb.”

“Are you guys close? I’m an only child of two athletic people, we’re all pretty independent. Not exactly close, my family.” There was a twinge of sadness in her voice, and no matter how long it’d been, she’d never been able to get rid of it.

“This seems to be a heavy topic for our afterglow, baby. But yeah, we’re close. Two English nerds, one science nerd, and a football player. Family dinners can be quite loud.”

“Sounds lovely, truly.” She pressed a kiss to his collarbone. “But you’re right. Pretty heavy, let’s just sleep.”

“Only for a bit. I know you gotta eat.” She chuckled and burrowed deeper into his hold.





Sunday morning should have been lazy for both of them but dual ringtones blared out in his kitchen and there were hasty goodbyes and promises to see each other again. Ara went off to his parent's place to help with something she'd not heard and June raced back to campus.

"Joey, what happened?" She unlocked her office with her phone braced on her shoulder. On the other end of the line was her assistant coach who was at the hospital waiting to hear about their goalie. "Car accident? Parents been notified? Okay, I'll grab what I need from here and then I'll meet you there."

In a rush, she grabbed the file for Cara, their goalie, and her tablet. In her car she hooked her phone to the console and dialed Cara's mom. "Mrs. Palencheck, I've just been updated... will you be flying out... I can get you a hotel room close to the hospital if I need to... yes, I will... okay. I'll call you back as soon as I know for sure... you too, bye for now."

With that taken care of, she made her way to the hospital, worried for a scared nineteen year old. Those girls were her number one priority and she had to give her all her attention. So when a text from Ara came through, she ignored it.

In the parking deck, she grabbed her tablet, her phone and the file, shoved it all in a leather bag her dad had sent her, and went to find her player.

"How is she?" she asked Joey the second she saw him.

"Broken leg, two cracked ribs, concussion," Joey listed off. "She's getting her cast now, and she'll be here at least two more days so they can watch her."

"Did you find out what happened?" As they talked, she sent a text to the team group just to make them aware that one of theirs was hurt.

"Guy sideswiped her. She was only a block off campus, on the housing side. Cops took care of everything on the scene, so I called her parents and notified them."

“Yeah, I talked to them. I’m gonna get them a room at the Marriott across the road. They already had their tickets.” She made the reservation for the room and sent the confirmation to Cara’s mom. With all that done, all she could do was wait and that was hell.

June checked the test from Ara and shot one back to him, telling him she’d be unavailable for a while. She wasn’t going to ghost him but her player took precedence. As did the others, who had just started bombarding the group text for answers.



June stayed at the hospital until Cara’s parents arrived. It was for the best considering it didn’t take long for the poor staff to be overrun by concerned hockey players. She left the Palenchecks with a promise to be there for whatever they needed, and she made it home before she crashed.

A buzzing woke her up. Slapping her hand out she blearily searched for her phone to shut off her alarm, only to find that it wasn’t her phone at all but someone at her door.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” she called out. She yanked open her door to find a delivery person holding a bag out.

“June Smith?”

“Yes. I didn’t order anything though.”

“I believe there is a note in the bag. I’m just the delivery person, have a good day, ma’am.” The delivery person left her feeling stupid. She shook it off and kicked the door close behind her while she searched for a note in the bag.

*A little snack to keep you going - Ara*

A hand flew to her mouth. Regret filled her. She’d all but ghosted him the day before, his texts going unanswered when she was dealing with the majority of her team and a pair of upset parents.

She left the note on her counter and pulled out three boxes. Each box was pink but otherwise unmarked, it tugged on her innate curiosity so she lined them up side by side before popping the lid on each box.

Donuts.

Danishes,

Madeleines.

She trailed her fingers over the perfect French pastry. It was hard to believe that he'd caught such a small mention and not only remembered it, but found a bakery that made them. Madeleines had been her favorite since she was a kid. June's mom had received a gift coaching gig in France and the family had moved there for a year. It was still one of her favorite times.

With a smile on her face, she bit into a madeleine. The familiar taste sent a rush of memories through her but she didn't wallow in them. Instead, she grabbed her phone and sent Ara a text demanding that they see each other soon.

His only reply was a smiling face emoji.



## *Chapter 6*

Tue, Feb 18 7:12 pm

Practice had long been over but June still sat in her office going over plays and lineups. A phone chime from beside her caught her attention and she smiled at the notification. A quick reply and then she left her desk and the rest of her work behind.

“So what do you think?” she asked Ara. He stood at the edge of the rink, his eyes darting everywhere.

“It’s huge. Bigger than I thought.” He turned to her and pulled her close for a soft kiss. “I’ve only ever been to one big league game and that was football and that was in New York. I knew that would be massive, but I dunno...”

“I get it. I grew up skating and the first time I skated out for a game, I nearly froze.”

“I wish I had got to see you play,” he told her. “Hey, maybe we could skate together. You’d have to teach me of course...”

“I’d love to.” She stole another kiss. “But for tonight I really need out of this building.”

“As my lady wishes.” His hand tangled with hers. “Do you have everything you need? The nice security man let me park in the staff area so my car is close, and then I’m whisking you off for Greek.”

“Oh man, I’m fucking starving. Let me grab my bag.” She dashed back to his office and was back by his side quickly. Hands linked, they walked through the empty arena. At the doors, she thanked Jorge for watching Ara’s car and the man winked at her. She slipped in Ara’s car, giggling.

“You just make everyone fall in love with you, don’t you?” Ara said. He quickly got them off campus and headed toward the city.

“Who? Me?” She grinned and got comfy in the plush seat. “I just try to be nice to everyone, especially folks who work for the public like that. If you’d seen how some of mom’s people treated guards and waitstaff—she shuddered—it’s just so easy to be polite. You never know what kind of day they’re having or any problems they’re going through.”

“I get it. I do. And it’s nice to see someone so passionate about it.” At a red light, he looked over at her and smiled. “It seems everyone I meet nowadays is just so... apathetic about everything.”

“Everyone needs a hug,” she joked.

“You might be right. Now, look out for seventh and Lexington, and that’s our turn.”

“Oh, there!” she pointed up ahead and he merged lanes to take the right. “Now, much like the speakeasy, I’ve not been here but a co-worker said it’s the best Greek in town.”

“Do you get all your recs from people at work?”

“Yes. I work, maybe not as much as you, but a lot. I made department head two years ago and being in charge, as you know, means a lot of late nights.” He parked, and hopped out to round the car. She waited, because she knew he would want to open the door for her. It’d only be their second date but she had already started to catalog his little quirks.

“Alright, let’s see if this place is as good as your co-worker said.” She took his offered hand and followed him into the small restaurant. They were seated at an empty table near the kitchen and offered menus right away.

“There’s a sample platter, you want to get that and we can try a bit of everything?” Ara offered.

“Yeah, that sounds good, but I also want to order the baba ganoush and pita, which, is that Greek?” She looked at him over her menu and found him smiling at her.

“I would think if they make it here, that means it must have some Greek connotations.”

“Okay mister scientist.” She laughed and put her menu down. “I was just saying that I know I had it at this Lebanese place when the team was in California.”

“Perhaps it’s one of those dishes that gets personalized to each country from a base idea? Like pizza or spaghetti.”

“Either way, I want some. I love it.” She leaned back in her chair and sighed, letting her shoulders lose some of the tension she’d been carrying the past few days.

“Whatever you want baby.” He placed the order when the waitress showed up, and then he sipped his water. “So how is, Cara was it?”

“She’s as good as can be. Out for the rest of the season and pissed off about it.” June sipped her water, trying to cool herself off. All he’d done was called her *baby*, but since their night together it took nothing to get her hot under the collar.

“I can’t imagine how upset she is. How much longer is the season?”

“A little over two months. Championship is in April, but honestly as much as I hate to say it, I don’t think we’ll be going. We’re a young team this year and now with our goalie out, it doesn’t look good for us.”

“I’m surprised you’re so blasé about it.” His gaze was locked on her and it made her want to squirm in the seat.

“Oh, I want to win, don’t get me wrong, but I have to be pragmatic. It’s only my second year coaching and most of our seniors were gone last year. We did make the championship last year. I’ve got so many freshmen with me though, so I’m

hopeful for next season.” She stopped to smile at the waitress who arrived with their food. “Thank you.”

The waitress smiled and gave them each a plate, and left the food in between them.

“This looks great, thank you,” he told the waitress. She blushed and left them.

“Now who’s making everyone fall in love with them,” she teased.

“Oh stop.” He winked at her and handed over the serving spoon. “Now, I know you need more calories than me, so you go first.”

“Fucking asshat, yeah, I need more calories than you.” She took a portion of everything on the platter and then a small bit of the baba ganoush. “You know, you’re the first man I ever met you didn’t make fun of the food thing.” She took a bite of the spanakopita and moaned.

“Any man who had an issue with the food hasn’t, one, heard the moan when you eat something good, and two, hasn’t felt the thighs. Because if they had, they would not have said a single bad word about it. Christ, you’re sexy.” He leaned forward, just enough for June to see the heat in his eyes. “You’re coming home with me tonight, aren’t you?”

She swallowed and darted her tongue out to catch the sauce on her lip. His eyes followed the movement. “Yes, yes I am.”

“Good.” It was all he said, and all he needed to say. They both dug into the food, which most of the rest of their conversation was about. When the plates were clean, they simultaneously sat back.

“That was the best meal I’ve had in a long time,” she told him. “This is going to be my new favorite place.”

“It was so good, I’ll have to tell Sara she did good.” Ara finished his water and poured more from the pitcher on the table.

“Was she the one who suggested it?”



“Yeah, she’s new and she told me that the best way to get comfy in a new job is food, so the other day at lunch we all talked about our favorite restaurants. It was actually a fun conversation. She said her and her wife eat her all the time.”

“Oh, what other places were talked about? We should do a tasting tour.” She stole a sip from his glass. Hers had been empty for a while and why pour another?

“That sounds—” A voice interrupted him.

“Aramis?” He and June looked up.

“Stacey. Cal. Hello.” His voice had no emotion and June immediately got angry at this woman for another ruined night.

“Yes and I’m June and you’re interrupting our date. So you can go now,” she said loudly. Loud enough that people at other tables had turned to watch.

“Listen you—” Stacey started.

“Now. You listen, you and your husband had a good thing and you fucked it up.” She stood and glared at the other woman. “That is your fault and interrupting our date is so tasteless, so you can go away.” She felt Ara’s hand on her hip and grinned at the couple next to her.

“I just wanted to say hi,” Stacey pouted.

“Now, dear, she’s right.” Cal took his wife’s hand and turned to June. “I’m sorry we interrupted your date.”

“I’d say it’s fine but it’s really not. Keep a leash on your wife.” Behind her Ara snorted. Stacey looked murderous but Cal dragged her away. When they were on the other side of the restaurant, Ara pulled her down in his lap.

“I think I love you,” he whispered in her ear. She giggled and laid her head on his shoulder.

“Can we go now?” she asked.

“Yep, let me get the check and we’ll go.” He pressed a kiss to her lips before he stood them up and then spun to put her back in his seat. “Two seconds, baby.”

Across the room. Stacey glared at her. June flipped her off.



## *Chapter 7*

Tue, Feb 18 9:21 pm

“Oomph.” Her back hit the wall.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, yep, I’m good. Carry on.” She waved her hand at him and he snorted into her stomach. On his knees at her feet, he slid her joggers and underwear down her legs, leaving her naked from the waist down.

“These thighs... I dream of them.” He lifted one over his shoulder, baring her center to him. “You might want to hold on.”

Her hands flew down to land in his hair just as he swiped his tongue over her. “Oh, fuck, Ara.”

Her words only spurred him on. He devoured her, right there in the hall of his place. At first it was his tongue mapping her entire pussy, and then he pressed into her with his two fingers. She groaned and he pumped his fingers into her slick twice and sucked on her clit before she shattered.

He pulled away from her and she slid down the wall, landing perfectly so he could kiss her. He sat back and grinned. The kiss had smeared her lips with her slick, leaving them shiny and bruised.

“You are... so good at that,” she muttered.

“I really, really want to say ‘I know’ but I feel like that’s the wrong answer.”

“Oh, no, hello no, it’s not. Be fucking proud of yourself,” she told him with a glint in her eye. “Especially ‘cause I want you to do that again and again, and then possibly a few times more.”

“I am here solely to give you orgasms, milady.” He mock-bowed and she halfheartedly kicked his butt.

“Ya know, it’s not fair that men can’t do multiple orgasms.”

“If I could have more than one, I’d never let you out of bed. We’d waste away in a bed reeking of sex,” he told her.

“Not a bad way to die, honestly,” she countered.

“You’d miss the ice. And I’d miss my chance of getting to skate with you.”

“Ahh, true.” He nodded before he leaned in for another kiss. “Now, let’s go to bed where I can worship you more.”

“All of this just cause I told that awful woman to fuck off?” she asked when he lifted her from the floor and threw her over his shoulder.

He swatted her bare ass, and then leaned over to soothe the spot with a kiss. “I don’t think you understand just how fucking hot it was, the way you stood up for me. I believe I’ll be thanking you via panty melting orgasms for a long while.”

“Oh no, Aramis, I did that for me just as much for you. She tried to ruin our date again.”

“But she didn’t, did she? Instead she’s out there being a miserable human and I got you all laid out on my bed.” He threw her off his shoulder and she bounced on the bed. He yanked off his clothes before he reached for her top. “I’ve got your taste on my tongue and I’m about to be inside you again where, honestly, I would live if I could.”

On his knees, he leaned over to grab the condom and lube from his bedside table and got himself ready in seconds. “I’ve been dying to get in you since I had to leave you the last time.”

“Then get in me already.” She shot him a look that could have been goofy, but in that moment only spurred him on. Her legs fell open in invitation. “I’m so empty, Ara, so ready for you.”

“You’re a fucking siren, June.” He grabbed his hard cock and rubbed the head off it over her slit, spreading the lube. June sighed and melted even more. His teeth dug into his bottom lip as he slid in, inch by inch. “There should be sonnets about your body. Great epic poems written about the clutch of your cunt and the tension in your thighs.”

“Fuck, Ara... I’m not that special.”

“You’re beyond special, June.” He punctuated his statement with a thrust of his hips. “Whoever told you differently must have been stupid and blind.” Another thrust. “By the time I’m done with you, you’ll never doubt yourself again.”

“I don’t... uh, doubt myself, oh fuck, right there...” Her hand pressed into the headboard and she lifted her hips to meet his next thrust.

“Sonnets, I tell you...” his voice trailed off. No more words were spoken, only grunts and groans as they drove each other higher and higher.

June’s second orgasm came out of the blue. Her nails dug into his back, her head fell back, and a silent scream fell from her mouth. Four thrusts later, Aramis fell over her, tired from the force of his own finish.

“Holy hell, we’re good at that,” June murmured.

“We sure are,” Ara mumbled into her shoulder. With a heave, he lifted off of her and slowly pulled out. He took care of the condom before he fell flat on his back next to her. They laid together, their breath mingling, as they cooled down.

“Join me in the shower,” Ara offered. June lifted her head, blearily, and nodded. He dragged them both off the bed and into the shower. In the steamy shower, they took turns washing each other. It was a giggly affair. Once clean, Ara offered June one of his shirts to wear, and then he corralled her into his kitchen.

“You know you don’t have to constantly feed me,” she told him from where she perched on the counter.

“I know, but feeding you is a joy, and we just burnt a whole hell of a lot of calories upstairs. So, I’m gonna make sandwiches for us, so you don’t enter any kind of deficit.”

“You’re gonna spoil me,” June murmured.

“It’s a chicken sandwich, June. It’s not special at all.” He paused his sandwich making to press a kiss to her cheek.

“Special, I tell you,” she told him.

They ate where they were, June perched on the counter and he leaned against it, right next to her. When the plate was empty, he put it in his dishwasher before he scooped her up and carried her back up to his bedroom.



Three days after the post amazing sex snack, June carefully led Ara out onto the ice of the college’s practice ring. She held tight to his hands as he got comfortable on the skates.

“You good?” she asked.

“I-I think so. Just... slow?”

“Of course. I’m not gonna let you get hurt,” she promised. She pushed off, skating backwards and slowly pulling him along. “I need you in one piece so when we get back from our roadie, you can help me celebrate.”

“Celebrate? I thought you were doing the pragmatic thing. Remember?”

“Yes, I was. But then Penny stepped up and has been doing really great in the net in practice. She’s a freshman but is making saves, so now I’m hopeful.”

“You guys are gonna do great,” he told her. “I’m gonna follow along as best I can online. And my brother is coming into town on Sunday, so he’ll be rooting for you too.”

“Awww, that’s sweet and totally uncalled for. I’ve never even met the man.”

“I’ve told Atticus all about you. He’s awfully proud that I landed a sports-type person,” Ara joked. “He went on and on about how he wanted to meet you and talk sports things.”

“I know for a fact that you know more about what your brother and I do, more than *sports things*. You’re entirely too smart to pretend to be that ignorant, darling.”

“You caught me. What’re you going to do with me?”

“I think I’m going to keep you, Ara. How do you feel about that?” She pulled him closer, close enough to kiss.

“I think I’m okay with that. More than okay, really.” Lips connected again, deeper and more passionate.

Loud cheers and whistles made them pull apart. June rested her forehead against his shoulder. “Ready to meet the team?”

“Beyond ready, baby.” He took her hand and gingerly skated over to where the ladies were. June had a blush on her face, and he wore a grin.

And they lived happily ever after...

## *About the Author*

Sheri L. Williams is an author who laughs in the face of genre. She always knew she would be a romance author one day, until she found the macabre that lives in her heart and her brain. Equally as comfortable in her own imagination as she is in the real world, she finds inspiration everywhere. Her stories range from light to dark, then very dark, but always with a touch of romance.

Sheri is a wife and a mom, which bring her great joy. She is also a geek and an avid Netflix binger, which also brings great joy. She always has multiple projects on her plate and if you want to stay up to date, be sure to sign up for the newsletter on her website. You can also follow her author page on fb, on tik tok and on instagram.

Website: <https://linktr.ee/SheriWilliams>



*Beneath the Wisteria*

**A Primordial Gods Novelette**

P.S. Nail

## *Blurb*

Being a warrior for the King's Guard, I'd been trained to handle the most lethal situations. But after waking up and realizing there's only five days left before the Snow Moon, I tasked myself with a mission which could truly end me—gifting my mate with a present for Flaik Luna.

Other than a couple of rounds with an evil being, what do you buy a Fire Caster who wants for nothing but happiness?

With help from some friends, the Snow Moon Festival of Love will either be a success or a disaster.

## *Note*

“Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off the goal.” - Henry Ford

This is not a normal book I would write. I didn't kill anyone! Okay, maybe like one or two, but not really. You'll just have to wait and see.

And for once, I won't break your heart ... much. Who knew? Not me ...

However, this story does have comedy, love, and romance to soothe your beautiful soul.

**Warning:** This book also contains scenes of explicit language, fighting, death (story being told by a character), and alcohol consumption.

It also contains explicit sexual content which includes biting, unprotected sex, and swapping of bodily fluids, e.g. semen and blood.

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To April D. Berry

You know what you did you to cause me to write this book  
when it *was not* the one I was supposed to write ...

I also realize payback's a bitch.



# Chapter One

## Valarian

After defeating the Demons during early autumn, they were lying low, making the winter days pass with ease. Most of us King's Guard were becoming bored with the lack of missions so we occupied our time with training. With the expectation of Demons striking again, enhancing our skills was of utmost importance.

Despite constant vigilance, the King's Guard had become complacent—some of us more than others. Unlike my bondmate Ember who worried about everything before it happened, I was more of a “*worry about the problem when it presents itself*” kind of man. So other than sparring and loving on her, the four months since our mating ritual had been tranquil.

But when I woke this morning and realized there were only five days until the Snow Moon, troubling thoughts filled my previously peaceful mind, causing me to miss the boredom I once had.

“Calm down, Val. It's not that bad.”

When I looked at the Angel walking next to me, his blue eyes showed no concern for my situation, and I wanted to punch him in his perfectly chiseled jaw.

“Not that bad? This will be the worst mission to date. I’m not sure I’ll even survive.”

Zayn cocked a dark brow, a look of bewilderment taking over his normally serene expression. “Witnessing a stoic vampire displaying a dramatic side is quite impressive.”

He laughed and it took an impeccable amount of strength not to bare my fangs at my good friend.

“It’s easy for you to make light of the situation since you’re not involved.” I inhaled deeply, releasing the breath swiftly into the chilly air.

Zayn took a sip of his apple brandy, ignoring my exasperated sigh. “I appreciate you asking me on this beautiful evening walk through the gardens, but if I had known the topic of conversation, I would have declined.”

Meeting the love of my life had been the best thing to happen to me. The bond Ember and I had was unbreakable. Especially after enduring so much together.

Perhaps this mission would be an exception.

*Will this be what tears us apart? Will this be our demise?*

“As my best friend, it’s your job to analyze the situation with me and come up with a plan. I need guidance.”

Zayn came to a halt next to the once beautiful roses, which had died off in the cold. He sighed, running a hand through his coal black hair, as he normally did when nervous or frustrated.

Which, I’m sure at this point, he was sick of me.

“I don’t know what you need from me, buddy.”

“How about you show some serious concern, Zayn?”

“Not to change the subject, but weren’t you supposed to go hunting with Ember before the sun set? I saw her earlier with a bow on her back, ready to go.”

I crossed my arms and shamefully looked at the ground, my dark hair falling forward. “I’m staying clear of her until I figure out what to do.”



“If she finds out you’re avoiding her, this so-called mission will be the least of your worries. She’s stabbed people for far less.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time she’s stabbed me.” I rubbed my hand across my heart, remembering the day her dagger pierced it.

Zayn chuckled at my all too real joke before exhaling heavily. “Well, I don’t know what to tell you, Val. Perhaps you should seek guidance from Cash or one of the ladies.”

The only thing I could do was nod, wondering who else would offer their help.

Wind whisked past me as Zayn released his sleek black wings, the green and blue hues catching the light of the setting sun.

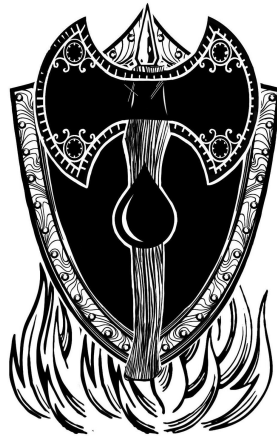
“Anyway, I have a minor task of my own to do.”

The rays shining upon the golden undertone of his face made him appear ethereal—nothing less than the Angel he was—yet, I still wanted to deck him.

“Good luck, buddy!” Zayn grinned as if he knew what I was thinking before shooting into the sky. Once he faded into the orange and pink horizon, I turned and headed across the estate.

Stationed in the country of Ashbern, Castleva Manor had been the place I called home for the last five years. I didn’t have a choice in my career, since I had been born with a guardian mark, it was my destiny to protect the kingdom.

Once I mated Ember, our guardian symbols intertwined as one—as did our souls—adding flames behind the golden axe and shield tattoo in the center of my chest. It was a constant reminder not to fail her.



When I rounded the corner to the dark gray manor, which looked more like a small castle, my mission was standing before me. With hair as bright as a flame, and an attitude as strong as steel, my bondmate was nothing less than perfection.

She was in her normal raiment, consisting of a black corset with silver buckles up the front, paired with black pants tight on her thick thighs. Her royal purple velvet cloak was opened just enough to show the dagger strapped onto her right leg.

A smile pushed up her fawn freckled cheeks when her emerald eyes locked on me. *Valarian Grey, where have you been?* she wielded the question to me.

Like all Vampires, I had the capability of hearing the thoughts of anyone who wasn't shielding their mind—an action we're taught in grade school. But when mental shields were up, they had to wield their thoughts to me. This came in handy during battle.

*I was spending time with Zayn.*

*The sun is almost set and it's too late to go hunting now.*

I closed the distance between us before pulling her into me. "I'm sorry, my love."

She pushed my dark, shoulder length hair behind my back before placing her hands on my neck. The way she peered up at me with nothing less than intense love, would make the knees of the strongest man buckle.

“It’s okay, but since we aren’t going hunting, I’m headed to teach Volcan.”

Since the first day they met, Ember and the Demon we captured a few months back have been friends. She complains every day that he’s imprisoned. King Reign was still apprehensive of trusting him, even after Volcan helped us save Ember and her sister when they were abducted by the now dead Demon King, Erebus.

Despite the king’s doubts, I trusted Volcan. It also helped to know if he ever attempted to harm Ember, she had full capability of defending herself.

“How’s he doing with learning to read?” I asked, sliding my hands onto her lower back.

“He’s doing great! King Reign and I had another meeting about his pardon. He keeps saying *not yet*, but I’m slowly wearing him down.”

Knowing my mate was absolutely annoying the shit out of the king to get what she wanted made me smile.

“That’s wonderful. Keep chipping at him until he gives in.”

“Obviously.” She smiled mischievously and I laughed.

“Have fun, my love, and be safe.”

She pushed herself up onto her toes ready for a kiss. “I’ll see you soon.”

Even though I have pressed my lips against hers thousands of times, every kiss she gave me felt like the first, sending my blood pumping fast.

After the brief show of affection, we broke free. I watched the back of her red head as she made her way to the portal. Now, with her gone, I had my own mission to tackle.

Living with five other people, not counting my mate, someone was bound to help me. I pulled the wrought iron door open and entered the manor. The sound of footfalls radiated through the air as someone came down the stairs.

“Hello, Valarian!” Zila descended quickly, her wavy hair bouncing with each step.

“Hey, Zila. Do you have a second?”

She stopped in the foyer, her silver-gray eyes locking on mine. “Of course. Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Can I ask for your advice on something?”

“Of course, Val.”

“I need to buy a present for Ember for Flaik Luna. I’m completely clueless about what to get. Do you have any suggestions?”

Flaik Luna was a Lycan holiday the entire realm celebrated by worshipping the Queen of the Moon. During the event called the Snow Moon Festival of Love, people honored their loved ones with gifts and treats.

When I first came to Castleva, none of us were mated, so we each would buy or make presents for everyone in the house to exchange for fun. Almost every year, I either got my housemates their favorite sandwich from a small stand on another landmass or took them to a burlesque show. Since this was my first celebration with Ember, I wanted it to be special.

“Ember is a simple girl, Val. She likes weapons, reading, and visiting Amethyst Falls. I’m sure she would be happy with anything. Please don’t get her a sandwich like you do us. It’s not very romantic.”

I smirked because I had already contemplated getting her favorite triple stacker.

“I say get her a book,” Zila continued. “She’s always in the library reading romance.”

“That’s actually a great idea. Since I’m clueless about books, would you like to come with me to the Mazuria bookstore tomorrow? You could get your presents while we’re there.”

“I already made everyone in the house something, and since I don’t have a mate, I don’t need to purchase anything.”

A sad look washed over Zila's tawny face and I knew she was thinking about Natsu. Unfortunately, it was crabbing season, so he was stuck on a ship in the middle of the ocean for the entire winter. But even if he wasn't, they've been nothing more than friends.

"I have plans for tomorrow," she added. "However, I am willing to cancel if you require me to."

"That won't be necessary. I'll find someone to go with me."

"Okay, but so you're aware, the best books are sold at the little bookstore on Dazeth. The Elven who owns it makes the best paper."

Zila smiled, showing me a perfect set of white teeth. I couldn't help but wonder how many people she had mauled with those chompers while in her wolf form. She was the kindest and most petite person I knew—barely five feet—but when she shifted into a Lycan, she was three times bigger than a normal wolf, and one of the fiercest fighters in the realm.

"Thanks, Zila."

"No problem. I'm off to have dinner with my mother in Direbreak. Every year, we commemorate the Snow Moon with dinner outdoors, surrounded by the beautiful mimosa trees in her backyard. It's so my father can watch over us from the moon. My little cousin used to commandeer her booth when needed, but since he mated and moved to another landmass, she's had no help. With the market being so busy this time of year, she couldn't risk missing out on sales." Zila pinched her lips together tightly before sighing. "Since she refuses to take money from me, I paid another vendor to manage her booth for the evening. Unfortunately, this was the only day he could do it, so we are having our dinner early."

"Well, you two have fun, and give your mother well wishes from me."

Zila headed out the door and I went into the study to pour myself a drink before dinner was served.



With Zayn and Zila gone for the evening, most of dinner was quiet with the exception of Cali rambling about how romantic Flaik Luna was.

After we ate, Ember went up to read before bed, and I stopped Zayn's sister in the hall. Since she was such an expert in romance, I was hoping for some help.

“Are you available to assist me on a mission tomorrow?”

Cali's brows furrowed. “Am I on the order?”

“Um, it's not a mission from the king. It's my personal one.”

The Angel pushed her shoulder-length chestnut hair behind her ear. “I already have shopping plans with the other ladies tomorrow.”

“That's okay. I'll ask Zayn when he gets back.”

“He went to Valmeyer for the weekend. He's going to bring us all back some apples from our family's land, but he's not coming back until the morning of Flaik Luna.”

“Fuck,” I whispered before cracking my neck in frustration. “Could you suggest ideas of presents to get Ember for the holiday? It's our first one together and I want to make it special.”

Cali's blue eyes lit up as she clapped her hands in excitement. “Oh, how romantic! I wish I had a mate to celebrate the Snow Moon Festival of Love with! Oh, you should get her a necklace or bracelet from Mazuria. Something beautiful! Perhaps something to pay tribute to a Fire Caster.”

“I feel like Ember would say those will get in the way during a battle.”

“How about a ring for her other hand?”

There wasn't anything I could think of to get other than weapons, and my mate already had a favorite dagger and bow. Jewelry or a book might be the ideal option.

“Thanks, Cali. I'll take a trip there tomorrow and see if anything catches my eye.”

“You’re welcome. Have a good evening, V!” She strolled away, and I headed to my room for the night.





## *Chapter Two*

There were only four days until the Snow Moon. As soon as Ember left, I went to find another friend who was always overly ready for a mission.

When I entered the study, the third Angel I resided with had his back to me, his frosty blond hair falling just past his burly, completely bare shoulders.

“Are you always shirtless?”

Cash turned his head toward me, a huge grin plastered on his face. “What’s up, Val?”

“I was wondering if you could help me on a mission.”

“What’s the mission? Never mind. Your face looks serious.” He yanked both axes from his brown leather holster strapped to his hips. “Let’s do this!”

I put my hands out in a soothing manner. “Calm down, buddy. We won’t need weapons.”

Cash peered down at his axes and whispered, “Sorry guys,” before re-sheathing them. His now saddened sky-blue eyes wandered back to me. “A mission without weapons seems boring. What the hell are we doing?”

“There are only four days left until the Snow Moon and I have yet to get Ember or anyone else a present.”

Cash’s blond brows shot up his forehead. “Shit! I haven’t gotten Cinder one either. Whatever you’re doing, I’m in.”

“I was going to go to Dazeth to look at books, but without Zayn or Zila, I’ll have no clue what to get.”

“Then where shall we go? Maybe Tessalone? They have the biggest market.”

“I was thinking Mazuria. Cali said I should get something in honor of a Fire Caster. Maybe you’ll find something for Cinder since she’s also one.”

“Sounds good. When do we leave?”

“Now.” I turned and headed toward the foyer, Cash followed behind me. “The women left to go shopping, so that will give us a few hours to really dig our heels into this mission. But you have to keep it a secret. You can’t be telling Cinder when we get back.”

Cash nodded. “My lips are sealed, buddy. Let’s do this!”

I stopped at the front door, my eyes drifting to Cash’s bronzed chest. “You may want to put clothes on first.”

“I can’t help that I’m sexy and people prefer me shirtless.”

He flexed his muscles, his pectorals practically winked at me before he ascended the staircase. His long legs took two steps at a time as he sang, “Off to a mission. Off to a mission,” over and over.

I crossed my arms and sighed, wondering if I should have chosen my sidekick a little more carefully.

Once Cash had dressed, we left the manor and approached the golden platform of the portal. Envisioning the land of Mazuria, our destination, I wielded the portal to go.

Unlike my mate, portal rides didn’t bother me. With the calmness of the wind whipping my hair into a frenzy, accompanied by dancing lights sparkling across my eyes as my body was hurled from one land mass to another, the fleeting time was tranquil.

A few seconds later we landed on the only part of Mazuria that was sandy—a beach right next to the ocean.

Both of us gave a nod to the portal guards when we exited before heading down the dirt path into town.

When we approached the market, which was packed with last-minute shoppers searching for gifts for their loved ones, my nervousness tripled. I was hoping there were still things available for me to buy.

With the excitement of a child, or possibly a puppy, Cash burrowed his way through the crowd to the first stand that caught his attention. I hesitantly followed, apologizing to everyone he'd shouldered his way past.

Cash held up a cast-iron pan next to his face, which beamed with pride. "What about this for her?"

Considering his mate loved to make food, and mine would rather be fighting—or gouging her own eyes out—I shook my head. "Ember doesn't cook, but Cinder does."

Cash looked at the pan again before nodding. "You're right. I'll get it for her."

My eyes swiftly glanced at the different cookware options the seller offered. Knowing Ember wouldn't make use of them, I decided to part ways for now.

"I'm going to walk a few booths down and see if I can find anything there."

Cash ignored me, picking up a giant stock pot, holding it out like he was weighing it with his enormous hands. I shook my head with a laugh before turning away.

Random people bumped into me as I strolled past a booth filled with spices and another with herbal medicine, but nothing got my attention enough.

"Would you like to purchase a sapling, my lord? All proceeds go to charity."

I stopped walking and eyed the small oak trees the old lady was selling.

"These are going to be huge. What would I do with one?"

"You could plant it close to your dwelling in the memory of a loved one lost."

“I don’t own property.” Grabbing the edge of my leather coat, lined with fur, I opened it enough to show my weapon.

She glanced at the short sword hanging in my shoulder holster. “A King’s Guard. I’m honored to attend to your needs. Do you reside at Castleva, my lord?”

“I do.”

“I have no doubt King Reign would be fine with you planting it on the grounds. He’s just as gentle as he is handsome.” She primped up the loose curls of her short gray hair, the light skin of her wrinkled cheeks becoming pink.

Knowing wisteria trees were Ember’s favorite, I had no need for an oak. But she was damn good at her job, making it harder for me to decline the kind woman.

As I contemplated where I was going to put the oak tree, Cash wielded his thoughts to me.

*Val! I found the perfect gift.*

Excitement rose in me. *Where are you?*

*Clothing stand. Hurry!*

“I’m sorry but I have to go. Thanks for your time.”

Feeling guilty about abandoning the conversation so abruptly, I dropped some gold coins into the donation bucket before strolling through the market, looking for my friend.

When I found Cash, he was holding up a sundress with flowers on the fabric and a huge accomplished smile on his face. “This is perfect!”

“I appreciate your help, but Ember doesn’t wear dresses. Do you know who does, though?”

Cash’s brows furrowed, sporting a now confused look. I tilted my head, and waited for the realization to hit him.

“Oh, Cinder! I’ll get this too.”

I scrubbed my hands down my face, wondering if I should stop and get a massage to relax me before heading to the next booth.



An hour later, a sigh of defeat left me when we stepped onto the portal.

“This mission was a bust.” I adjusted the burlap sack I had slung over my shoulder so Cash could eat a snack. It was filled with gifts for Cinder. “Well, for me anyway.”

“If only you hadn’t taught Ember how to guard her mind from you.”

My eyes drifted curiously to Cash as he bit into a piece of fudge.

“What do you mean?”

“You could have listened to her thoughts,” he mumbled through a full mouth.

When Ember became a King’s Guard last year, she hadn’t been taught how to keep her thoughts to herself. Regardless of their level of dirtiness, I could hear all of them. It was a fun time.

After weeks of training, she was able to consistently maintain it. Since then, I haven’t been able to hear what she’s thinking unless she wants me to.

“That’s unethical, Cash.”

“Yeah, I guess. But if you managed to make her drop her shield, would it be unethical or a fortunate mistake? Especially if you hear something important. Accidentally, of course.”

Most of the time Cash hadn’t much to say on the lines of smart things, but his plan was brilliant.

My mind lit up with the first thing I knew would make Ember drop her shield—sex. Knowing she and I were scheduled to spar tomorrow, I smiled broadly. Our fights often led to us being naked, which gave me the perfect chance to listen to her thoughts.

“That’s a great idea. Thanks, Cash.”

He grinned proudly, sporting chunks of chocolate between his teeth as he held up a bag. “Want some fudge.”

With a laugh, I shook my head and willed the portal back to Castleva.



## *Chapter Three*

The amount of fervor Ember came at me with was both exhilarating and sexy as hell. At the last minute, I grabbed her shoulders, slinging her onto the floor. She pulled her knees to her chest and pushed off the mat, kicking herself back to her feet with ease.

Armed with a dagger in one hand and the other tightened into a fist, she was ready to take on the trues of enemies.

Little did she know, my plans involved us sparring only until I got her naked. It only took being caught once for our friends to know not to come into the training center during our sessions, so I was free to ravage her.

She came at me again, but this time I sidestepped, causing her to tumble to the sparring mat. Before she had a chance to move, I threw myself on top of her, pushing my body against hers.

After restraining her wrists, I pinned them above her head.

Breathing her in, she smelled of her favorite winter shampoo—amber and sandalwood mixed with some sweet vanilla notes. The delicious scent caused me to release a growl that rumbled my chest against hers.

Never one to give up easily, she squirmed beneath me, fighting to get free.

I lowered my head, letting my rapid breaths out into her ear, instantly stilling her body.

“Point,” I whispered, then sucked her earlobe into my mouth causing her to sigh softly.



“If you keep doing that, you shall have all the points you want.”

She raised her knee, rubbing it against my cock, instantly hardening it.

Knowing I had been given the permission to advance, my eager lips made their way onto her neck, the blood in her veins pumping furiously below each kiss. In order to intensify her arousal, I opened my mouth wider and gently brushed her skin with the tip of my fangs, eliciting a moan from her.

With that, her right leg opened, beckoning me inside. I shoved my knee under her other leg, pushing it open before pressing my throbbing cock against her core.

As soon as I released her wrists, she clawed at my shirt, unable to get it off me fast enough. Once free, I unbuckled her corset, splaying the fabric open before sliding my hands up her stomach, lifting her shirt.

The skin on her ivory breast was soft when my callused hand gripped it. I almost forgot about listening to her thoughts when I sucked her pebbled nipple into my mouth.

Was it morally questionable to seduce the person I love to listen to their thoughts?

Quite possibly.

Did she give me full consent long ago to do whatever I wanted while naked?

Absolutely.

A loophole, I presume. One I was taking advantage of.

I released her nipple, making my way lower, kissing every inch of flesh that had barely been graced by the sun, knowing how fortunate I was to get to see it.

Taking the quickest route to my destination, I followed the curve of her stomach, blowing air against her skin between kisses.

When I got to the top of her pants, my hands were quick to untie the fasteners before sliding them down and tossing them

aside.

She let her knees drop back open, granting me a full view of her beautiful pussy, which was already glistening with her arousal.

My euphoric gaze traveled to her hooded eyes, the passion behind them as strong as the fire of a thousand dragons.

A single word played in my head . . .

Lucky.

That's what I was.

Lucky to see such a beautiful woman before me, ready to give me anything and everything I ever wanted. With the heart of a saint, the body of a goddess, and the soul of a warrior, Ember was nothing less than an image of perfection.

Her expression showed the tremendous amount of love she held for me—a completely immeasurable amount which was never bound by simple words, nor used against me for personal gain.

She offered me her affection with no expectations of anything in return.

Even though I was twice her size and had extraordinary Vampire strength, she would throw herself into the face of death to save me.

I'm not sure if she knew her love had already saved me . . .

More than once.

It saved me from the unhappiness that was once my jaded life.

It rescued the relationship I had with my father.

And when the time came, and I needed her blood to survive, without hesitation, she slit her wrist and fed me, bringing me back to this realm.

Her love did that. Her love gave me life.

And then our souls bonded, entwining as one.

Now written on the map of time ... carved into the strongest stone ... stamped on my tender heart ... and burned into our souls, our love was everything, causing me to yearn to be fed nothing but it for eternity.

I cherished our bond.

Nourished it even.

I basked in our love, consuming it any chance I had, never getting my fill.

Always longing for more.

Always needing more.

Her love was everything, and I knew I wouldn't survive a single day without it.

“Are you okay, Val?”

Her tender voice brought me back to reality. My heart fluttered, beating against my chest like a thousand horses on fresh soil.

Not wanting to concern her, I swallowed down my feelings. “I'm okay, my hertis rote.”

The term of endearment meant heart's root, because that's what she was.

Like the tree of life, her love sustained the roots to my heart, making me feel like my life meant something—worth more than a mountain of gold.

She owned my heart now, and as I peered into her face, her mouth curled at the corners, her compassionate smile assured me it would forever be safe with her.

And that made me lucky.

She was mine.

And I ... was lucky.

Shaking off my daze, I dragged my eyes away from her face, ready to continue worshiping her body.

Curling two fingers, I dipped them into her opening, collecting some of her juices. When I pulled my fingers out

and spread her wetness up her center, stopping at her clit, the muscles on her thigh twitched. I tipped my head down, kissing the quivering skin, making my way toward the apex of her legs.

As soon as she knew where I was going, she entangled her fingers into my hair.

*Bite me*, she wielded.

Knowing *where* she wanted to be bitten, I made sure to kiss everywhere but that spot.

First, my lips pressed against the crevice of her inner thigh. *Right here?*

“No,” she groaned.

Another kiss, this time near her core. *Here?*

“Please, Val.”

The next kiss was on her pussy lips. *What about here?*

She sucked in anticipating breaths as she squirmed beneath me. “You’re getting closer,” she breathed out.

I extended my tongue, thrusting it into her opening and savoring the delicious wetness I found. Her fingers tightened in my hair, her moans echoing through the room.

With a perfect view, my eyes landed on her swollen clit. It pulsed with each pump of blood that rushed to it—desiring to be touched, kissed, licked ... bitten.

My intentions were slow when my tongue traveled up her center, causing shivers to roll through her. I twisted my tongue around the sensitive bud, barely touching it before returning to her entrance, bringing more tasty juices up.

After repeating this action a few times, her breaths became ragged, her moans coming faster, louder.

She rolled her hips, pushing my head down, begging for me to satisfy her needs.

After one last stroke, I stopped on her clit, sucking it into my mouth.

*Oh, Gods!*

And her shield was down ... but since I was concentrating on her pleasure, my mind had completely forgotten about the mission.

Knowing she wanted to be bitten while she came, I waited until the last possible moment to open my mouth and strike. I swirled my tongue the way I knew was her favorite, causing her back to arch off the sparring mat.

When her entire body tightened, I released her clit and quickly tilted my head, positioning my mouth so one of my fangs would penetrate her pussy lip and the other ... her clit.

My fangs pierced their target, her gasp filled the room as her blood pooled in my mouth.

Savoring every drop, I took hungry gulps of the sweet nectar, the flavor bouncing off my tongue and snaking down my throat.

My venom was powerful, warming her veins and electrifying her senses, sending euphoria flooding through her. She yanked my hair, her body bucking underneath me as she rode out the wave of ecstasy.

About half way through her peak, I removed my fangs and sucked her clit into my mouth with a growl. Her body quaked, then shivered below me, her orgasm coming to an end.

Once her muscles were limp, she released my hair and grabbed my shoulders, guiding me up her body.

I settled between her thighs, finally remembering my mission.

“You know, Flaik Luna is only a few days away.”

“I know,” she whispered before wrapping her legs around my body.

She slammed her mouth onto mine, letting me know now was not the time to converse before reaching between us and maneuvering my cock to her entrance. Her silky wetness allowed me to slide inside of her with ease, eliciting a satisfying moan from us both.

“Did you want something special?” I asked, grinding my hips in her favorite way.

“What?” she breathed out, her forehead wrinkling.

“For the Snow Moon day. Do you want—”

“I want you to stop talking.”

Her nails dug into my ass, thrusting me deeper into her, and I lost my ability to think.

*Harder*, she wielded.

With my hands planted firmly on either side of her, I did what she wanted, our sweaty bodies smacking off each other with every thrust.

“Oh, fuck!” Her screams of pleasure filled the room.

Any thoughts of love or missions faded away with the blissful feeling of her pussy clenching around me, wetting my cock further, and sending me over the edge.

A rush of euphoria coursed through me, causing my muscles to tense and a warm sensation to spread in my lower abdomen as I reached climax.

With heavy breaths, my head fell against her chest, her heart thundering in my ear as I softened inside of her.

She gently stroked her fingers down my back and whispered, “I love you, Val.”

Lucky.

I was lucky.



## *Chapter Four*

Since I hadn't completed yesterday's mission, I had a strong desire to see if I could get Ember to let her shield down today. The sun had barely risen and Flaik Luna had been the only thing on my mind. With my thoughts elsewhere while sparring, Asher had a perfect opportunity to slam his hickory weapon against my chest, knocking the air from my lungs. Before I had a chance to recover, he swung his staff again, sweeping my feet from under me. I fell forcefully, my back slamming onto the mat.

Rarely did I get defeated in battle and honestly, I couldn't even remember the last time someone had knocked me flat on my ass. I laid there for a few seconds, contemplating my entire existence before Asher stepped into my view.

His emerald green eyes sparkled with excitement as he peered down at me. "Point."

"You got lucky," I huffed, catching my breath.

"Need some air." He wielded his wind magic, a light breeze blowing over my body.

"And that's why Cash calls you Ass instead of Ash. You're quiet until you're not."

Asher laughed and leaned into his staff with one hand while reaching another down, helping me from the floor.

I dusted off my bruised ass and ego before turning toward him. "You better relish that point because you won't get that opportunity again. It's just your lucky day."

An accomplished smile rightfully played on his face when he left the floor and propped his staff in the corner.



“A point’s a point, and since I rarely get any with you, I don’t care how it happened.”

With a chuckle, I headed toward the rosewood table against the wall, grabbed a towel, and tossed it to him before grabbing my own. “My mind is elsewhere today.”

“Though I appreciate getting a point now and then, I don’t like that my friend is worried about something.” He rubbed the towel over his alabaster face, clearing it of sweat before continuing. “Do you want to talk about it?”

An uneasiness settled in my stomach and I twisted the sweat rag in my hands. “It’s not that serious.”

Asher’s brows arched. “We are currently tied with two points each, Val. That’s never happened before. It appears to be a serious matter to me.”

He scrubbed his towel through his shaggy sepia hair, drying up his sweat while I contemplated our relationship.

The undeniable truth, Asher was an honorable man with a gentle soul, yet I still hesitated to share my feelings with him because we had never formed that kind of friendship.

Of course, he was my friend and I would fight to the death for him—like everyone in the house—but unlike Cash and myself, he was a soft-hearted male. More like Zayn, but even sweeter.

And even though Asher wasn’t as muscular as us, his skills with a bow, wind magic, staff, or almost any other weapon I gave him was outstanding.

Other than knowing he was a quick learner, loved walnuts, cracked his knuckles a lot, and was book smart, I knew little about him.

However, I knew some of his dislikes.

Dead bodies made him nauseous, which was rough when our jobs required us to kill occasionally in order to protect the citizens of the kingdom. He despised the fact that there were no walnut trees where we lived as there was back home. And unlike Cash and myself, he hated chopping wood.

Upon reflection, I realized that he had a strong aversion to engaging in almost anything us men in the house typically enjoyed. I'm not sure if that's why we never bonded closer than we had, or if it was the fact that he was quiet, spending a lot of his time alone.

"You don't have to tell me the issue," he said, tossing his towel aside. "I was just offering my help."

"I appreciate that."

He nodded slowly, the silence in the room louder than thunder, causing me to avert my eyes.

Understanding that not everyone's personality was as outgoing as Cash's or Cali's, I knew I was eventually going to have to open up in order to form relationships with certain people. I released a puff of air, deciding to say something small and see where it went.

"Um, I'm having trouble figuring out what to get Ember for Flaik Luna and it's driving me nuts."

"That's simple. Get her the triple stacker from Milo's. She loves that sandwich."

My mouth fell agape. "See, that was my first thought, but Zila said it wouldn't be romantic."

"No, but it would be filling."

We both laughed before I decided to open up more.

"After talking with Cash, he thought it would be a good idea to get Ember to drop her shield and maybe I could get a small glimpse of that beautiful mind of hers. Unfortunately, it didn't go as I planned, and now my best friend is out of town for the weekend picking apples and my other one bought out the whole damn market for Cinder."

Asher furrowed his brow, probably wondering what the hell I was talking about. Maybe I opened up too much. I was starting to sound like Cinder with my rambling.

"Anyway, that's what's on my mind. Flaik Luna."

Asher cracked his knuckles, his face pensive. “I know little about women, which is probably why I’m single after a three-year relationship. But I do know I always lose my shield on the portals. Have you tried taking Ember on one? Or maybe a few in a row?”

“I haven’t, but that’s a great idea. Thanks, Asher.”

With a smile, he appeared to be in a more relaxed state. “You’re welcome.”

I tossed the towel I had stressfully twisted but never used aside. “Are you ready to lose?”

He retrieved his staff, a look of determination plastered on his face. “The question is, are you ready to get slaughtered?”

I laughed and entered the middle of the room. “Let’s do this.”



A few hours and a hot shower later, I was ready to tackle my next mission. Asher had managed to get a third point on me, beating me for the first time since he came here almost a year ago. But I wasn’t going to let that get me down when I had more important things to tend to.

“Hurry up, my love. We’re going to be late.”

Ember scrunched up her nose as she fastened the last two silver buckles on her corset. “How can we be late shopping at the pelt market on Direbreak? They’re open until this evening.”

“It’s winter and most of the good furs are going to be gone.”

She grabbed her dagger off the maple dresser, then strapped it to her thigh. “You’ve been acting strange lately, Val.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Uh huh.” She sounded like she didn’t believe me. Her eyes met mine, a gleam of suspicion in them. I swallowed hard.

“I’m just tired of being cold.”

“Can you tighten my lacing?” She turned away from me and I was grateful to be away from her accusing glare.

I cinched the strings on her corset to exactly where she liked them before lowering my mouth to her neck. “You’re sexy, you know that?” I asked between placing soft kisses on her skin.

“Considering you tell me daily, yes.”

We both laughed before I grabbed her cloak and handed it to her. “Let’s go.”

I quickly headed out the bedroom door and entered the hallway filled with marble statues before she could ask me more questions.

Unfortunately, it didn’t work.

The second we descended the stairs, she asked, “Why do we need another fur pelt? I like the gray one you got us last month. It’s warm and comfy.”

I pulled the handle on the wrought iron door and held it open for her to exit. “It is, but I want to get a black one.”

Once outside, she slid underneath my arm with a shiver. “It’s freezing out, Val. Are you sure you want to go today?”

“It’s late winter so there won’t be many left if we wait any longer.”

We made our way onto the portal with her not saying much. I wielded it go to go, but instead of envisioning Direbreak for our destination, I chose Tessalone.

It was overwhelming for Ember to be thrown through the realm at such a fast rate, so I felt bad when the light danced across my vision at rapid speed as the wind blew my hair back.

Ember’s shield was still strong when we landed but a look of confusion took over her beautiful face. “Why are we in the Fae land?”

“Oh. Wrong landmass.”

I wielded the portal again, this time taking us to Mayhem. When we arrived, Ember was not happy. Her shield was down,

leaving her mind open for any vampire to hear.

*What the hell!* she thought loudly before quickly reestablishing her shield.

“Are we visiting your family? Because if not, I have no clue why we are in the land of the Vampires!”

“I’m sorry, my love.”

My apology was disingenuous and I faltered for a second before I wielded the portal again, this time to Ashbern.

When we landed in Angel territory, her eyes widened, her mouth agape.

“Valarian Carter Grey, I don’t know what you’re doing, but you know I hate riding on the portal. This nausea is going to kill me.” She fanned her face with her hand.

“My mind is just elsewhere today.” A sentence I had been saying a lot lately.

With red cheeks and a contorted expression, Ember wore her anger proudly, not masking the fact that she was getting pissed. “If you don’t get it right this time, I’m going to stab you.”

I wasn’t scared of Ember piercing my heart again, but I was afraid if I took her on another ride, she was going to hurl.

I swallowed hard, hesitating before wielding us to the Elven land.

Her shield was down when we arrived at Tessalone, but it wasn’t good.

*Oh, hell no!* The icy glare she gave me could freeze the warmest souls.

This time, she said nothing directly to me, instead wielding the portal herself, and I was surprised when we landed back in Ashbern.

“Why are we home?”

Ember put her hand on my arm and took a few breaths between pursed lips, her face pale. I knew she was fighting

back the nausea I gave her, causing me to feel guilty for my actions.

Once she was good, she yanked her hand away and waved it in the air. “If you’re in such dire need of getting a fur pelt, go by yourself!”

She angrily stomped off the portal and I chased after her.

“Wait, my love.”

She halted her furious feet and whipped toward me, her finger pointed at my chest. “Cinder told me you were trying to find me the perfect gift for Flaik Luna, so I’m assuming that’s why you’ve been acting weird! But this. Really?”

“How did she know?”

“You know damn well Cash can’t keep a secret.” She crossed her arms, her eyes locked on mine. “Tell me right now what you were doing.”

I made a mental note to blacken the snitching Angel’s eye when I saw him before confessing. “My plan was to make you lose your shield so I could hear your thoughts, then maybe I could find a perfect gift for you. All I wanted was our first Flaik Luna to be special and I ruined it. I’m truly sorry.”

Ember let out a hard breath before placing her hand on my cheek.

“I love you so much Valarian, and I know how much you love me. I don’t need a *perfect present* from you when we have a bond stronger than steel.”

Her eyes glistened, filled with compassion, and my heart fluttered.

“You’re an amazing woman. I just wanted you to have amazing things.”

She dropped her hand from my face. “Seriously, you could have gotten me a sandwich from Milo’s and I would have been happy.”

I snickered, shaking my head in exasperation. “That was one of my first thoughts, but Zila said it wouldn’t be romantic.”

Ember giggled, then rubbed her hands up and down her arms, warming them. “No, but I really do love the triple stacker.”

We both laughed before I threw my arm around her, escorting her out of the cold.





## Chapter Five

With a little less than twenty-four hours until the Moon Day Celebration, I was still cogitating last-minute decisions. Even though Ember said she didn't *need* a present, I couldn't help but wonder if I should get something small. Anything.

*Maybe a bracelet? Flowers? The triple stacker? A tree?*

I turned my head toward Ember. "Do you like oak trees?"

The gossip at the breakfast table halted, all eyes now on me.

"Um, they're okay. Why are you asking, Val?"

"Just wondering." I took a bite of my pancake, avoiding her suspicious glare.

She had already forgiven me once, so at this point I was ready to cut my losses. Maybe after breakfast I would get her a bouquet of her favorite flowers, so I didn't show up empty-handed tomorrow.

"I prefer roses over trees," Cinder said, bringing my attention to her as I swallowed my food. "They smell better."

Cash nodded in agreement. "Me too. They remind me of my mom's garden back home."

"That's because you never had an apple tree growing up like Zayn and I had." Cali clasped her hands together in excitement. "The best thing in the world is being able to pluck an apple from your own backyard."

"Mimosa trees smell just as good, if not better than roses," Zila chimed in before letting out a satisfying sigh. "They're mine and my mother's favorite tree."

“We don’t have mimosa trees on Windcrest,” Asher added. “But we have a lot of walnut trees. They stink when they fall, but the nuts inside are so good. I miss them.”

Cali rolled her eyes. “We know. You talk about them all the time.”

“I love how we’re always talking about Asher’s nuts,” Cash said and everyone but me bursted out with laughter.

For a few minutes, surrounded by my friends whom I considered family, I had completely forgotten about the mission.

After breakfast, Ember went off with Cinder who’d run out of some ingredients she needed to finish baking. I took that as an opportunity to do what I needed to do.

I was off to see a man about a present. Not just any man. An extremely large, ancient God with the knowledge of a thousand men.

King Reign’s castle was located hundreds of miles south of the same landmass I resided on, so taking a portal wouldn’t be an option. Galing—an action of opening a portal in my mind and moving my body to any destination I envisioned at rapid speed—was our most used transportation when staying in the same country. Unfortunately, the king’s castle had a magic barrier protecting him and his guard from any enemies swiftly approaching. With the wards spanning a two-mile radius around the perimeter, I wouldn’t be able to gale too close to the castle.

Galing as close as I could to Castle Elderfall wasn’t close enough. The chilly morning air slowed my muscles, sending a chill through me, and I swiftly remembered why we rarely visited the king in the winter. By the time the gray stones of the castle came into my sight, my teeth were chattering.

Surrounded by red maple trees, Castle Elderfall was the pinnacle of strength and beauty, well fortified with towers and battlements, though the king didn’t need them.

With the other nine Primordial Gods sleeping, King Reign harnessed their powers, able to use every form of magic the

Moon Goddess blessed them with. Other than wind, water, and fire magic, the god had excessive strength, mind control capabilities, could gale inside of the wards, and see any visions of what any citizen had done in the past by simply taking their hand. I'm sure he had more powers I was unaware of. A god amongst men, he had them all. But the one I hated the most ... he could still hear our thoughts while we were shielding.

There were no guards posted outside the castle when I ascended the stairs, the giant doors magically opened on their own.

When I stepped onto the crimson rug of the foyer, the warmth of the inside hit me. The king's personal servant quickly laid a fur pelt across my shoulders.

"Welcome, Valarian. Our Majesty has been expecting you."

"Of course he has."

Meyers was a stout man with short white hair, light blue Angel eyes, and a fair complexion. He died long ago and was accidentally brought back by the king. They are now bonded and have been friends for thousands of years.

"He is all knowing." Meyers smiled with a look of pride on his face before gesturing his hand toward the left. "Follow me, my lord."

I took a few slow breaths, relaxing my burning lungs before trailing behind him. The corridor we entered proudly displayed the king's colors with crimson rugs, drapes, and chairs.

Taking a right, we trekked through the hallway lined with marble statues, each resembling the Primordial Gods. As I passed the seven foot tall figures, I couldn't help but glance at the statue of Tartarus, the God of the Demons, knowing one day we would have to battle to the death if the Demons were able to wake him.

A few more turns later, we approached the throne room, those doors also opening on their own.

Meyers hastily went down the crimson runner, taking roost near the king. He clasped his hands in front of him, ready to

give the same introduction he always does.

“Welcome to Castle Elderfall, currently residing is His Majesty, King Reign, God of the Angels.”

I bowed my head.

“Thank you, Meyers. You are dismissed. Valarian, you may rise.”

Meyers left through a door in the back right corner, and the king locked his blue eyes on me.

“Your thoughts are loud and have been echoing in my head since you crossed my wards. You have tremendous worries over a present?” He shook his head, his long black hair falling off his shoulders.

“I do, Your Majesty.”

He shifted his massive body, uncrossing his legs and extending an arm. “Let me understand everything you have done.”

With a sigh, I approached the king and placed my hand in his, knowing he was about to witness my memories.

The warmth from his magic spread through my palm and up my arm as the king’s once blue eyes widened, before turning silver, then gold. Watching my memories, he looked concerned before a small smile pulled up his cheeks. His mouth fell agape and then he chuckled before his eyes turned back to blue.

“One lesson from this week is to never take advice from Cash or Asher. Even though Cash’s plan had not worked, it looked like you had a blast attempting to make Ember lower her shield at the training center.”

Heat radiated to my cheeks. *Shit.*

“It’s okay, Valarian. I stopped watching the minute I knew where that sparring was leading. But the portal rides, really? You’re lucky Ember didn’t stab you again.”

A laugh rumbled from his belly, echoing through the large room.

“I am grateful she loves me, Your Grace.”

He smiled before propping his massive ivory elbows onto his knees and leaning forward. “Have you come here to seek guidance, my child?”

“I have, Your Grace. You were with your mate for four hundred years, so I was hoping you knew a lot about women.”

King Reign let out another boastful laugh. “You are mistaken, my child. Even though I can hear their thoughts, I still have no clue what any woman really wants other than kindness, protection, honestly, and love.”

I nodded, agreeing with him.

“But you don’t need answers to your questions, Valarian, You have had the answers all along.”

“A sandwich from Milo’s, Your Grace?”

He shook his head. “No, my child. Where is the one place that she is drawn to? A place more magical than most of the lands?”

*Amethyst Falls?* I thought to myself.

“Yes. And with that, you have our answer.”

“But, Your Grace, I do not—”

A light seemed to switch in my head, multiple thoughts running in different directions. The answers had been in front of me multiple times, and I had no clue how I had missed them, but I finally knew what I needed to do to make Flaik Luna special.

The king’s mysterious blue eyes sparkled, a smile pushing up his cheeks, and I knew he had heard my thoughts. “Ember will love that, and so will everyone else. Happy Flaik Luna, Valarian.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. Happy Flaik Luna to you too.”



Since I wouldn’t have enough time to complete this mission alone, I headed to my homeland. Upon arriving in Mayhem, I

galed as close as I could. Unlike the king's wards, the outside ring was only about a half mile away from Blackveil Castle.

The cold ground crunch beneath my boots as I made my way across the desolate landscape riddled with deadened trees and protruding roots.

Guards were standing on either side of the iron door, framed by the dark brick of the castle, when it quickly came into view.

Knowing I was the Duke of Mazuria's son, they both nodded a silent greeting before one opened the door for me.

Instead of going to the father's quarters, I wielded my thoughts to him as I traversed the halls.

*Can you come to the front sitting room and bring Wynter with you?*

He answered me in seconds. *Of course, son. Be there soon.*

When I went to turn down the hallway with the family portraits hanging in it, I was met with a red velvet rope with a sign saying:

*Closed for construction.*

Not thinking anything of it, I turned around and went down a different corridor until I made it to the sitting room where my father and sister were patiently waiting for me.

"What is wrong, Valarian? Is Ember okay?"

"Yes, Father. Everyone is fine. I just needed to ask you a question."

My sister had a scowl on her face when she smacked my arm. "You scared the shit out of me, Val! I thought something was wrong."

"Language, Wynter," my father warned. "You're a lady, remember?"

She rolled her eyes before wrapping her arms around me. "It's good seeing you, but next time send a messenger Imp first." Wynter released me from her angry hug before her violet eyes locked on mine. "So, what's going on?"

“I need you to go on a mission with me. If our father approves of it.”

She gasped before letting out a loud squeal. “I would be honored. Let me get my cloak.”

My father cleared his throat, halting her movements. “I don’t even know what this mission is about, not to mention that Wynter isn’t a King’s Guard yet.”

“It’s not that kind of mission, Father. I need Wynter to assist me in getting gifts for everyone at Castleva manor.”

“I knew this day would come.” My father let out a hard breath. “Make sure you have her back before dark. She needs—”

“I’ll get my cloak!”

Wynter took off fast, her black hair bouncing on her back and I laughed.

After a quick hug, I told him my plans for the gifts and he thought they were great. Conversing with my father was something I would have never done before Ember had helped me mend my relationship with him. My whole life, I’d blamed him for my mother dying during childbirth, never once realizing how much he was hurting. After finding the love of my life, and having her die in my arms before being resurrected by the God of Fire, Volcanis, I knew that pain well.

Wynter returned minutes later with the biggest smile on her face. “I’m ready!”

We bid farewell to our father and headed straight for the portal. Because we had numerous places to go, this task would occupy us for the entire day.



Shortly before dark, my sister and I crossed the wards of Blackveil Castle.

“Today was a lot of fun, Val,” Wynter said as we passed a half dead tree. “Thanks for inviting me to help.”

“I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you. I really hope everyone loves their gifts. Especially Ember.”

“Do you know what the other guards got for Flaik Luna?” Wynter asked as we approached our father’s castle.

“Only Cash because I was with him when he bought Cinder the entire market.”

Wynter laughed, lifting the hem of her dress before ascending the front steps.

I pulled the castle door open and held it for her, and gave the guards on duty a nod before following her inside.

“Did Zayn get anyone a gift?” she asked, stopping inside the corridor.

Confusion washed over me and I shook my head. “Not that I know of. Why?”

Wynter pushed her dark hair behind her ear, a shy expression flushing her cheeks. “I was just wondering.”

Remembering Wynter had a crush on Zayn, I sighed and let the subject drop.

“It’s getting late. I better wield to father that I’m home.”

“I already did before we came inside.”

Wynter snickered, a bit of jealousy behind her eyes. “I don’t know how you can do it so far away!”

“When you come to Castleva, I’ll teach you how to wield your thoughts farther.”

The way Wynter smiled reminded me of our mother. “I would love that.”

Like my father, I wasn’t looking forward to my sister becoming a King’s Guard. Not because she wasn’t a warrior—my father had taught us more about weapons since birth than almost anyone else in the kingdom—but because, to me, she would always be that annoying little girl who used to follow me around, begging to have snowball fights. Even though she was born with the guardian mark, and it was her destiny to protect the kingdom, she was still innocent in my eyes.



At the age of twenty-one, she was far from a child. She was a full-blown woman still under the watchful eyes of my father. When she finally came to Castleva, and I had to deal with her big personality daily, I knew I was going to have my hands full. And that scared the shit out of me.

Pushing my worries aside to deal with when the time came, I said my goodbyes to my family before heading back home.



## *Chapter Six*

The Snow Moon Festival of Love had finally arrived. Everyone was dressed in their fanciest attire when we arrived in Direbreak. The land of the Lycans was beautiful, covered in pine trees that had stayed green during the winter, the scent of them filling my lungs.

The air had a chill to it when we stepped off the portal, so we were ready to gale as close as possible to the town of Hallowshade.

One by one, each person galed away alone, except for Cinder who was in Cash's arms, peering up at him like he was a god amongst men. "I can't wait to give you your sweet treat when we get home."

Cash grinned like the fool he was, reminding me that I was supposed to black his eye for snitching. "I have something sweet for you too, Cinnamon, but it'll have to wait until we're alone."

"Oh, gross," Ember said, before sliding her arms around me. "Gale us away before I hurl."

Despite her ability to gale herself, Ember always made me do it, but having her in my arms was nothing less than perfection, so I never minded.

I slid my arms around her before galing us outside the wards of Hallowshade.

When we landed, Ember let go of me and slid her hand into mine.

After a short walk, we arrived at the festival. Twinkling lights lined the town's streets and little heart shaped cutouts

hung everywhere. The sounds of music and laughter filled the air as people danced in the middle of the town square.

Ember's eyes sparkled with excitement. Her gaze darted from the food booths to the lights and stopped at the band. "Whoa. This is amazing! I've never been to a Snow Moon Festival this huge before. Is it always like this?"

"Since Flaik Luna is a Lycan holiday, we go all out," Zila answered, wearing a prideful smile. "The party actually starts early in the morning, but most folks wait until the moon is about to appear before they come out."

Ember tipped her head toward the sky. "That's a very beautiful Snow Moon we are celebrating."

Zila looked up, slowly releasing a deep breath. "When I was a young girl in school, the elders came for a story day. They spoke of Altaluna Anesa who was not only a goddess, but the Queen of the Moon. Legend says she had golden brown skin that was smoother than the finest silk and shiny black hair that fell in waves down her back, slightly brushing the ground when she walked. Her eyes were steel gray and sparkled like a thousand stars lived in them."

"Wow," Cinder whispered. "She sounds gorgeous."

"Indeed she does," Zila agreed. "She had the hearts of many men, but only one earned the right to have hers. Benedict Amaris. He was the Commander of the Queen's Guard and after years of protecting her, they fell in love."

"That's the sweetest thing I've ever heard," Ember gushed.

Cali cleared her throat, sadness washing over her. "Just wait until she tells you the rest."

"I was getting there, Cali." Zila shook her head before continuing her story. "Legend says that a rival kingdom attacked her castle. Benedict led her guard like he always did, ready to protect the woman he loved and her kingdom. During the battle, the queen got word that Benedict suffered a severe injury and lay bleeding to death in the middle of the battlefield. Altaluna refused to let him die without her by his

side. Multiple people tried to stop her, but you can't stop a queen from doing what she wants, especially one in love."

"Did he die?" Ember asked, before sniffing back tears.

"When she finally found him, she knelt by his side, taking his hand into hers. He whispered that he loved her and she whispered it back. Moments later, Benedict took his last breath and drifted away, still holding the queen's hand. Another guard pulled on Altaluna's arm, begging her to get off the battlefield. She wouldn't budge. Multiple arrows flew toward them, one landing in the guard's shoulder, the other in the queen's chest. They say she never saw it coming. They both died under the Flaik Luna, which means "Snow Moon" in the old language. When the battle ended and the sun had risen, the remaining guards found Altaluna and Benedict still holding hands. It was love even in death, they say."

"That's such a sad story," Cinder whispered. "Why would people celebrate that?"

"We don't celebrate their death, we celebrate their love. Lots of people still worship the Queen of the Moon in hopes of returning to her upon death because they believe she will make sure they spend eternity with their mates. Over the years the day changed. People started paying tribute to Altaluna and Benedict's love by honoring the ones we cherish in this realm. And that's how the Snow Moon Festival of Love was created. It's my favorite holiday."

All the women and Asher wiped tears from their eyes. I looked away, making sure no one saw the ones that filled my eyes.

Zayn sniffed, then nodded his head toward the festival. "Let's party."

We strolled the cobblestone streets until we got to the section filled with food vendors where we each got hot cocoa and treats. After a while, we all piled onto the dance floor. We danced to every fast or slow song that played, and with Ember in my arms, I had completely forgotten to be nervous about the present I got her.

Once we arrived back at the manor, we all took seats at the dining room table and I hoped I hadn't failed my mission.

Cali clapped her hands together with a squeal. "It's time to exchange gifts now! I'll go first!"

She excitedly handed everyone new bracelets she had woven from yarn she got from the land of the Angels.

Zayn passed out bottles of brandy infused with different flavors to match everyone's taste.

Cash went next, giving us each a bag of fudge, and Cinder an entire new set of cast-iron pans, two sundresses, and wooden spoons.

Zila gifted everyone with handmade paper which had real flowers in it, along with new quills made of peacock feathers.

Asher had carved tiny weapons from basswood. I was going to prop mine next to the small wooden bear Ember got me last year.

Cinder baked everyone's favorite flavor of cupcakes. Of course I ate two chocolate ones while Ember grabbed a basket, and started handing burlap bags out.

"These are from me. They're filled with deer jerky. I killed the deer and Cinder helped me make it."

"Hell yeah!" Cash hollered with excitement.

When Ember stopped at me, her basket was empty. "I didn't get you jerky."

"That's okay, love. I don't need a present."

"I never said I didn't get you a present." She handed me a note that was wax sealed with the royal crest of my family.

My mind wondered what the letter could contain as I broke the seal and opened it.

*You have been cordially invited to the unveiling of the new marble statue erected at Blackveil Castle in honor of Duchess Leona Serenity Grey.*

My mother's name being on the invitation sent my emotions into hyper drive.

“What is this?”

My gaze went to Ember who was smiling nervously.

“Your father, sister, and myself liked the idea of having a statue at your father's castle in honor of your mother. The great grandson of the man who sculpted the marble statues in the king's castle inherited the business. From my understanding, he's just as good as his predecessors. We have yet to see it because we're waiting until the unveiling, but your Uncle Lazul said he knew your mother and the resemblance is uncanny. The sculptor's work definitely honors his family's legacy.”

I was only ten years old when my mother died giving birth to my sibling who also didn't survive. Ember was one of the few people I had opened up to about my feelings—ones I used to suppress.

The fact that she would honor not only me but my mother with such a beautiful gift, made me feel unworthy of the amount of love she had for me.

“Thank you, my hertis rote.” I quickly wiped away one small tear which managed to escape my eye before jumping up and getting everyone's attention onto a new topic.

“The gifts I got everyone are a little different. Come with me.”

I took Ember's hand and led her to the study. Our friends followed.

After unlocking both the doors, I dropped her hand and went to the first potted plant with a foot tall bush.

“This one's for Cash. It's a rose bush from your mother's garden at the castle on Valmeyer. I figured we could plant it in the garden here so you and Cinder can visit it when you take your walks.”

Cash's eyes were glazed with emotion as he headed toward me. He slapped a hand on my shoulder before yanking me into

him with the strength of ten men. “Thank you, buddy.”

When he let go, I turned my attention to the next plant. “This one’s for Zila. It’s a mimosa tree sapling from Direbreak. I heard you say it’s both your and your mother’s favorite. I figured we could plant it near where you like to meditate, since they smell fantastic when blooming.”

“That is so very kind of you, Valarian.”

Zila pulled me in for a hug and I patted her back.

With a deep breath, I continued. “I know little about your family, Asher, but you’re always talking about walnuts and how much you love them, so I went to Ashbern and got a tree. You’ll have plenty of walnuts now. Well, once it’s big enough.”

Asher shook my hand. “Thanks, Val.”

I pointed to the next pot with a two foot tall plant. “This present is for Cali and Zayn. It’s an apple tree from the farm you grew up on. Every time you pick an apple you can think of your parents.”

Cali plowed into me with a big hug. “This is the most thoughtful gift. Thank you, V.”

As soon as Cali pulled away, Zayn grabbed me. “Thanks, buddy. I’ll share my apples with you.”

We both laughed.

I took a deep breath, hoping my gift to Ember and her sister would be good enough.

Only a few months ago, they learned their parents had been murdered. The only thing they had to remember them by were their mated rings, which Ember gave to Cinder and Cash to use when they have their mating ritual. With nothing else to remember them, I wanted to give them something they would cherish forever.

“I know you very well, Ember, and since I do, I know you want for nothing. That made getting you a gift difficult. It was even harder gifting to Cinder since Cash bought out the entire market.” Everyone laughed, and Cash gave me a wink before I



continued. “Instead of getting you normal, mundane things, I decided to get you both these.”

I pointed to two pots filled with soil and Ember eyed them.

“You got us dirt?”

“I got you two Wisteria seeds from your homeland. I figured when spring comes, they’ll be strong enough to replant at Amethyst Falls. The day we transplant them we’ll hold a ceremony to honor your parents who didn’t have a proper burial.”

Ember’s teeth bit down onto her lip and for a split second I wondered if my gift was dumb until tears filled her emerald green eyes.

My attention was brought away from her when a very happy Cinder yanked me into her. “You’re the best brother-by-mating anyone could ever ask for.”

When Cinder let go, Ember wrapped her arms around me and laid her head on my chest. “Valarian Grey, you never fail to surprise me.”

I ran my hand down the back of her bright red hair. “So you like my gift?”

She pulled back, peering up at me. “It’s perfect.”

I placed my hand on her cheek and rubbed my thumb back and forth. “I love you, my hertis rote.”

“I love you, Val.”



Later that evening, I was under the biggest Wisteria tree at Amethyst Falls, the full Snow Moon barely visible through the long branches. Teal, silver, and purple sparkles of magic dancing along the cold ground scattered away when I laid a pelt of fur down. By the time I removed my boots and took a seat, they were already back, swirling around me.

Ember handed me the two cups of hot cocoa to hold while she slid her boots off.

“These are almost cold, love.”

She took a seat next to me before taking one cup from my hand.

“Don’t worry. I can heat them for us.”

After conjuring her fire magic in her right palm, she held the cup over the small violet fireball.

My eyes widened in wonder. “You’re a genius!”

“Since there have been no battles, I had to learn to do something with my magic during this boring winter.”

She smiled before switching cups with me, heating hers next.

“I think I’m going to go visit Arna tomorrow, Val. Would you like to come with me?”

Arna was her familiar who looked like a giant eagle. She was gifted to Ember by the God of Fire before she transformed into a phoenix.

“I would love to go with you. How does she like staying on the Water Caster land?”

“She said it’s fun lying around on the sandy beaches of Cerulean all day, but she can’t wait until spring comes so she can return home. She misses me as much as I miss her.” Ember took a sip of her cocoa before turning her head toward me. “Do you think the trees will fit next to this one, Val?”

I crinkled my nose. “But this is the tree we make love under all the time?”

Her expression turned confused. “What’s wrong with that?”

“I would prefer to honor your parents further away from the spot I get naked at.”

Ember giggled, then tapped her cup lightly against mine.

“Blessed Flaik Luna, Val.”

“Blessed Flaik Luna, my love.”

I pressed my lips against hers, where they would gladly remain for eternity.

## *Note from Author*

Thank you so much for reading my story and supporting NAMI.

Revisiting the Primordial Realm and being in Vals' head was an amazing experience, and I can't wait to come back again and again.

Blessed Flaik Luna, my loves!

Love, hugs, and vampire blood,

P.S. Nail

## *About the Author*

Dreaming of becoming a vampire, I mean author, since she was a youngling, PS Nail finally fulfilled her prophecy by self-publishing her first paranormal fantasy romance novel, with many more to come.

She enjoys playing guitar to soothe the draw of the moon, video games to help pacify her blood lust, reading romance and smut books, since she never sleeps, and having a fangtastic time with paranormal friends. Once a month, when the full moon calls, she and her coven dance naked around a magical blazing fire ... but don't tell her we told you.

We think she currently lives in the United States, or possibly Romania, with her shifter husband, three hybrid sons, and their pet demons. She lovingly calls them her immortal family.

She will continue to quench her thirst for writing until death, dismissal, or dishonor.

FYI: She hates the sun, but loves garlic.

Websites: <https://psnail.org>

<https://www.primordialtree.com/>

All social media: <https://linktr.ee/authorpsnail>

# *Hurts Like Hell*

Andi McClane



## *Blurb*

I've always loved the smell of sadness. Well, as long as I've been a demon, which wasn't always the case. But the smell of sweet vulnerability, solace, and grief I experience in Eve's presence awakens dormant emotions I'd forgotten long ago. After one meeting, I'm addicted.

I can't come back again. It's dangerous for her, torture for me. Just being near her paints a target on her back. Other demons that want nothing more than to see me fail will stop at nothing to break me. I have to stay away no matter how much I crave her.

Unless I can finally convince the devil himself to let me go. Who will break first?

Lucifer? Or me?

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## *Blazing Brimstone Biscuits*

Eli

I hate the smell of children. They smell like armpits and sugar. Sugarpits.

After the family, donned in all black, brushes past me, the smell still invades my senses. I send a nod down to Lucy for not allowing children in Hell.

The cool February morning causes a shudder to rack my body. I hate the cold. Of course I hate the cold, almost my entire existence has been surrounded by a blazing inferno. You'd think I'd welcome the chill, but I hate it. Still not as much as the smell of children.

And... there he is. Lounging on the stairs of a mausoleum. Fucking Grimm. Always hanging around cemeteries waiting for someone to fall out distraught and heartbroken after watching dirt thrown on their loved one. Bastard feeds off torment. We all do, I guess.

He's the one I have to keep the closest eye on. Well, him and Naamah. Crazy-ass she-demon is trying to populate the Earth with half-breeds. That damn enchantment she disguises herself with means she evades me more often than I'd care to admit. And as I said, no kids in Hell, so the little demons are running



around setting shit on fire and cloaking themselves the minute they learn how to do it. Makes my job nearly impossible.

My job being the demon babysitter. Also known as the most hated demon in the underworld. Ah, such is life. Or existence, whatever you want to call it.

Good thing I'm in tight with the big man. I've had him half-convinced to let me out for damn near a century now. I'm so close. I don't know where I'll go when I'm released but I know it'll be somewhere warm.

Grimm's mouth curls up in a sneer when he spots me.

I saunter up to him, hands deep in my pockets, wrapped around hot stones I tossed in the fire before leaving. "Grimm."

"Warden," he deadpans. His black-rimmed eyes monitor the patrons of the cemetery and never meet mine. He salivates at the scent of anguish in the air. "Just getting some fresh air."

"We've talked about this. You're only to take those that are due. Stop popping up to scare people into checking out before their time."

His eyes flash red as he grits his teeth. "Like I said, needed some fresh air."

"There's nothing fresh about the air here. Quit scavenging."

He stands to his full height, knowing he's taller than me. "Quit acting like you know my job. Quit acting like you know how it is to be bred to crave the taste of pain and then be told to only quench it when someone else sees fit." He takes a step down so we're eye level, leaning in to take a sniff. "And quit acting like you're some big bad demon boss who's unaffected by all this when I can smell the angst on your breath."

He brushes my shoulder as he pushes past. Slowing as he walks past a family standing graveside, he looks back over his shoulder and side-eyes me as he runs a finger through the hair of a distraught widow. He smiles as he rounds a tree and disappears. My guess is he's cloaked himself until I leave so he can continue in peace.

*Fucking reapers.*

I scan the grounds of the cemetery, the sounds of frost crunching under my feet as I walk. A scent from my past invades my senses along with the lilt of laughter—odd for the current locale. Focusing my hearing in the direction of the voice, the cheerfulness of tone piques my interest. I move in closer until I can pick up words clearly.

“Can you believe it? Who would’ve thought Sam would have a little girl and he’d be completely wrapped around her little finger. I mean, the guy who got arrested for not only peeing on a cop car, but then puking on the cop as he was being arrested.” She giggles and I find my feet moving closer until I can see the back of a brunette head poke out over the stone wall. She sits cross-legged on a red and black plaid blanket, pulling food out of a wicker basket. “She really is the cutest thing, though. Little blond, fuzzy curls and pink, puffy cheeks. And she laughs at everything. I bet she’d even laugh at your stupid jokes.”

I came for the scent of fried meat but stayed for the scent of her. It’s a mix of citrus, spice and anguish and beyond intoxicating.

She spreads the meal on the blanket and pops a strawberry in her mouth with her gloved hand. Who eats lunch in the cemetery in February? I side-step to get a look at her profile and when she turns, tears stream down her face, despite the cheery words she utters.

A quick glance at the headstone reveals a thirty-year old man named Anthony whose death date is today. The fourteenth of February. Valentine’s Day.

The beating heart in the human body I possess thuds a twinge of pain. It’s also the reason I was drawn to the smell of fried meat. I could name a thousand other reasons why I miss having a human body but I can only focus on her. Her face. Her pain.

I take another step to see more of her and the frost crunches under my feet. She turns and immediately wipes her face with a gloved finger. She paints a weak smile on her face and clears her throat.

I offer her a smile back. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“Oh, I was just leaving.” She tosses wrapped food back in the basket.

“Didn’t you just unpack that?”

An uneasy look flashes across her features. “You sit in a cemetery and watch people?”

“Occupational hazard.”

“What?” Her blue eyes flick to mine and then scan the surroundings. *Smart*. “What does that mean?”

“Never mind. A weak attempt at humor.” I turn to leave. “Don’t leave on my account.”

“Sorry.” Her hands pause packing and rest on the basket. “You just startled me. You don’t have to leave if you’re here visiting someone.”

I turn back to her and answer with a nod. I’m not visiting anyone. Certainly not here. But I find myself unable to walk away and leave this woman in her grief. Grief smells delicious.

“That’s a lot of food you have packed there.”

Her shoulders slump slightly and a weak smile paints her lips. “Can’t seem to prepare half portions.” She turns to the headstone and snuffles. “It’s been over a year and I still make enough for two.”

“I wish I had something to say that would help, but all I can think is at least you have leftovers.”

Her eyes widen and her mouth drops open.

*Oh shit.*

She throws her head back and laughs. Her blue eyes sparkling with tears and humor.

*Oh, thank fuck.*

When she stops laughing, she wipes a finger under her eye. “I needed that. Thank you. Everyone always tiptoes around me

like making a joke is going to break me. Tony had the dumbest jokes and it's been so long since I laughed like that."

She pats the blanket and moves over to make room for me to sit.

*What is happening? Walk away.*

I sit, despite every speck of my soul telling me to leave.

She makes a plate for me and cracks open a bottle of water, handing it over. "No leftovers for me tomorrow."

"Oh wow. You don't have to do that." My human stomach growls and she quirks a brow.

"Your stomach says otherwise. Please, eat. It's been too long since I shared a meal with someone."

My current body can't wait to dig into the fried chicken. My demon soul wants to devour her. My job demands obedience, considering breaking rules and being selfish is what got me here in the first place. I can't exactly punish demons for breaking the rules and then do it myself. So, I settle for the chicken.

The food can't cover the scent of her and I'm grateful for the plate covering my lap. I guess even this body can't mask the stimulation the heady scent of pain and suffering can cause our demon souls. It's both shameful and exhilarating.

We eat slowly. In silence. It's both comfortable and unnerving. Unnerving because I'm comfortable.

"What happened?" I nod to the grave when she turns to me. "If you don't mind me asking."

"Aneurysm."

"Ah. Quick at least."

Her head whips to face me. "You don't mince words, do ya?"

"Sorry. I thought it would be a comfort but I see it was misplaced."

She waves me off. “It’s fine. I’m probably being overly sensitive.”

“I think that’s warranted, considering.”

She spins the wedding ring on her left hand. “You’re oddly refreshing.”

I chuckle. “That’s a first. No one’s ever called me that.”

“No, I mean it. You’re not rude or nefarious in any way, just blunt.”

*If you only knew.*

“I need that.” She ends the statement with a nod as if to convince herself.

“Well, I was going to open with ‘*come here often*’ but it seemed crass given the circumstances.”

She laughs. “See, that’s what I mean. I’m still me. I still need joy and humor. Now more than ever. Instead, I get everyone walking on eggshells. I miss him, but I don’t want to forget.”

“What else do you miss?”

“Holding hands. Going to the movies. Both of us reading before bed.”

“Aside from holding hands, you can still do the other things. You don’t have to stop living.”

Her eyes meet mine and we hold the silence for a beat, each studying the other. I break the stare first and we both turn away.

“You’re right. I can do those things alone. It just amplifies the loneliness, but that can’t last forever.”

“And who knows, you might find someone to hold hands with.”

She spins the ring on her finger. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that.”

“Then start with the other things and see how it goes. It doesn’t mean you love or miss him any less.”

A single tear slips down her cheek.

I reach over and swipe it away with my finger. She studies my eyes. Then her gaze dips to my lips. I need to break this moment. “And you need to learn how to halve a recipe.”

She giggles and the sound sends goosebumps down my spine.

*I need to get out of here.*

I stand and brush my hands on my pants. “Thank you for lunch. It was a pleasure meeting you...”

She stands and reaches for my hand. “Eve.”

*What are the fucking chances?*

“It’s been a pleasure, Eve. I’m Eli.”

“Nice to meet you, Eli. I better be going too.”

I bend to pick up the remnants of lunch. “Let me help you clean up.”

“Thanks.”

We dance around each other picking up the mess. Bending for the basket at the same time, we bump heads. We both rub our heads and laugh, staring awkwardly at each other.

I fold the blanket and hand it to her.

“Will I see you again?” Her hand covers her eyes and she lets out a small groan. “I mean, do you come here on this day... to visit someone?”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Eve.”

Her brows furrow and her eyes flash a hint of sadness. “Happy Valentine’s Day,” she whispers.



## *Hell Does Freeze Over*

Eli

I've heard some humans put the television on in the background just for the noise, so they don't feel alone. Walking through Purgatory has the same effect for me. The wailing of tortured souls is oddly soothing. It's like setting your favorite playlist. You know the words to every song, so you're comforted by the sound. I'm careful not to step on any of the half-buried screaming faces though. I'm not a monster.

I should've shed this human body the minute I got back. I didn't. I hate the fact that I like the feelings Eve evoked in my human chest. I'm covered in sweat, nose burning from the sulfur permeating every drop of breathable air, yet I still wear this body hoping for the half-second pang in my chest or the rush of shivers down my spine, thinking about the way her eyes dipped to my lips.

It's a bit uncomfortable palming my dick to quell the ache in front of these screaming faces and outstretched hands, but I still do it. I'll wear this body all the way home so I can get some satisfaction out of it before hanging it up. I could do it here, but I think that would be crossing some employer/tortured soul sexual harassment policy. I'll have to

look into that one. Pissing off the boss while trying to get released probably isn't my best course of action.

Walking through the gates, I immediately feel the change in atmosphere. I welcome the heat and inhale my first deep breath of breathable air. Lucy has this place enchanted like a modern gothic suburbia. All gray stone and iron gates. Fires burn low for ambiance and the concrete gargoyles turn their heads in my direction as I walk. His palace sits at the front and streets wind away from his home to spread in each direction, housing the demons of Hell. It even has street signs now. Apparition Ave. Manic Dr. Ghoulish Blvd.

Ridiculous and arbitrary if you ask me.

It's nothing like you'd imagine Hell would be. For us anyway. The patrons, *sinner*s, whatever you want to call them, see what Lucy wants them to see. Or what the council decides they see. Usually some variation of their worst nightmare. An eye for an eye and all that shit.

I'm so glad I wasn't conjured for this place. I don't want to ever be one of the Tormentors. Although, now that I think about it, this place probably wouldn't bother me so much if I was made for it. But I also would have no chance of getting out if I had been a demon from the start.

I toss Gorgo a bone and bend over to scratch his head. Hellhounds aren't so scary. I lean down to flash my eyes at the scanner and the gates to Lucy's palace open. They glide silently open and close behind me without so much as a squeak. I shake my head at the image of Hell most people fear. This looks like a modern-day version of *Desperate Housewives of Transylvania*. Yes, I have a television and yes, I stream trashy reality shows. I have days off.

The heavy black iron doors glide open and I'm handed a glass of something cool and refreshing by a she-demon dressed in a French maid outfit. Lucy has some weird kinks. Best to not question it, lest you get an over-detailed explanation with some very disturbing visual aids. I'll never get the image of the Ring of Fire out of my head. And no, you don't want to know.



Lucy has dinner guests. Business is done for the day, so this must be for pleasure. He sits at the head of a table big enough for fifty with a few of his human pets for the night. Sometimes he sends someone to fetch them, sometimes they're hand-picked. Today we have two females and two males. A little too crowded for me.

The table is very French Renaissance, which is surprising with his modern taste splashed across every other inch of this place. It's then I notice one woman with her eyes shut and her head thrown back. Her leg, closest to Lucy, is hanging over the side of the arm rest and I'm guessing Lucy's tail is getting her warmed up.

I take a step back. "I'll come back another time. I didn't mean to interrupt."

His gray eyes flash red and he waves me over. "Eli, please come in. Join us." He takes a small sip of whatever red fluid is in his glass. I've learned not to ask too many questions. His tongue darts out to swipe his bottom lip and when my eyes dip to them, he grins. It's a natural reaction for your eyes to dart to any movement, but he takes it as flirtation. I think for the thousandth time I could probably have been let out long ago if I succumbed to him, but my human stubbornness still lives inside and I'll never let my body be used as payment.

I keep my feet planted where they are. "That's quite alright. I stopped by for a quick chat, nothing urgent."

"I can spare a few minutes for you." When he stands, the woman, who I assume he was penetrating with his tail, slumps against the back of the chair. He stalls for a second, to tuck away said tail.

My eyes fall to the floor as he approaches. Not in submission, *I don't think*, but in avoidance. I don't want him to think I'm interested. He seems to have taken this current body from some Hollywood heartthrob. Icy gray eyes and sleek black hair in a frame nearly six and half feet tall. I'm sure it works on most who come in contact with him. Even if he was in his true form, he could enchant his way into anyone's bed.

Sometimes he plays this little prank on his guests and shows them his true self while in the thick of it. I've heard the screams. I'm not sure whether he charms them, kills them, or eats them when he's done. Remember, we don't ask questions.

He slaps a hand on my shoulder and guides me to his study at the other end of the hall. I'm still holding the glass of bubbly stuff I'm afraid to drink and hold it up to indicate I'm all set when he offers me something.

He takes a seat behind his sleek, lacquered concrete desk and motions to the chair opposite for me to sit. "What's this quick chat about?"

"I was wondering if you had any more time to think about me leaving?"

Leaning back in his chair, he kicks his feet up on the desk and folds his hands behind his head. A dimple appears in his right cheek when he grins at me. "Didn't we just talk about this?"

"Lucy, that was a decade ago." Time passes differently down here. I'm still undecided if I appreciate that fact or not.

"Was it? Feels like last week. Why do you want to leave this place? I've made it pretty fucking great don't you think?" He spreads his arm, gesturing to demonstrate how exceptional everything is.

"Yes, of course. You've done a fantastic job. I'm just not meant to be here." I set the glass down so as to not drop it as my palms slick with sweat.

"I have a contract that says otherwise."

"You know that was bullshit. He manipulated me."

He tsks. "Were you fully aware of the terms before signing?"

"Dammit Lucy, that was seven hundred years ago and there's a reason we don't allow contracts like that anymore. I was just a kid."

"You were an adult. We don't, or didn't, offer contracts to children."

“I was barely an adult. Young and greedy. And probably drunk.”

“Which I took into consideration when giving you the job I did. I don’t have you torturing souls. Or reaping souls. Or burying souls in Purgatory. I gave you a nice gig.”

My head falls to my hands. “I know. I don’t mean to sound ungrateful but it’s been almost a millennia. I’m not supposed to be here.”

“You fit in well, Eli. You’re the only one I trust to keep an eye on these fuckers. I don’t know if I can afford to lose you.”

“Then I’ll find a replacement and train them.”

“I’ll think about it.” He stands and tugs on his jacket to smooth it. “Now, if you’ll excuse me. I have guests.”

I stand and nod. “Of course.”

He rubs his hand down my back when I turn to the door. “Unless you’d like to stay.”

Stepping through the door a little quicker than necessary, I turn back to him. “Been a long day. Thanks though.”

The gate doesn’t slam behind me like I wish it would. I crave some outlet and it evidently won’t be the audible slamming of any door or gate since Lucy had this whole damn realm upgraded with hydraulics. I miss a good door slam to vent some frustration.

I leave the palace grounds and walk the winding gravel path lined with fire and wrought iron gates to my small stone dwelling. Tossing the stones back in the fire for my next trip, I decide I’ll stay in my current body and wring every last drop of human sensation out of it, lest I forget why I’m dead set on getting out of this hell.



## *Misery Loves Company*

Eli

### **One human year later**

There's no scent of demons here. No sign of Grimm. Still, I came. On this day. To what? Torture myself? Seems fitting, I suppose.

It's been another year for her. Not that long for me. I hope she's found healing. I hope she's stopped crying.

I hope she's not here.

*Liar.*

My traitorous heart leaps at the sight of her, pounding like a hammer against my ribs. I both abhor and relish it. This feeling is the reason I haven't hung up this body since the last time I saw her. The little prick of pain to my chest is one I've felt over and over. When I think of her. Conjure up her face. Trace the shape of her lips in the air.

This obsession, if you call it that, is bewildering, even to me. I spent less than an hour with this woman. I know damn

near nothing about her, except that she likes to read, watch movies, hold hands, and she misses her husband.

My throat thickens when I spot her ring finger empty. Does this mean she's moved on? Found someone to hold her hand? The thought sits like heated glass in my gut. Sharp and red hot.

Is it her I want? Or what she represents? Freedom? Respite?

The resulting leap of my heart when she spots me watching her over the wall is all the answer I need. It's her.

She stands and wipes her hands off, a small smile on her lips. "Eli. I was wondering if I would see you again."

Digging my hands deep in the pockets of my coat, I grip the hot stones like a talisman.

*Remember where you came from.*

*Remember where you're going back to.*

Don't get her caught up in you. *She's already broken.*

I paint an easy smile on my face, masking the effect she has on me. "Eve. We've got to stop meeting like this."

"So, I..." She gestures to the basket of food, "I've gotten better at cooking for one but I brought enough for two, just in case."

I wish I could say her anticipating my being here didn't do warm and fuzzy things to my insides, but that would be a lie. And I do warm—*hello, Hell*—but I don't do fuzzy. I breathe out a sigh of relief knowing she's just as affected by me as I am her. It wasn't all in my head. It wasn't me imagining the look of lust cross her face. It wasn't me latching on to the idea of her in some *after-hell* life.

Something did pass between us. And now I feel like the snake, tempting her when it's against the rules. Wanting so wickedly to see if she's willing to take a bite. Doing exactly what I condemn others for doing.

I grip the stones in my pocket until my knuckles ache. "Eve, nice to see you. A little warmer today than it was last year."

“It is unusually warm for this time of year. The picnic food seems more fitting this time.”

We stand in awkward silence, our heads both dipped to the blanket and basket before us.

“Would you, uh, care to join me?” Her feet dance in place, a small indication of her tension. Whether it’s unease or anticipation, it’s adorable.

I sit with a smile I couldn’t wipe off my face if The Tormentor himself had a sickle to my throat. “What are we having today?”

“Stuffed ravioli. I hope it’s still warm.”

The food smells amazing, mixed with a hint of sadness and guilt. And I’m a man whose starved for so long—human and demon alike. This is a dangerous game.

We eat. We talk—for too long. Every second with her is gratifying.

She’s a nurse, which has me wondering if she’ll always have a slight scent of sadness to her. Hospitals are always wrought with delicious smells of anguish and misery. I’m not surprised to find the scent of pain and sorrow on her today. She’s visiting her dead husband. But I wonder if her occupation comes with a contingency that would warrant a permanent allotment of sadness.

It won’t be at all appetizing when I’m no longer a demon.

“So, what do you do?”

The question catches me off guard. “I’m, uh, a police officer of sorts.”

She snort laughs. “Of sorts? An answer but not an answer.” She shakes her head. “I guess it fits your mysterious vibe.”

“You think I’m mysterious?”

“Let’s see. Pops up out of nowhere. Listens to me talk and talk, but gives not an ounce of information about himself. Is oddly soothing and comforts me on the one day every year I allow myself to bask in the pain. No hello, no goodbye, no

phone number. And then pops up again the next year to do it all over again. I would say that fits the definition of mysterious.”

“Well, when you spell it out like that.”

“So, is this going to be a standing date? Should I take your order for next year?”

My spine stiffens. She notices the change and her eyes search my face.

I stand. “I should go.”

She jumps to her feet. “Are you playing up the mysterious vibe or was it something I said?”

I toss dishes haphazardly into the basket and collect the trash. “It’s not you.”

“Nothing is less comforting than the *‘it’s not you it’s me’* conversation.”

I grip the balled-up napkins in my hands to keep my eyes from flashing red with the utter rage and disdain I feel for putting myself here. For putting her in the position to feel rejected. I should’ve left before she saw me. What did I think was going to happen? “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come.”

She takes a step toward me. “Why did you?”

I sigh and take a step back. “Eve.”

“Why did you come?” She steps closer and I step back.

“To see you.”

“Ha. But you plan to just leave without a trace again? Casually pop up next year to see if I’m still sad and vulnerable? Is sadness your kink?”

“No. Dammit, Eve, it’s complicated.”

“It’s complicated. It’s not you, it’s me,” she mocks. “The mystery is starting to wear off, Eli. You can go.”

The basket turns over when she rips the blanket out from underneath it. The strong scent of shame hits my nose and my heart sinks in my chest.

“Eve, please. Don’t feel ashamed. This is my fault.”

She spins on me, eyes wide. “I know this is your fault. You could’ve stayed away and let me think our connection was all in my head. I mean, it would make sense with me being all distraught., I could explain that away. But y-you showed up, and it was there, the connection. And I thought you felt it too, or you wouldn’t be here. But now you just want to leave after making the connection root even deeper inside me, so I’ll sit and think about your stupid eyes all day or your lips or your smell—”

The kiss is sizzling hot. My hands grip the scarf around her neck before tangling in her hair. Our tongues dance in tandem desire. Her hands push on my chest and though I could defy and hold my grip, I let her go.

“Oh my god. Here? I do this here?” She gestures to the headstone a few feet away.

“You didn’t do it. I did.” I step closer and rub my hands down her arms.

Her eyes meet mine and I lean in to rest my forehead on hers. She doesn’t move. “Can you trust me when I say I’m trying to figure out a way?”

“Would you stop with the non-answers?”

“That’s all I have for now.”

“I have no idea what to do right now. Asking for your phone number seems so trivial now.”

“I don’t have a phone but I’ll get one.”

“So, you’ll give me the number next year?”

My thumb slides across her chin. “It won’t be a year before you see me again.”

“When?”

“Not a year.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re exhausting.”

“I’ll explain at some point.”



“It better be good.”



## *Pain in the Ash*

Eli

### **Another human year later**

As a demon from Hell, I've gotten pretty good at avoiding torture. You make nice with the Tormentors, maybe bring them a little plaything every now and then, put some hell hound treats in your pocket... It's not hard to play the game.

So why do I feel like I'm walking up to the Executioner? It's been a year. Not by choice.

There's been quite a turnover in staff. A couple demons get pissy and start snitching, and before you know it there's elimination style brackets set up and half of management is wiped out. Or wiped up, if I'm being technical. And who knew Lucy taught a training class on the Ring of Fire?

I can still smell it.

All this to say, I was in no position to ask for my leave. And I'm in no position now, standing here, behind her. Her shoulders stiffen to indicate she's aware of my presence but not willing to turn and acknowledge it.

“You’re late.”

A grin tugs at my lips and I take in a deep breath to fill myself with her scent before I toss an enchantment over her. “I am.”

She hasn’t turned. Hasn’t looked at me. “I only brought enough for me.”

“I’ll fill up on your pleasant company.”

She spins around, arms crossed over her chest. “What if I don’t want to be pleasant?”

I smell something but it isn’t anger. Isn’t rage. Heartache? Maybe defeat?

“You can be whatever you need to be. As long as you do it here.”

Her shoulders slump and her hands drop to her sides. “How do you do that? How do you immediately jump into the end scene of a romcom and make me all... malleable?”

“I put a spell on you.”

“Yeah, you’re a real charmer.”

*If you only knew.*

“I wish I could explain.”

“I just told you I was malleable, and oddly calm. Hit me with this inexplicable explanation and we’ll see what happens.”

“You’re not ready.”

“And you’re pissing me off. Oh look, your spell is wearing off.”

I chuckle and her eyes narrow. I did ease up on the enchantment, only because I’m addicted to her angry scent. If this does work out, and I can leave Hell, I’m going to have to find a replacement.

“I’m not kidding. Start talking while I eat this fried chicken in front of you.”

She plops down on the blanket and pulls out a drumstick.

“Aww, cute. You made our first meal together.”

She takes a huge bite, skin still hanging out of her mouth. “Are you married?” she asks around her mouthful.

I sit down next to her and make sure our shoulders are touching. “Not married.” The closeness of her warms me more than my hot stones ever could.

“You know, there’s a new doctor at the hospital who always flirts with me.” She attacks the chicken like a Cerberus when I bring them a femur.

“Do you like him?”

“No.” She throws her bare bone back in the basket. “He’s a little weird. Always telling me how delicious I smell.”

My lungs constrict and they burn with a fiery rage both demon and human.

“And apparently, I’m hung up on a guy I’ve spent a collective few hours with and we have yearly dates at my dead husband’s graveside.”

My body moves quickly, standing with an urgency I can’t explain. “What did you just say?”

“Are you really so needy that I have to repeat it? I’m hung up on you, or whatever.” Her eyes roll as she stands.

“No, before that. He talked about your smell?”

“Uh, yeah. That itself isn’t weird. It’s just that he says it all the time.”

I grip both her shoulders and pull her in close. “What does he look like?”

“I don’t know. Tall. Handsome. Dark eyes, like really dark eyes, kinda like yours—”

“Go home. Go home and stay there.”

She grabs my coat as I turn to leave. “Eli, I swear to Hades, if you don’t start the explaining part of our agreement...”

“You swear to Hades?”

“Well, I don’t like swearing to God. It scares me.”

I smile. "He's not so scary."

"What the hell?" She throws her hands out to her sides.  
"What does that even mean?"

"That's more like it. Now go home, please."

"Right, go home. See ya next year, I guess. I'm leaving here more confused than when I came."

"It won't be a year, Eve."

"Yeah, yeah. I've heard that before."

I wait until she drives away to leave. As I pass a tree on the way out, a figure steps in front of me.

"She does smell delicious, you can't deny that."

Grimm.

"I can't help but mention it every time I see her. And I'm pretty good at the doctor stuff. Maybe I can get Lucy to let me out too."

He's gone before I can get my hands around his reaper neck.



## *Sinful Delirium*

### Eli

What's Hell with one less reaper? There are still plenty to get the job done. Grimm cloaked himself and vanished before I could get my fiery fists around his neck.

With the scent of Eve still on my hands, I want nothing more than to go straight to the palace and plead with Lucy to let me go. I have a feeling some fucking reaper got there first and there's probably a bounty on my head.

I hesitate at the gate and turn down the path to my home. When I reach the door, there's something tied around the knob.

Eve's scarf.

That sadistic bastard.

I don't even hesitate and run back through the gates. I spent my time walking through Purgatory on the way back, so it's been a few hours for me, less than a week for her.

I know where she lives because, hello *obsession*, and a lot of time on my hands. I may have cloaked myself and strolled by a few hundred times to watch her read through the window. It's creepy, no need to dwell on it.

I take the steps of her porch two at a time and pound on the door. I have no idea what time it is, but all her lights are off.

Please answer the door.

If he touched her, I'll trap him in a human body and rip him limb from limb.

The porch light flips on mid-knock. The door doesn't open right away and I'm hoping she's one to check the peephole.

The door swings open to her pulling her robe closed.

Oh, thank Hell.

"Eli?"

"Eve." I push into the house and close the door behind me. "Are you okay?"

"A little surprised to see you at two in the morning, but yes. Why wouldn't I be?"

I touch the sides of her face and slide my hands down to her shoulders, checking for myself. Her eyes aren't clear in the dark but I'm sure she's confused and I have no idea how to explain this without scaring her.

"Did anyone talk to you in the cemetery?"

"No one but you. Why? What's going on?"

"I really can't get into all of it now. Can you stay home for a few days?" No, wait. That only gives me a few hours. "Maybe a few weeks?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You're sure no one talked to you? No one you haven't seen before?"

"No. Well..."

"Well, what?"

"I saw a homeless man huddled in the doorway of a mausoleum. He was saying how cold it was going to be that night so I gave him my scarf and some food. Then he grabbed my arm and tried to sniff me. So creepy."

Before I can rein in any reaction, my eyes tingle. By Eve's reaction, they flashed bright as hellfire in the dark room.

She stumbles through the archway and falls, scrambling on the floor to get as far from me as she can.

"Eve, wait."

"What the fuck was that? Get away from me." She backs herself up against a piece of furniture and throws her hands up.

"It's not as bad as it looks."

"*'It's complicated.'* *'It's not as bad as it looks.'* You're just a walking cliché. You just went all Fireball McGee."

She stands and rounds the furniture, grabbing a lamp off the table as she goes. I stay where I am and put my hands in my pockets. No one is scary with their hands in their pockets.

"Do you want all your questions answered?"

"Not if you're going to shoot me with laser eyes if I don't believe you."

I chuckle. "I don't have laser eyes. Otherwise, you'd already be dead."

"Small comfort. Start talking. And just know, I played softball and I'm a good throw."

I smile as she bounces on her feet. I walk around the couch and, when she tries to step back, the cord from the lamp halts her retreat. Reaching down, I flick on the lamp, taking it out of her hands and setting it on the table.

"I should be afraid of you." She doesn't move.

"You should be."

"Why aren't I?"

"I've enchanted you."

"Well, you think pretty highly of yourself, don't you?"

I can't hold back a laugh. "Not like that. I mean, I really put an enchantment spell on you. A calming one."



She throws up her hands. “This is perfect. I finally let my guard down and of course I fall for a guy who thinks he’s a witch.”

“It would be a warlock. Witches are female.”

“Is that what you are?”

“No.”

“Well, your eyes just blazed like a wildfire. What fictional creature are you going to tell me you are?”

“You just saw my eyes light up and you still think whatever I tell you will be fictional?”

“Eli, if that’s your real name,” she narrows her eyes, “what. Are. You?” She spits the words out between clenched teeth despite the enchantment.

“A demon.”

She moves back a step and I match her.

Holding my hands up, I mock surrender to keep her calm. “Not the bad kind.”

“‘Not the bad kind?’ There’s a *good* kind?”

“Theoretically, I’m only bad for other demons. I would never hurt you.”

Her hands cover her eyes as she shakes her head. “I’ve officially lost it. I thought I hit rock bottom when I diddled my skittle and then immediately wanted fried chicken after, but this takes the cake.”

I pull her hands from her face and she stares at her wrists. “Has your skin always been this hot? Why haven’t I noticed?”

“Eve, I’m trying to find a way out.”

“A way out of what? And answer my question. I need something to focus on other than the fact that the man I fantasize about went all McFireball on me and I never noticed that his skin could roast marshmallows.”

“My skin is always hot, yes. And you probably didn’t notice because you were distracted, grieving. I don’t know. A whole

list of reasons.”

“Is that why you targeted me? Because I was grieving? An easy mark?”

“I didn’t target you. You enraptured me from the moment I heard your voice. Before I even saw your face. I tried to stay away.” I stroke my thumb across her bottom lip. “I couldn’t.”

“When you said you’re trying to find a way, what does that mean?”

I brush the hair off her forehead and lean in, ghosting my lips across her cheek. “I wasn’t always a demon,” I whisper. I move to the other cheek, brushing my lips across hers as I go. The sweet scent of lust pours over me as she hums deep in her throat. Her hands roam over my chest before gripping my shirt.

Our lips meet and the fiery need inside me flares to life. It’s a human need I’ve been deprived of for centuries.

My fist grips the hair at the nape of her neck and I pull back. I take a full step back to put some space between us. “I’m going to lift the enchantment before this goes any further.”

She grins. “Did you put a lust spell on me?”

“Just the calming one. But if you don’t feel the same after I lift it, if you’re afraid, I’ll go.”

She nods, taking a step toward me. I take another step back, releasing my grip on her, and hold my hands up.

Her face falls as soon as I pull back the enchantment. I take another step back. Her head tilts but she doesn’t move.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Show me.”

Flashing my eyes red, she doesn’t budge.

“Well, it’s not so scary when you’re expecting it. What else you got?”

“That’s all I can do in this body, aside from the occasional cloaking spell to disguise myself or disappear. Like I said, I wasn’t always a demon. This is my human body. Except for the eyes, this is what I looked like seven hundred years ago.”

She moves closer, until she's looking up at me. Her hands grip the back of my neck and pull me in for a kiss.

"You have to be sure about this, Eve. There's a chance I won't get out."

"What would that look like? Back to yearly visits?"

My hands wrap around her waist and pull her flush to me. "I don't think I can ever go that long again."

My nose skims down the tender flesh of her neck and I let out a deep sigh. Lust smells so sweet on her. Her hands knead my back, trying to pull me closer. I kiss down one side of her neck and over to the other side. She moans deep in her throat and tilts her head.

I pull back, my finger skimming down her chest, between the thin fabric of her robe. I meet her eyes, making sure she wants this. I need some acknowledgment other than her scent pouring over me.

She nods, bottom lip caught between her teeth. I tug the loosely tied belt around her waist and the robe falls open. She's wearing nothing but a small tank top and panties.

The robe falls to the floor and she reaches for the hem of my shirt. Eight seconds later, we're skin to skin as she straddles me on the couch.

"I haven't done this in a very long time."

"Is that your way of saying this is gonna be quick?"

I throw my head back and laugh. "Probably." My hand skims down the middle of her chest, pushing her back to admire every inch of her. Her tits are full, with rosy nipples, and her soft middle flares into thick hips and thighs.

"You haven't had any demon sex in the fiery pits of Hell?" She palms my cock, stroking slowly as her hips grind slowly.

I grab her hips pulling her closer to stroke her pussy along my dick. "There have been opportunities."

My eyes soak up every inch of my cock sliding along her wet slit. She grips my chin between her fingers, pulling my

eyes to her face. A strong scent of jealousy pours over me and I chuckle. She raises up on her knees and positions herself over me.

“Jealous, are we?” I pull a rosy nipple into my mouth and bite down a little.

She slides down on my cock until I’m buried. I hiss through my teeth and clutch her ass with both hands. My head falls back onto the couch and she leans over me as she raises up until just the tip of my dick is in her.

Slowly, she rides my cock, eyes never leaving mine. I palm her tits and thrust up to quicken the pace. She lets out a moan that goes straight to my dick. Grabbing her around the waist, I push her to her back and hover over her. She digs her heels into my back. I pull out of her and kiss a trail between her breasts, down her stomach, and plant my lips right over her center.

“Eli.”

One lick from her core to her clit and she’s writhing beneath me. My tongue dances over her flesh as she pumps her hips in tandem. I slip two fingers in and she grabs her tits and squeezes.

“Fuck, Eve.”

She tightens around my fingers as I suck her clit into my mouth. The moans bouncing around the room have my dick dripping. I push her legs up to her chest and bury my cock. Her pussy drips and squeezes as I pump my hips until she screams.

The pressure builds in my gut and my spine tingles with anticipation. I lean over and plant my arms on either side of her head. Her eyes are squeezed shut and her head thrown back.

“Look at me, Eve.”

Her arms wrap around my neck and her eyes meet mine. My cock throbs in waves and I groan and pump through my release.

I bury my head in the crook of her neck as her legs relax their grip on my hips. Petting each other with soft touches as our breathing slows, we stay tangled, our skin slick with sweat wherever we touch.

“Now what?” She whispers.

I sit up and lay her legs across my lap. “Now I try to get out.”

“Haven’t you been trying that?”

A deep breath comes out on a sigh. “I have.”

“Why hasn’t it worked yet?”

“At one point, I was really close. And then there was a catastrophic battle between demons and half our staff got eliminated.”

“You talk about it like it’s a job.”

“It is. For me anyway. I signed a contract, broke the terms, and landed myself in Hell for eternity.”

“If it’s for eternity, why do you think you can get out?”

“Lucy knows I’m not cut out for it.”

“Lucy as in Lucifer? The actual devil?”

“That’s the one. Gave me a job that didn’t include any torture because he knows I’m not made for it. My job is to keep other demons in line.”

“A policeman of sorts.”

I chuckle. “Exactly.”

“So, all the rest of the demons are bad but you?”

“Bad is relative, I suppose. Some of them just haunt humans’ nightmares. Some just want to seduce them and make half-breeds. Others want to reap souls to satisfy a hunger that’s never satisfied.”

She jumps off the couch and pulls her robe to cover herself. “Did you say half-breeds? Can I get pregnant?”

The scent of fear hits my nose and I stand to pull on my clothes. “Aren’t you on the pill?”

She pulls her robe all the way on and throws her hands up. “Why would I be on the pill? I have a dead husband and a man that has lunch with me once a year.”

I pull her into a hug and smooth my hands down her back. “It’s okay. I told you, I’m going to find a way out.”

“And if you don’t? What am I supposed to do? Drop our kid off in Hell every other weekend for visitation?”

I try to hold the laugh in and my shoulders shake before it roars out of my mouth.

She pushes away from me. “This isn’t funny.” A small smile plays on her lips despite her words.

“It’s kinda funny.” We both laugh. “But I won’t let it go down like that.”

She stalks slowly over to me, thumb nail half chewed off from nerves. I wrap my arms around her and she buries her head in my neck.

“I do have to go. I have some work to do.” I pull her back by the shoulders and look her straight in the eye. “I need you to stay here. Don’t go to work. That doctor is not a doctor.”

“Who is it?”

“You really don’t want to know. All those comments about your smell weren’t pick-up lines.”

“What does that mean?”

“We can smell emotions. Every emotion.”

Her eyes widen. “That makes so much sense. I was starting to think I really was in a romcom the way you were reading everything I was feeling.” She smacks me on the arm. “You stayed a mystery while knowing every thought in my head.”

I kiss her on the cheek. “Perks of the job. I gotta go.”

“One day you’re gonna tell me how you landed in Hell.”

“Oh, I will. Jealousy smells great on you.”

“Ass.” Her face splits into a grin before I shut the door behind me.

I waste no time strolling back through Purgatory. I have a reaper to reap and a dance with the Devil.



## *Eternal Damnation*

### Eli

Human wrists weren't meant to withstand this heat. The scent of burnt hair wafts upward as I place my fire-shackle bound hands on Lucy's new council table. I take slight pleasure in the look of horror on his face as I singe through the fancy, sleek coating.

"I could have condemned you from the start. You broke a contract. But I saw potential in you, so I gave you a job instead."

He glides around the table behind all the other council members. All eyes on me.

"Now not only do you want out—which was a possibility you made up in your head if I'm being honest—but," he raises a finger in the air to emphasize his point, "you've broken rules you yourself are supposed to uphold for every single demon in your ward."

"There's not a single demon here that doesn't break these rules on a daily basis. It's the only reason you need me."

"Maybe. But they were conjured for this. It's harder for them. And there was a time when I let them run wild, but now



I'm trying to clean up our image. Sue me for trying to make this place appealing."

The council nods their agreement but exchange looks amongst themselves indicating they like Hell the way it used to be, when they demonized whoever they wanted instead of relying on a vote.

"Appealing for who? Everyone here is here because they're shit humans or made here. You think they aren't going to be shit demons? That's why I spend every damn day reining them in and looking like an ass for making them go against their nature."

A wounded smile paints his face as he stalks behind the seated council members. "Not anymore."

"Fine, put me somewhere else for the time being. I'm sick of babysitting."

"Circle one." I whip my head around and he won't meet my eyes.

"You're condemning me?"

Maize clears her throat. "I thought we agreed you would stay out of the final decision. You're too close."

"I said Circle One. That's final." His eyes flick to mine for a split second as I'm flanked by two guards and pulled out of the chair. His jaw flexes and his eyes narrow. He's angry, but not at me.

"You can't be serious, Lucy. Grimm is up there playing doctor and most likely cutting people up in storage closets and you're condemning me for falling in love?"

"I'm condemning you for breaking the rules. Something you haven't stopped doing in damn near a millennia.



## *Carnal Calamity*

### Eve

What level of pathetic depravity do I sink to tonight? Will it be an entire bucket of fried chicken in the tub? Clothed, mind you. At least I didn't turn the water on; that may have been rock bottom. Or will it be getting off while watching *The Devil's Advocate*? *Supernatural* might work too. I'll add that to the list.

It's a tad discouraging that after months of this I have not the slightest intention of stopping. It's beyond unhealthy. Unstable for sure. I know it. I just don't care anymore.

I haven't been to work. Haven't left the house. *He told me not to*. He also said he'd be back and I've lost hope that's in the cards. I don't remember the last time I showered. I haven't charged my phone in weeks and it's almost Christmas.

My excuses of working overtime aren't going to be a good enough excuse to avoid the holidays. And they'd commit me if I told them I can't leave the house because my demon boyfriend told me not to.

Was it all an enchantment? Everything I felt? I feel? He's not here now and I still feel the delicious burn of his skin against mine.

Did he leave a spell in the nightstand drawer? Or have I completely lost my mind and some guy came into my house, seduced me with devilish stories, and left with no intention of returning?

He said he would *try*. What if they wouldn't let him out? What if he's dead?

How do you summon a demon?



## *Rot in Hell*

Eli

The rage burning in my gut reaches its boiling point when the cell door glides silently closed instead of clanging shut with intent behind me.

Yes, he gave me Circle One, which is a bullshit level anyway, but to condemn me for breaking a rule when my entire existence the last several centuries has been to babysit and report back every other demon and their insubordination.

And they walk free.

The crisp sound of metal on metal pierces the air. I look up to find Grimm clanging a metal pipe along the bars of my cell.

“Well, if it isn’t the warden, all cozy behind the bars. Shame, really. I was just starting to have fun watching you run around like some human savior. I mean, you’ve always had this holier-than-thou persona, but when it came to Eve... you really pulled out all the stops.”

“Fuck off, Grimm.”

“If only you were a better demon. Didn’t they give you cloaking lessons when you got here?”

I turn my back on him and curse the confinement bonds on my wrists keeping me locked in this human body. If I could use my demon form, half this circle would be disintegrated with bits of Grimm goo coating what's left.

He chuckles behind me. "Oh, that's right, you reject the demon inside you. You wouldn't even attempt to hide yourself to keep that delicious smelling girlfriend of yours safe. So selfish. So human."

He drags the pipe along the bars and the resounding tuning fork effect sets off the hellhounds.

"I can't even explain my anticipation at what this anguish and torment is going to do to her scent. She has to be absolutely distraught. And you know that's my favorite. I might just devour her on the spot."

Reaching for his coat through the bars, I pull him toward me so his face is an inch from mine. "You touch her and you won't survive the night."

I push him away but he doesn't stumble. I also recognize the fact that I only got my hands on him because he let me. He's older, stronger, and faster than me, and he knows it.

"Can't do much from here, Loverboy."

His laugh echoes all the way through the brig until all that's left is the growl of hellhounds and crackle of coals.

I sit on the cot, head hanging. The only hope I have of getting out of here is if one of the guards lets me out willingly. Considering I've spent my existence here snitching on their buddies, I don't like my odds.

I raise my head when the sound of a stone dropping at my feet breaks my fruitless attempts at devising a plan to escape. Lucy's steel gray eyes peer through the bars as he tosses another stone.

"Still hot from the fire."



## *To Hell and Back*

Eli

### **Valentine's Day**

One more sermon and I'll either shove a hot poker in my own ears or offer myself up to the Executioner. He hates me though, so he'd make it really slow and painful. Everyone here hates me. The guy next to me ate one of Lucy's human treats, but I'm the problem for doing my job.

Gorgo comes sniffing at my cell and I reach through to scruff his ears. He's the only hellhound that lets me near him. Probably because I used to toss him bones on my way through the gate. Sometimes they just pop right off an outstretched arm when you're walking through Purgatory. No use wasting an opportunity when it presents itself.

“Stand up and put your hands through the slot.”

Gorgo lets out a low rumble and scurries off. I stand in front of the guard and do as he ordered. The confinement bonds are removed and I immediately feel my eyes tingle.

“Keep that shit in check or you’ll regret it,” he grits through his teeth. “Step back.”

The door swings open in front of me and he bends to put a good old-fashioned set of metal shackles on my ankles.

“Let’s go.” He pushes my back and urges me through the cell door.

We walk in silence until we’re halfway through Purgatory. The sounds aren’t as soothing as they used to be, but my steps are light knowing the only reason we’d be walking this way is if we were leaving Hell.

“Where are we going?”

“You know damn well where we’re going.”

“But why? Is this part of my *penance*?” I laugh. “Such bullshit. Taking me to the human world to torture me? Sounds fitting.”

Once we pass through the stifling sulfur-filled air of Purgatory, I close my eyes and inhale deep and slow on the other side of the gate.

Opening my eyes, I curse when I see the setting. The cemetery. Our cemetery.

“Oh, you sadistic fucks.”

He chuckles and pushes my shoulder until I stumble toward a parked car. He opens the door and I duck to get inside.

Lucy sits opposite me in the oversized back seat, a smirk on his face.

My eyes flame red and tingle all the way through my skull. “What the fuck is this?”

“Relax.” He grins and pulls out keys to unlock my shackles. “You didn’t think I’d actually lock you up for eternity, did you? And in Circle One? Please, that shit’s ridiculous.”

For the first time in months, I’m finally free from all restraints and can take in a full breath.

I run my hands over my grimy face and meet his eyes. “What’s this about?”

“Grimm. What else?”

“I’m going to need some help here... a few details?” I lean forward so I’m less than an inch away from him. “Maybe a little fucking something to explain why you locked my ass up.”

He opens his hands in front of him as if to placate me. “I locked you up for breaking the rules, just like I said.”

“So why am I here now?”

“I needed Grimm to believe you were out of the picture. I’ve been trying to find a reason to smite his ass for centuries. Now I have bait.”

“You’re using me as bait?”

He clicks his tongue and tilts his head when the words leave his mouth. “Not you.”

I lunge before my brain has time to warn me that this is the Devil himself. My fingers barely graze his jacket before I’m slammed back into the seat with a fiery hot force holding me down. I can’t lift a limb against it without singing myself.

“I told you to relax.”

“You brought me here to watch you use Eve as bait to lure a demon? A demon that wants nothing more than to see me suffer for eternity.”

“The stones, Eli.”

“What?”

“I gave you your stones. Did you not understand?”

“Understand what?”

“It was a clue that I was still your friend. That I was on your side.”

“I-I didn’t realize.”

“Oh hell, this whole time you thought I was really condemning you?”



“Yes, you fucker.”

The weight lifts off me and I slump back into the seat.

“Well, my apologies. But on the plus side, it did well to convince that reaper fucker that we were on the outs. He let his guard down and now we got him. And I promise nothing will happen to Eve.”

“Great. Let me out of here.” I try the handle and it won’t open.

“I have everything set up. Just sit back and watch.”

The roar I let out is more demon than human.

“I’ll put the constraints back on and handle this myself if you don’t chill the fuck out.”

I peer through the window, scanning the grounds. I have a clear view of where she’ll be but there’s no sign of her yet. There’s a large crowd with a military burial and twenty-one-gun salute staged in the back, less than fifty yards away from where Eve will be. The rest of the cemetery is almost empty.

She appears from behind a tree and walks slowly to her husband’s graveside. She doesn’t look around, like she isn’t expecting anyone to be here. I’m sure by now she thinks I’m either dead or has given up.

She doesn’t have a picnic basket. She doesn’t sit. Silent tears fall down her cheeks. I don’t know who or what they’re meant for, but my heart aches in my chest.

Her head turns abruptly to the side and that’s when I see him.

Grimm, as if conjured out of thin air, emerges from behind a tree and strolls up to her. He has an easy smile plastered on his face, but I can see the nefarious thoughts in his head as if he projected them onto a screen. He takes a deep inhale when he’s a few feet away from her and the hunger is written all over him. He’s primed like a predator on the hunt, muscles tight despite the sympathy he masks his features with.

Lucy cracks a window and I can almost make out what they’re saying. At first, it’s just exchanging pleasantries. He

hasn't cloaked himself. He appears to her as himself, so she has to recognize him as the doctor I warned her to stay away from. But he either has an enchantment spell on her, or he's spent the last several months cozying up to her, because she doesn't look frightened.

He rubs a hand down her back and she side-steps ever so slightly to keep the distance between them. It's a clear sign she isn't interested, but also a clue he doesn't have an enchantment on her or she'd stay right where he wanted her.

"Fucker." I punch the window when it hits me.

Lucy sits up closer to the window to see what he missed. "What?"

"He doesn't have her enchanted because he likes the smell of fear and panic. He's waiting until the last second to soak it all up until he needs her to be quiet."

He sits up and studies me as if seeing me for the first time. "Damn. Is this what you do all day?"

"Yes, asshole. Thanks for the job."

Lucy laughs when I punch him in the arm.

"I'll give you a raise when all this is over."

Our eyes meet for longer than is comfortable and we both look away.

Grimm now has his arm around her shoulders and is trying to guide her to a cluster of trees. Her head shakes, clearly saying no, and the smile that splits his face has me fighting to get out of this car.

"Let's go. What are you waiting for?"

She's fighting a little harder to stay put just as the military burial kicks off their salute. I can't hear anything, but she's now trying to pry his hand off her wrist.

"Just wait," he says, hand on my chest to hold me back.

I push him off me and stare at him as if he were in his true form. "What the fuck, Lucy?"

“Eight... Nine...” He grins and points a finger at Grimm when the tenth gunshot goes off. He’s obliterated from existence the instant I set eyes on him. One second he’s there, the next he’s gone.

Eve falls back and scrambles a few feet away.

“What was that?”

He smooths his hands down his jacket and winks. “Hired a few people to make me a new weapon. Cool, right?”

“Yeah, Lucy. Cool. You could’ve told me. And you get weirdly excited about new shit. Where’s the proper Lucifer? You’d think if he were going to show up in any given circumstance this... this would be it.”

“Devil’s Play.” He smirks like a kid.

“Can I get out, please? Just to make sure she’s alright.”

The smile slides off his face. He laces his fingers and plants his hands in his lap. After a solid minute-long stare-off, he rolls his eyes and reaches into his jacket pocket. He empties a pouch into his hand and right before he blows it in my face he whispers, “I’ll miss you.”

I don’t know how long the agony lasts—minutes, hours maybe. I come back to myself broken, battered, and throbbing all over.

Shaking my head to collect my thoughts, I look up and see Lucy. A small grin hooks the side of his mouth.

“That was fun to watch. I might have to release someone else just to see it again.”

My eyes bounce around the car and my brain tries to make sense of what he just said.

I dig the palms of my hands into my eyes and rub until I see stars. “Release? You’re letting me go?”

Arms rested on his knees, he leans forward and pats me on the hand. “You’ve found what I’ve been chasing for an eternity. All the nights filled with a crowded bed, anyone at my beck and call... The humans, the demons, the occasional

angel. I mean, I can go a long time and I've tried some pretty crazy stuff, but it never fills the void. I remember this one time, there was like five of us and we—”

“Lucy, for fuck’s sake do not finish that sentence.”

He stops, mouth still open, and sits back. “Right. Sorry.” He reaches out a hand to shake and I take it. He nods toward the window. “Go on.”

I sprint across the grass, not feeling a single ache or pain until a skid to a stop in front of Eve, sitting cross legged on the ground. She looks a little shaken but whole.

“Eli?”

“It’s me.” I pull her into my lap and squeeze until I cry.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Eve.”

She hiccups on a sob and pulls back. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

## *Note from Author*

Thank you so much for reading!

I hope you all enjoyed the steamy Valentine's Day fun!!

This was my first dive into the paranormal world and as much as I would have liked for it to be dark and broody, I can't hold back the sarcastic banter and light. So sassy demons are what you get.

Can you believe a year ago I was gushing about these authors and absolutely over the moon to be receiving their books in the mail, and now I'm in an anthology with them! It's beyond surreal. And I couldn't be happier the proceeds are going to the National Alliance of Mental Illness. I would expect nothing less with this amazing group of authors. I'm so honored to be a part of it.

## *About the Author*

Andi McClane spends her days in scrubs and her nights creating stories. Falling in love with the written word at a young age with authors like V.C. Andrews and Robert Ludlum, it only made sense that her books would be filled with love, lust, and suspense. She resides in Ohio with her family and enjoys reading, writing, and photography.

Please buy my books. Scrubs are very unflattering for my body type and I owe people money.

Website: <https://linktr.ee/andimcclane>

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We also want to express my deepest thanks to the readers. With your support, we're able to donate our profits to a great cause.

XOXO,

The Authors