

B.LOVE PRESENTS

Accidentally
IN LOVE WITH YOU

KAYE LOVETT

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KAYE LOVETT

[#BLP](#)

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Contents

B. Love Publications

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Afterword

BLP Meet and Greet



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*For those who blindly love love. Having never experienced it
but hoping it exists for you.*

Special thanks to Erika B.

*Thank you for the push, late night sprints, and overwhelming
love and support.*

Introduction

Heal: Become sound or healthy again.

Hey Readers!

My heart is delighted to introduce my main character, Caleb Jackson. He was everything I needed in a time when I wasn't at my best. His character came in kind and nurturing, holding on to the hope that he would learn the definition of true love. I had to give him a beautiful, enchanting soul to become infatuated with and make his.

Kacie Benjamin is so loving and understanding by nature, making her the perfect, true mate for the beloved Caleb.

This is such a beautiful story of transition in one's self with the help of a partner. Their love blossomed into a magnificent tale and to think it all started with an accident...

Happy reading!

Kaye Lovett

Reminder: Check for your **Content & Trigger Warnings-**
<https://bit.ly/3uQd6G5>

One



DIFFERENT DIRECTION

STUNNED.

She couldn't have heard him correctly.

“What do you mean he decided to go in a different direction?” Her best day was quickly spiraling into her worst day.

Kacie Benjamin was the owner of a small business called Silver Sets, where she designed custom sets for photo shoots. Being able to create something genuine with the popular influencer had been the highlight of the last three weeks. Finally, all her hard work and determination had paid off.

So she thought...

It was two days before the shoot was supposed to take place, and she was there to begin setup. She wanted a head start on setting up and marking areas where things should be. She'd even outsourced a few helping hands from one of the best staging companies in South Carolina. She was determined to make her client's vision come true.

She had walked inside her favorite event space, ready to get started, when Nick had stopped her. She should've known something was up when she saw him.

“When did this happen?” Kacie followed behind him as he moved around the space.

Nick was the manager of her first major client, Dom. He took to social media with the freshest fits, impeccable shoe game, and model features. He was light skinned with soft yet

masculine features. He had kind, light brown eyes, naturally arched brows, and kissable lips. A chiseled jawline, straight nose, and no facial hair wrapped up his face. His medium built frame, smooth six-pack, and a thin happy trail leading to gold he carried between his legs sealed the deal. Men wished they could be him, and women desired to be with him.

It was sad he had turned out to be exactly like the people she didn't want to work with. She thought he was different.

Imagine her surprise when she found out Dom was from the growing city of Johnson, South Carolina, like her. When he commented on a picture she'd shot of herself on a custom set she did, she was all over him, jumping at the slight chance of working with him.

After he replied to her comment with a wink emoji, he'd hopped in her private messages, saying they had mutual people they followed. That was when they discovered they were from the same area. Dom would be in town soon and said they should work together. After talking for two days, they decided on two sets that totaled close to three-thousand dollars, with labor included, and he would pay and reserve whatever venue she thought was ideal for his vision.

Kacie was known for handcrafting her sets, putting a personal touch on every piece. She had things sent to the studio, and her car was full of equipment and any extra necessities she might need in setting up. Now she didn't need any of it.

“Last minute, but we know your policy, Kacie. The deposit is yours, and Dom has sent you the rest of the money, plus extra for the inconvenience.”

Her head dropped, moving from side to side. “It's not about the money...” It was so much more than money.

“Dom really liked you, Kacie, but his audience is changing, and that means so does his image.”

Her eyes shot back to him. His attempt to let her down easily wasn't going over well. It was a bunch of excuses Kacie wouldn't let him use to sugarcoat shit. “Somebody couldn't

have told me? We could've come up with something different. The money set was his idea. This is what I do. I can adjust with the image change and do something different. Is he here?" She looked around aimlessly. They were coming up from Atlanta, so if he wasn't, he wouldn't be far behind.

"Kacie."

"I just need to talk to him. If not today, then maybe tomorrow or whenever he gets in. We can make this work. I'm good at what I do, Nick." The desperation in her voice was sickening.

"Kacie." He grabbed her arm softly. "He wanted different all the way around. I'm sorry."

There it was. He didn't want her. "Why didn't you say that in the beginning?" She faked a toothless smile as she patted his hand so he could release her arm. "Tell Dom thank you. Let him know it would've been a pleasure working with him."

He sighed. "Don't take it personal. It's business."

Yeah, she was damn sure riding on the business she was about to receive. Dom had the following she only dreamed of having. His mention of her would have skyrocketed her business and social status.

Kacie turned her back to him, looking for the nearest exit. She found one close to her, but she couldn't make her feet move. Hurt, anger, and humiliation kept her feet rooted. "What do I do now?" she asked, more to herself than Nick. She honestly thought he would rush off, but he spoke up, making her look over her shoulder.

"You're five thousand dollars richer. Go do something to cheer you up. Instead of being disappointed, be happy that you got your money and didn't even have to work for it."

She looked at him with despairing eyes. People like Nick couldn't understand an artist's heart, Dom included. Creating would always be the only goal. Money was just a benefit.

"Listen, why don't you come back on Friday? Maybe you can network, get your name out there more?" Nick tried to

cheer her up, but it was no use. When she didn't respond, he checked his phone, looking at the time. "I have to go."

"Don't worry. I'm leaving." She sucked in a deep breath and stuck out her chest before turning to him fully. "Thank you for the opportunity, and I hope you and Dom have success in the upcoming session. It was nice meeting you." She held out her hand to him, and he shook it.

"You too, Kacie. Take care. I know how to get in contact with you when I need some fresh, new ideas. You really have a good head on your shoulders."

"Thank you, Nick." With her nose in the air, she walked to her car and climbed behind the wheel. It was only then she allowed herself to sulk. She buttoned her lips to hold back the cry she desperately wanted to release. She thought it was her time, but she was wrong, so wrong.

She pulled up her bank information, and sure enough, in her business account, a credit of five thousand dollars was added this morning. She tossed her phone in her purse and pulled away from the building, letting down the windows to take in all the fresh air she could. She pulled down her visor and headed toward the setting sun.

What a day...

Kacie wanted the drive home to be like one of the times she would magically appear in her driveway, forgetting how she got there, but her mind couldn't stop replaying what happened. She had been so close to her breakthrough. When would it be her turn?

Needing a listening ear, she dialed her best friend's number. "Hey, Gia. You busy?"

"You need my help, don't you? Well, I'm going to need my payment up front this time." Gia laughed. "You need me now? I can toss some clothes on real quick."

Kacie's throat tightened. It was so sweet of her friend to ask if she needed help. It wouldn't be the first time Gia had helped. It made her sad to even tell her what happened.

"Hello?"

“Yeah, I’m here.” Kacie sniffed.

“What’s wrong?”

“They replaced me, Gia. For no reason other than I didn’t fit what they were looking for anymore.”

“They can’t do that! I thought you have them sign a contract that covers things like this? Do you need Jalil to help you?”

Jalil was a lawyer and Gia’s boyfriend of five years. She and Gia had been friends double that, yet neither relationship had suffered from the new addition. Jalil was the sweetest and treated Kacie like a sister. If anyone would have her back, it would be the two of them. “Yes, my contract covers me getting paid. They can cancel, but they still have to pay the total amount, plus extra, totaling to five thousand dollars. So, it’s no need to call Jalil. Thank you, though.”

“Damn. But of course, it’s not about the money.” Gia knew Kacie like the back of her hand.

“It’s never about the money. I thought this was a gateway to better for myself. Sometimes I feel like a hamster on a wheel.”

“Get off the damn wheel then, Kacie. You see it’s not working. Do something different.”

Hearing that only hurt more, but maybe it was time to let her dream just be that. “Do I just give up and start looking for a real job?”

Gia let out a heavy breath, and Kacie could see her face all frowned up. “You have a real job, a real business!” she stressed. “I wish your mother would stop telling you otherwise. Everyone doesn’t want to be a stay at home wife—anyway, I’m getting distracted. What I’m suggesting is a new approach to an old dream.

“We talk about this all the time. You keep trying to fit into a tiny space when you’re so much bigger. Honestly, I don’t think this was your gateway. Your taste is not for the industry. This *no* is protection. You literally make something from nothing. You have your own lane. Stay in it; stick to it even

when it seems hard, and watch it pay off. Give yourself grace and watch your business grow.”

Kacie removed her foot from the gas as she wiped her falling tears. “You’re sounding like me and shit.” She giggled as she dried her face with the end of her shirt. She knew she had called the right person—her person.

“Where do you think I get all this inspirational bullshit from? I know Jalil thanks you because I used to wild out on him. I used to fight him first and then meditate later.” They shared a laugh. “But seriously, I know it hurts now, but in a few weeks, months, even years, you’re going to be thankful this didn’t work out for you.”

“Yeah, I know. It just sucks, but thank you. I really needed to hear that. I can’t always pick myself up.”

“That’s why you have me. I’m here to catch you when you fall. Now, you want to go get drinks later? We still need to celebrate your cash advance. Five thousand dollars is a blessing.”

Kacie’s face twisted. “I have to call this company and cancel for Friday and still pay them. I want to handle all this bullshit today, then rest. Maybe some other time.”

“I can come over later?” Gia offered.

“No, I’m fine. I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Okay. Call me if you change your mind about tonight, and you better call me tomorrow, or I’m coming with Jalil’s trumpet.”

Kacie laughed. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“The Scotts are gone. I will stand outside that house and blow until I’m blue in the face, until you come out of that house.”

She shook her head, knowing she was serious about her threat. “I love you, Gia.”

“I love you, too.”

Two beeps signaled the end of the call, and she could breathe a bit easier.

At a red light, Kacie looked at her phone. “So much for leaving today in the past.” Noticing the late hour, she wouldn’t be able to call the company until tomorrow. She tossed her phone back in her purse. She would be dealing with the effects of Dom’s decision for days. She rubbed at the back of her neck, eager to get home. She wanted to shut herself away from the world.

The light turned green, and she accelerated up the hill, signaling to get in the left turning lane.

“Go! We can both catch the light.” The Chevy truck in front of her rode their brakes and just as she prepared to stop, the truck sped up and took the yellow light, enraging her as her car jerked to a complete stop. She flopped back in her seat, watching the light turn red.

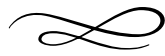
She slapped the steering wheel. “Damn it!”

The loud noise behind her caused her to check her mirrors. The motorcycle that had been riding behind her zipped to the left side of her vehicle, moving into oncoming traffic. He had been behind her, so he didn’t see the rental moving truck that was barreling down the ramp to her left of the three-way intersection.

When the motorcyclist guided his bike into the wrong lane, colliding with the truck, it sent the person in the air. Kacie turned her head so she wouldn’t see them possibly fall to their death.

The truck’s tires screeched at the driver’s attempt to get the truck under control but also from slamming into her, but it was too late. He hit her from the side, pushing her car two lanes over into a tree. The impact was enough to knock her out, making everything around her go black.

Two



THE BEST PART

CALEB JACKSON CRUISED down the road, trying to fight off the aggravation that weighed heavily on his shoulders. Tonight was a special night for him and his girlfriend, Alanah. He just *had* to schedule a meeting right before he was supposed to meet her at her house for dinner. He was trying to be nice and accommodate everyone. That was his problem...

He had scheduled Avery to meet him at six so he could arrive at Alanah's house early. He couldn't wait for tonight. Hell, he had been waiting three long months for this night. Fuck, he was going to strangle the other man the next time he saw him.

Avery O'Neil was someone Caleb thought he was going to do business with, but today was the third meeting Avery had missed, so it was clear he wasn't serious about their dealings.

Caleb had a wonderful memory, and this was something he would embed in his brain for a later date. He knew there would be a later. Avery would come up with another lame excuse Caleb would listen to before he turned him away. They were done as far as he was concerned. There were plenty of people who were dying to do business with him. He had started with the obvious choice because of Avery's connection with the property, but now everything was in the air.

"What's up? Where are you?" His brother, Cannon's, voice came over the speakers in his car after he pressed the green button to answer the call.

“I’m not at the store,” he replied plainly.

“I’m at the store, CJ. So I know you’re not here. That’s why I called to see where you at.”

“What do you want?” His irritation couldn’t be masked. He didn’t even try to hide it from Cannon.

“I was coming to hang out with my baby brother. I can’t do that?”

Caleb could hear the cashier checking him out. “You be on some bullshit every time you stop by, and make sure you’re paying for whatever you got.”

Cannon laughed. “I’m not on no bullshit today. I wanted to hang with you, bring you by the casino.”

“Yeah, I got plans with my lady.” His rotten mood began to melt away, thinking about the night planned for him and Alanah. His skin tingled, picturing her beneath him, above him, driving them both into a heated frenzy.

“Not that Alanah bitch,” Cannon spat. When Caleb didn’t respond, he corrected himself. “My bad, but I can’t stand her. You better watch her, man. She flirts with all my boys. I be having to check them fools.”

“I hear you. She’s like any woman. They love attention.” The bell of the store chimed, so he knew Cannon was headed back to his car. “Where you headed now?”

He ignored Caleb’s question. “Mmhmm. You’re better than me. I can’t stand no friendly ass woman. I like mine mean and stuck up. If a man ever say my woman was trying to holla, I know it would be a lie.”

“You remember Trina and Tracy?” Caleb asked before they both burst out laughing with the mention of the twins they tried to double date.

“You couldn’t handle Tracy’s ass. Shit, I could barely handle Trina. I said mean though, not crazy. But that’s what I like. You need you a good girl. Those other women need a strong hand, and you just don’t have it in you, and that’s okay.”

Cannon wasn't talking about putting his hand on a woman. They knew better, but he was calling him soft. He didn't think Caleb was firm, but he was when he wanted to be. He just never felt the need.

Caleb didn't have much luck in the love department. He was one of the few men who was actually looking for love and not just waiting for it to drop into his lap.

His mom had been super affectionate with him and made him into the teddy bear he was, while Cannon had taken after their rugged father, following in his demanding footsteps.

Things didn't change for Caleb until he got into middle school. Girls would tease him, and boys would bully him for his soft demeanor, chubby cheeks, and round belly. With his brother being six years older than him, he had looked to Cannon for help when things had gotten overwhelming.

It's time to man up, baby brother. Those were Cannon's words before creating a foolproof system that would have his body armored.

The summer before high school, he started lifting weights, and that led to a gym routine that transformed not only his body but his mind as well.

Caleb became aggressive with his workouts—calculated. He would bring shame to anyone who had ever talked about him.

He started on the football team his freshman year, and he felt the shift in how people treated him. By the time he was a senior, he was a transformed man physically and mentally, but emotionally, his heart was still three times the size of the people around him.

With a big heart came greater disappointments. He was a sucker for love, and when girls found out all it took was a little affection to get to the perks of him having a wealthy family, he got used a lot. Dating superficial girls turned into him dating superficial women that looked good on the outside, but what about the inside?

He had this idea of love, but maybe that wasn't really what love was. Years of dating the same type of woman diminished his thoughts of love. The lines of real and fake love blurred, and in return, he found himself settling. Though he didn't think of it as that, it was exactly what he was doing. He took what he could get and was happy because he was simply a man who loved love.

"Did you hear me, CJ? I asked where y'all going tonight?" Cannon asked, pulling him back into their conversation.

"To her place," he answered, focusing on the road again. He had drifted off with his thoughts.

"Good. You don't need to spend any more money on that broad until she's fucking you again. I can't believe you agreed to that three-month bullshit after you already smashed."

It was true. He and Alanah set aside three months of no sex to build a stronger bond. Alanah said she didn't want their relationship to be based on sex, and he agreed because, once again, he was a sucker for that four-letter word. "Well, we're going to end that tonight."

"She better let you fuck her in the ass for waiting three months."

Caleb shook his head. His brother's mouth was reckless, letting anything slip out. "Worry about your own woman. Oh, I forgot. You don't have one."

"You know I keep a roster. Don't play with me. Go do your thing, though. Hit me up tomorrow."

"I got you."

Caleb sighed as he navigated his car through traffic, turning onto a two-lane road heading east. He couldn't act like Cannon's words about Alanah didn't bother him. His relationship with her was still fresh.

They started out as sex buddies, but after a while, she said she wanted more. She wanted to remove sex from the equation to get to know each other better. He thought she would fold, but Alanah held true to her word, and they hadn't had sex for

three months. During that time, he had learned a good bit about her.

He knew her favorite restaurant, where she got her shoes, her favorite perfume, and where she liked to hang out. He could only hope she had found out things about him too. He took her to a couple of his favorite places, but she didn't seem interested in the things he did, so he stuck to more things she liked to do to make sure they had a good time.

Caleb liked to please. It was a blessing and a curse being a people pleaser.

“Shit!” The sound of a horn blaring snapped him out of his thoughts as he came to the light of the Y-junction. Caleb slammed on his brakes, thankful no one was behind him.

“What the hell?” Beyond the cars, he saw a person falling to the ground. The motorcyclist had gone one way and the bike another. He pulled off to the side when he heard a loud noise. Making sure his car wasn't blocking traffic, he turned his hazards on and jumped out. A few people were already on the phone with who he assumed was 911, so he didn't call. Instead, he took a second to look around.

Everything started moving in slow motion like in the movies. People raced to the person who flew off the bike. Surely, they needed the most attention. The guy in the truck that sat in the middle of the road, blocking traffic, was getting help. Caleb looked further in front of the truck, and head-on in the bushes was another car, and no one had made it to check on them. Cars were still trying to pass, so he had to make a quick dash across the lanes to the vehicle.

A woman sat behind the wheel, slumped over. The ponytail from her half up, half down style blocked her face. “Ma'am, can you hear me?”

She stirred.

Good. She's alive.

He went around to the passenger side of the vehicle. Luckily, her windows were down for him to press the unlock button, and he kneeled inside.

“Ma’am.” He pushed her hair away from her face as her head leaned to the side.

He paused for a second. She was gorgeous. Her brown terracotta skin was dewy-like. Giant ringlets rested against her chest and down her back.

She was exquisite, letting him know God took His time with her. Her lips were plump and a few shades lighter than her skin with a hint of pink in the center. She had thick eyebrows with the perfect arch. The gash on her forehead couldn’t take away the fact she was attractive. “Are you okay?”

Grunts and groans followed his question. Caleb caressed her cheek to get her more responsive.

Full eyelashes across her lids fluttered, and he couldn’t wait to see her eyes.

“Yeah, I think.” She squinted as she looked down at the deflated airbag, then around her. “Somebody hit me...” Her head lowered again.

He moved more into the car, leaning over the console to cuff her face in his hands. “Hey.” He massaged her cheeks in circles. “Stay with me. Try to keep your eyes open.”

She stared at him, making him sink into those chocolate pools. His eyes were dark, but hers were a different kind of dark. They were rich in the color brown while his were dark like the clouds that covered the sky before a storm.

“What’s your name?” she whispered, still staring. He felt like she could see right to his soul, but it didn’t frighten him. It calmed him knowing someone cared enough to look beyond what was presented. Hell, maybe it was her injuries, and there he was romanticizing it, but he couldn’t pull himself away just yet.

“Caleb.” Most people called him CJ, but he didn’t want to be CJ at the moment. He had found himself in a little fantasy, and he wanted to stay in the scene for as long as possible.

“I can remember that.” Her eyes closed.

“Can you say it for me?” he whispered softly as he caressed her soft skin above her cheekbones with his thumbs. He knew her skin would be smooth as butter. “Say my name.”

He leaned closer to hear her better, but that wasn't the only reason. He wanted to be in her space, to have more of the sweet flavor she wore, wrapping around his brain. He wanted this moment stored in his mind for the times when he needed to escape reality, his own little fantasy island to retreat when responsibilities weighed on him.

“Caleb.”

Damn, his name sounded good coming from her lips. “Okay.” He slowly backed away, letting his hands drop from her face. He was getting too damn comfortable touching her.

“You wanted to make sure I wasn't too out of it?” She slightly chuckled, resting her head back, lazily staring at him.

“No.”

He didn't offer her more, and she didn't probe. She continued to stare at him, making him shift under her gaze now. In a short time, he knew she wasn't like the women he dealt with. She was the type he wanted but was too afraid to go after. It was unknown territory. With women like Alanah, he knew what he was getting. The woman before him was a wild card.

“You have mesmerizing eyes...” Her words trailed off as her lids shut.

“Hey, hey.” He patted her cheek. “Talk to me.”

“I'm trying. It would be good to take a nap though. My head is killing me.” She hadn't opened her eyes, but she was talking.

“No nap. You hit your head.”

“My head...” She tried to touch her forehead, but he knocked her hand away. She snorted. “Well, ask me something to keep me talking.”

What was he supposed to ask her? How was her day going? Apparently, she was having a pretty shitty day. “Open

your eyes first.”

The corner of her lips curved up before he was met with those deep brown orbs again.

“Is she okay!” A man yelled as he raced over with a phone to his ear.

“Any pain besides your head?” asked Caleb.

“My arms are a bit sore.” She lifted them, and he could see she had a few cuts on both forearms.

“She has a head wound and a few cuts on her arm. Other than that, she says she’s fine.”

He relayed the message on the phone. “Help is coming. Hold tight, ma’am.” He looked at Caleb. “You okay staying with her?”

“Yeah, I got it,” he answered without hesitation.

Why hadn’t he taken the out to get to Alanah? He knew the answer. Simply, he wanted more of the mystery lady’s time. He had built a connection with her and didn’t want it to end just yet.

“The ambulance will be here soon. Do you have someone you would like me to call?” Caleb asked her. “Maybe they can meet you at the hospital.”

“I don’t want to call my parents unless I’m about to take my last breath. Once they see I’m okay, it’ll be nothing but fussing after that. You wouldn’t want my head to hurt worse, would you?”

“I wouldn’t. You won’t be lonely, will you?”

“No.”

Her tone told him she was used to being alone. He found that hard to believe though.

She touched her forehead before he could stop her, and she hissed at the contact. Her fingers had blood on them, and she wiped it on her t-shirt. “What were you going to ask me?” She rested her head back, locking eyes with him again. Obviously, she loved eye contact. Almost every time she spoke to him,

her eyes were on his. She always gave him her undivided attention. It was something he wasn't used to but easily accepted from her. He had to know who this woman was.

"You know my name. What's yours?" he asked.

"I'm Kacie Renee Benjamin." She opened her palm for him to take her hand. He shook it, feeling the warm sensation travel up his arm. "What's your whole name?"

"Why you need to know all of that?" he joked, releasing her hand. "Caleb Gregory Jackson. Most people call me CJ." He didn't know why he was being so upfront, but it was probably because she wouldn't even remember him after they wheeled her into the hospital.

"My dad's name is Gregory." She smiled at the coincidence while her lids closed.

He would let her, for a second, as long as she kept talking. "Sounds like I was supposed to be here with you," he teased. "How old are you, Kacie?"

"I guess so, and I'm twenty-four. You?"

"Twenty-eight." He got comfortable in her passenger seat as they talked.

"Interesting..."

He laughed. "What's interesting about that?"

"Oh, nothing. Well, I like men who are older. What do you do for a living, Caleb?"

She liked older men! Was she flirting with me? Calm down, CJ. It was probably just a general statement.

"Hey, hey, I'm the one asking the questions here. What do you do?"

"I'm a set designer." She used her thumb to point toward the back seat that was packed with boxes. "I thought I had my big break in my career today, but they went with someone else at the last minute. Then I get into a car accident after the most embarrassing moment in my life. Today has been a day."

He wished he knew the words to say to make it better, but none came to mind, so he just held her hand in support.

After a few minutes, the fire truck arrived first, then the police, and finally the ambulance.

They had Kacie on the gurney and were ready to load her up. He had stayed by her side the whole time. Now it was time for them to go their separate ways.

“I guess this is goodbye... Thank you. It was nice meeting you, Caleb.” Kacie offered him a lazy smile as they began to roll her away.

“You too, Kacie.”

He turned away, feeling a heavy feeling in his chest. His stride slowed, and the sound of his name stopped him. He looked over his shoulder at his own personal little fairy he would carry with him in his head, never forgetting their exchange.

“Being with you was the best part of my day. I really want you to know that I truly appreciate your kindness.” Kacie’s words touched him in a way that made his stomach knot.

Caleb gave a firm nod. “How about I come check on you at the hospital, then we can say goodbye?”

Her cheeks lifted. “I would like that.”

He offered her a reassuring smile before the paramedics finished loading her inside, closing the door behind them. Caleb started for his car when the items in the back of her car caught his attention.

“What’s going to happen to the car?” he asked the officer that was taking notes, standing by her car.

“We’re going to have to have it towed.”

If it was going to the local yard, he knew some stuff would be missing. “Can I get her things out of the back seat? I’ll be quick.”

The officer shrugged as he went on making notes on the pad. “That’s fine. The truck probably won’t be here for another

five or ten minutes.”

Caleb moved his car close to hers and started transferring the items. He wanted it to be one less thing Kacie had to worry about. She deserved a good deed done to her after the day she had. Maybe it would be his good karma and his chance to see her again once she was released from the hospital.

He paused.

What am I doing?

Three



CALLING ON YOU

CALEB SENT ALANAH A MESSAGE, letting her know he was running late.

There was an accident on the road. I'll be there as soon as I can. I promise to make this up to you.

He only felt a pinch of guilt as he rode the elevator up to Kacie's floor. He wanted to make sure she was okay and give her his number so she could get her things from him, and then he would leave.

A man in blue scrubs stepped aside to allow him to exit the elevator on the sixth floor. He moved to the desk and stopped to speak to the woman behind it. "Hey, I'm here to see Kacie Benjamin."

"Hello." The nurse checked the visitor sticker on his shirt, then the computer screen and said, "Six thirty-seven."

"Thank you."

The blinds to Kacie's room were opened. He stood looking through the glass for a moment. She was bandaged up and sleeping peacefully, resting on her back with her head turned slightly toward the window. A smile touched his lips as he admired her angelic face.

"Are you Caleb?" asked the doctor, who scared him with her approach. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"Yes, I'm Caleb. Are you Kacie's doctor?" The woman looked a little young, but Kacie seemed to be fine in her care.

“Yes. I’m Dr. Lenzie Danny. Kacie was waiting for you, but she couldn’t fight off those drugs.” She laughed.

He gave a light chuckle. “So, she’s okay?”

She gazed into the room as she spoke. “She was banged up pretty good. She’ll be stiff for a few days. Our primary concern had been her head. We ran some tests, did some scans, and they all came back normal. We are keeping her overnight for observation. If everything checks out in the morning, she’s free to go home.”

“That’s good to hear, and the guy in the truck?” Caleb realized he hadn’t checked out the scene enough. He saw it was a chubby guy behind the wheel of the truck as he passed to get to Kacie, but he hadn’t known who was on the motorcycle. He had watched citizens check on the others, but he hadn’t checked. His only concern had been getting to her.

“He’s fine.” She nodded her head.

“The person on the motorcycle? You know they caused this whole thing.” It was hard to keep the frustration out of his voice. He’d overheard other drivers telling the officers what they saw. Driving into oncoming traffic was never a good idea. There was nothing that important to almost take the lives of others.

“He’s in surgery. He’s a fighter.”

“I hope he pulls through and takes this as a lesson. It could have been a lot worse.”

“I agree one hundred percent.” She touched his arm. “You can go in with her. Do you plan on staying tonight? I can get you some blankets and a few pillows. I know hospitals can be uncomfortable.”

“I’m not staying.” He mumbled the words as he moved his attention back to the woman in the bed. “I have somewhere I need to be, but thank you.” He pulled out a folded piece of paper. “Can you make sure she gets this?” His eyes shifted back to Dr. Danny as she slipped the paper from his hand.

“Yes, I can. You have a good day, Caleb. It was nice meeting you.”

“Thanks, Dr. Danny.” They shook hands before she made her way down the hall.

Caleb took one last look at Kacie. “Goodbye, Kacie Renee Benjamin.”

When he walked out the doors of the hospital, he left his fantasy world behind. He drove toward Alanah’s house, heading to his reality.

* * *

INSTEAD OF KNOCKING, Caleb used his key Alanah had given him to open the door of her house. He knew she would probably be irritated with his late arrival, but he knew all the ways to make it up to her.

“Babe.” He moved to the kitchen. The food was covered on the stove, but there was no sign of Alanah.

“Lan—” He was about to call out her nickname to see where she was, when he heard her in the bedroom. He moved down the hall but stopped when he heard the sounds of heavy breathing. He eased closer to the door, but stayed out of view. Disappointment and anger filled his belly.

Alanah pushed the man Caleb recognized as her ex off of her. She grabbed her phone off the nightstand and cursed. He saw the remorse on her face as she looked down at her phone, probably just now seeing his text. She flopped back against the pillow with a sigh.

Alanah was a stunning woman, identical to a black Barbie doll, from her blemish-free brown skin to her tall, slim frame and long, jet-black hair that hit the middle of her back.

As she lay with tousled strands and glistening skin next to another man, her beauty was fading to the background, letting her unsightly flaws come to the forefront.

“I can’t believe I fucked up again.” She rapidly typed on her phone. Caleb rushed to turn the ringer off on his phone. “Damn, I’m so stupid. You have to go, Reggie.”

“Come on, Lana. Don’t start that. You do this every time. We fuck and then you get sad about that corny ass cashier.”

“CJ is a good man! I don’t have to explain myself. You have to go.” She pushed at his arms, but he didn’t budge. He looked at her with a scrunched-up face, and she sighed. “He’ll be here soon. He would have caught us this time if it wasn’t for a damn accident.” She resumed typing, and his phone vibrated in his hand.

Lanah: I hope it’s not too bad. I’ll reheat the food when you’re close. Text me when you’re in my neighborhood.

He typed back a response quickly.

Okay, babe. Can’t wait to see you and have you for dessert.

Caleb was intentional with his text. It was hard staying quiet and not react to her deceit, but he kept a leveled head. Things could get real ugly, real quick, and neither of them was worth jail time or losing his life.

“Oh, God.” She groaned. “I fucked up. Shit. Shit.” She threw the covers back and had the nerve to throw one of Caleb’s shirts over her naked body. “Get your shit, Reggie, and let’s go. He’s going to be here any minute.”

“I don’t know how much longer I can keep doing this.” He grumbled as he threw his legs over the side of the bed, stepping his foot into his boxers. “I want you back, Lanah, and I’m not about to keep hiding. You know that’s not even me.”

He covered his lower region and moved to Alanah, but she forced him away by shoving the rest of his clothes in his arms. “I can’t do this with you. We don’t work. You’re a cheater—”

He cut her off with a deep chuckle. “So are you, Lanah. We’re perfect for each other.”

Caleb couldn’t agree more.

“You made me a cheater! I was fine until you started popping up. CJ is good for me, and I would appreciate it if you would leave me alone to move on with my life. You’re my past, and CJ is my future.”

She said that shit confidently. In a different scenario, his chest would have filled with pride. In the current circumstance, it was laughable.

“You ever wonder why you can’t say no to me? We’re meant to be with each other. You know you still have feelings for me.”

“Physical feelings. Nothing more.”

Caleb moved away from his hiding spot as he listened to Reggie tell her she was delusional. She wouldn’t be for long. He was about to remove all delusion by eliminating himself from the situation. What she did after that wasn’t his concern.

He made it to the kitchen, where he poured himself some of the dark liquor she kept in the cabinet, then moved to sit at the table.

Alanah came out of the bedroom, passing by him without noticing his presence. Following behind her, Reggie stopped in front of her as she pulled the front door open. “This ain’t over, Lanah.”

She smacked her lips. “Just go.”

Reggie moved out of the door, then turned back to say something when his eyes caught Caleb as he stood from the table, moving behind her. Following the direction of Reggie’s wide eyes, Alanah flipped around. Instant regret and sorrow masked her face. She closed the door without even looking and put her back to it.

“CJ...”

His demeanor was cool, but he was sure she could feel the anger radiating off of him.

“Hey, babe. I thought we were having dinner alone tonight. You didn’t tell me we were having company.” He took a sip as he stared at her over the rim of his glass.

“CJ, just hear me out.” She ran to his side, tears forming in her eyes.

Alanah tried to reach for him, but he avoided her hands by pressing a firm hand against her chest. “Please what?” He

moved around her to pour himself another drink. “How long has this been going on, Alanah?” he asked calmly.

“This was the first time. I swear. This was a mistake, baby.”

Caleb slammed the glass on the counter. “Stop lying to me, Alanah! Haven’t you done enough of that? I heard y’all talking in there.” He turned to her with a look of disgust. She had been caught, and she was still trying to play the victim. Why was he surprised? Alanah had always been that way. He was sad it took catching her cheating to see it. “We’re done.”

“No.” She rushed in front of him as he moved for the door. “I don’t believe it. You love me, CJ, and I’ll make this up to you.” He kept walking as she stepped backwards until her back hit the door.

He leaned in close so she wouldn’t mistake his words. “Don’t take my kindness for weakness. The only way you can make this up to me is by staying the fuck away from me.”

He pulled her away from the door and stormed out, only to find Reggie sitting on the step, smoking. There was no other car in the driveway, so he was probably waiting for a ride. He shook his head.

Caleb looked back at Alanah one last time, and she stood hugging herself with a pleading stare. He turned away and stormed to his car.

Reggie stood. “Ah, man—”

“She all yours, bruh.” He threw the words over his shoulder.

Caleb couldn’t believe Reggie had the audacity to address him. Whatever he was about to say would fall on deaf ears, so he saved him from wasting his breath. He wished their trifling asses the best, but he was done. There was no coming back from this.

He pulled out of her driveway and just drove until his thoughts were no longer on Alanah and her unfaithfulness. Instead of driving home, he let his head take the wheel, and he was guided toward the county hospital.

When he pulled into the parking lot, he was concerned about getting upstairs. It was way past visiting hours, but he would still try.

He walked toward the building, stopping short of the entrance when the doors slid open, letting out two doctors. “Dr. Danny?” He approached her as she dismissed her colleague.

“Caleb.” She smiled.

“I need a favor. I know it’s late...”

She stopped him with the raise of her hand, then looked him over and repeated her question from earlier. “Are you staying with her?”

“Yes.”

Content with his answer, she led him into the building where he received another visitor sticker, replacing the one he had removed earlier. They moved to Kacie’s floor, and Dr. Danny gave him a blanket and two pillows. She opened the door for him, and like earlier, Kacie was still sleeping. He quietly rolled the chair from the corner to beside the bed. For some strange reason, he needed to be closer to her.

“You need anything else?” Dr. Danny asked.

“No, but thank you. You’ve been a big help today.”

“You’re welcome, Caleb.” She started to walk out of the door, but stopped. She pulled the folded piece of paper from her pocket and crumbled it up. “I don’t think you need me to give this to her anymore. It’ll sound much better coming from you.” She tossed the paper into the trash with a satisfied grin on her face.

He watched her walk out the door before reclining back in the chair.

Caleb closed his eyes. He didn’t question why he was there or if he even should be there. The alcohol coursing through his system provided the fix he needed to sleep the night away.

Four



IT'S SOMETHING ABOUT YOU

“GOOD MORNING.” Dr. Danny greeted Kacie as her heavy lids lifted.

She offered her doctor a weak smile before her eyes wandered around the room and locked on the most beautiful sight. She had to be dreaming, but the sound of his snores let her know she was very much awake.

“Caleb...” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“He came back last night.” She pulled out the pen that was about to blind her. “Let’s check your eyes.”

She was quick, flicking the light over her eyes, and then she continued with her check. As Dr. Danny proceeded, Kacie’s eyes returned to the man at her side.

Caleb sat in the chair beside her bed. His head was thrown to the side, giving her access to view his face without restrictions. His skin was dark and pure, like vanilla from Madagascar. A full beard surrounded his chubby cheeks and juicy, flesh-tone lips. He was handsome and smelled so good. His masculine aroma was pulled in with every breath she took.

His massive frame barely fit in the chair, so he was turned to the side. She loved his size. He was what they called thick. He carried it well with solid shoulders, a wide chest, a little stomach, and broad thighs. He was tall, at least six feet. He was amazing to look at. Her head should be throbbing, not the pearl between her legs.

“All done.” After Dr. Danny gave her the green light and said she would be discharged soon, the doctor moved out the door, leaving her alone with Caleb.

She couldn't believe he had stayed with her last night, but the proof was right in front of her, wrapped tight in his blanket, a protective layer from the chill in the room.

He looked peaceful sleeping. She hoped they would be friends after she left the hospital. It was too much flowing between them to let it go so easily. He was running in second place to her father when it came to the sweetest thing a man had ever done for her. She needed more men like that in her life.

Instead of continuing to ogle over him and thinking of what ifs, Kacie got busy handling her business. She pulled her gaze away from the mesmerizing sight of the man before her. She reached for her phone on the table beside her and texted Gia to come pick her up. She wasn't surprised when her phone rang, but she forgot her ringer was turned on.

She hurried and answered, but it was too late. Caleb's eyes landed on her as soon as they opened. She didn't understand anything Gia was saying because she was lost in his stare. His eyes were dark, but not brown, more of a cloudy gray color. It reminded her of a stormy day, but his personality was like sunshine. What a combination.

“Hello,” she answered, never taking her eyes off of him.

“How in the hell did you end up in the hospital?” Kacie could hear the sounds of traffic, so she knew her friend was already out, getting an early start on her day.

“Someone hit me yesterday, but like in the text, I told you I was fine. If you're busy—”

“I'll see for myself. I'm close, so I'll be there in a couple of minutes.” The line went dead, and she dropped her phone on the bed. Any other call she was going to make would have to wait.

“Good morning.” His deep, raspy voice wrapped around her like a warm hug.

“G-good morning. You’re here.”

Great way to show your appreciation, Kace.

He yawned and stretched his full body, legs and arms out, creating a giant X with his full frame. He moved his head from side to side, possibly working out a kink from sleeping in a hospital chair.

“You didn’t have to stay and sleep in that uncomfortable chair.”

“It wasn’t my best night’s sleep, but I didn’t mind. I have your things in my car. I can give you a ride home if you’re comfortable with that. I promise, I’m not a crazy stalker. I just want to make sure you’re okay, especially since you didn’t want your family informed.” He pulled out his phone, the light flashing on the back letting her know he was receiving a call, a call he didn’t answer.

“That’s very sweet of you.” The sentence came out squeaky. She took a second to clear her throat. “That was actually my best friend. She’s on her way here.”

“Okay,” he mumbled, becoming lost in his phone. A deep frown formed on his face until he noticed he had her attention. His cheeks lifted, and she thought she spotted dimples. “You’re staring,” he stated in an amused tone.

“I’m still surprised you’re here.”

He stood and started folding his blanket. He was definitely taller than six feet.

“I told you I would visit you to make sure you’re okay and say our last goodbyes.”

“Does it have to be goodbye?” she asked shyly.

He set the blanket on the chair and placed the pillow on top before answering her. “Not if you don’t want it to be.”

“What do you want it to be?” she asked as he pushed the chair back to the corner of the room.

“The beginning of—”

There was a quick knock at the door, and their heads snapped in its direction. In walked Gia, and she rushed to her bedside.

“When you said you would call me in the morning, this was not what I had in mind,” Gia reminded her.

“I’m fine. Just a little banged up. I’m about to get discharged.”

“You can’t tell me you’re in the hospital and not expect me to panic a little...” She took in Caleb as he strolled back to the center of the room. “But I’m glad you’re okay. Who is this?”

“I’m Caleb Jackson.” He offered Gia his hand, and she easily slipped her hand into his. Gia looked at her with an eyebrow raised before turning back to him.

“Well, hello, Mr. Jackson. Did you come with the room?”

“Cut it out, Gia.” Kacie slapped her arm as they released hands. “Caleb was going to take me home since he has my things in his car. I didn’t know that before I called you.”

“You can ride with your friend, and I’ll follow, or I can move the stuff to her car. Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

Gia reached to squeeze her hand. “No need to do all of that. You guys have everything already worked out. I’ll just get going. Knowing that you are fine and are in excellent hands has eased my mind. I will call you later.” She made a face that only Kacie could see as she moved toward the door.

Kacie knew they would surely talk real soon.

“Oh, Caleb?” When he turned, Gia snapped a picture of him. “Just for precaution. Can’t be too careful these days.”

He laughed. “I get it. It was nice meeting you, Gia.”

“You too, Caleb. I hope I’ll be seeing you around.”

Gia moved out of the door, passing the nurse, who came to get her ready for discharge. She looked at Caleb, wanting to continue their conversation from earlier, but they had plenty of time to talk on their way to her home.

“I’ll go get the car while you get ready.” He patted her arm before moving out the door.

“He’s handsome,” the nurse said as she finished marking on her clipboard.

“He is, isn’t it?”

He said he wanted it to be the beginning of something, and she only hoped they were on the same page of what that something would be.

* * *

CALEB PULLED his black 2022 Audi RS7 into the loading zone. His timing was perfect. As he put the car in park, the nurse was wheeling Kacie out the door.

He waved to get their attention as he walked around and opened the passenger door for her.

“You’re putting my twenty-twenty Sonata to shame,” Kacie said as the nurse put the brakes on her chair and handed him her things. He placed the bags under his arm as he helped her into the passenger seat.

“Thank you,” he said to the nurse as he placed her things in the back, then he moved back to her. “Maybe you can get you one now since you’re in the market for a new car.” He pulled the seat belt around to buckle her in, and she held her breath until he pulled back.

“Thank you.” She blushed as much as her brown skin would allow.

She likes me. That’s good. Real good.

“So, where are we headed?” he asked as he climbed behind the wheel.

She looked around his car in awe as he played with the settings. He adjusted the air condition, started up his favorite playlist of oldies, then went to the GPS, waiting for her to tell him what to insert in the search bar.

“What do you do?” she asked once her eyes finally landed back on him.

“I’m an entrepreneur like you.”

She frowned, rubbing her hands over the leather interior. “I’m doing something terribly wrong.”

“I may have had a bit of a head start.” He chuckled. “What’s your address, Kace?”

She riddled off her address, and they were about twenty-five minutes out from her place. “Don’t think I’m crazy, but Kace is the nickname I call myself when I talk to myself. No one ever thought to call me that.”

“Great minds think alike.” He winked at her. “Ready?”

“Yes! I still can’t believe somebody hit me.”

They ended up talking about the accident for most of the trip, from both of their points of view. By the time they pulled up to her house, she had nodded off.

“Kacie, we’re here.” Caleb couldn’t help himself. He reached out and stroked her cheek.

She hummed, leaning into his caress.

“You’re home,” he said softly.

Her eyes moved to her place, and she thanked him for getting her there safely.

“Nice house,” he said as he opened the door for her. He helped her out, then opened the back door to get her things. Once the bags were in his hand, he popped the trunk and dug into his gym bag for something that was sure to help her with any soreness.

“It’s not mine. I stay in the attic that was converted into an apartment.” She led the way to the side of the house, and his eyebrows raised at the stairs that led to her place, and it reminded him of his hard training days.

“I’m glad you didn’t break a leg. It would have been hell for you trying to get up and down these stairs by yourself.” He had a hand on her lower back, supporting her up the climb of

the metal staircase. Though they gave her the clearance to go home, he couldn't be too cautious.

“I would have come up with something.” She unlocked the door and pushed it open. He wasn't sure of what to expect, but it wasn't the luxury gray and white aesthetics.

Caleb lowered his head to step into the small dining area, through the galley kitchen with miniature yet high-end appliances, into the more spacious living room. He could stand to his full height there. He looked around at everything, trying to get a feel for her vibe. A person's place could tell a lot about them.

She watched him from the archway of the kitchen as he took in her apartment.

There were a lot of windows, and they let in a lot of light into the small space. Plants hung from the wall and around the ceiling. A small white, built-in bookcase full of books let him know she liked to read. Art covered the wall, and statues decorated the three tables that occupied the area.

Kacie's apartment didn't tell him anything he already didn't know. She was clean, smart, poetic, and maybe a little introverted, but he liked that. She was truly down to earth.

“This wasn't what I was expecting when you said an attic apartment.”

She laughed as she took the bags from his hand and set them on the floor beside the couch. “I was surprised myself. The owners did a fantastic job. They're an older couple, recent empty-nesters, so they are always on the move. They gave me a nice deal on this place after I worked with them as their photographer for their thirtieth anniversary celebration.”

“I believe it. You seem to have an effect on everyone you come in contact with.”

“Even you?” Her head was down as she fiddled with the hem of her shirt.

“Especially me.”

She rubbed at the back of her neck. “Um, would you like to stay for a while? I just have to get out of these clothes. I couldn’t possibly entertain you in the clothes I’ve worn twice.”

Her words made him remember the small bottle he got out of his car. He dropped his keys and phone on the table to present the bottle to her. “Let me run you a bath. My brother got some of this stuff from his trainer, and I swear it works miracles on achy muscles. Dr. Danny said you would be sore.”

“Sure. The bathroom is just through that door.” She pointed to the door by the entrance of the kitchen.

The bathroom was a little tight. It was long and narrow, with the vanity to the right, the shower slightly to his left, and a clawfoot tub against the far wall a few feet from the shower. He turned on the water, checking the temperature, then he plugged it.

After pouring some of the solution into the water, he grabbed the lavender and vanilla bath bubbles from the small table. He used a good amount to mask the powerful scent of the soak and to create bubbles for more of a soothing experience for her.

When he moved back to the living room, she had her robe on with towels and a change of clothes on her lap. He froze. He knew underneath she was naked, and he fought to keep his eyes on her face instead of traveling over her body, picturing her without the silk covering.

“It’s ready for me?” She stood from the couch.

“Yes. I can leave now, if you want. I’m sure you can use some alone time.”

She plucked at her robe. “We could talk some more, unless you have somewhere to be?”

He shook his head. He was right where he wanted to be. “I don’t have any pressing matters at the moment.”

She lifted her head and smiled. “Good. Make yourself comfortable.” He sat on the couch, and she spun around to head to the bathroom. “How long do I need to soak in this?”

“At least fifteen to thirty minutes. I would say thirty to forty-five for you.”

“I’ll be a prune if I stay in here for thirty minutes.” He heard the water sloshing around. He forced his mind not to imagine her dropping the robe, stepping into the warm water.

After a few minutes of silence, she called out to him. “You work out a lot?”

There were a lot of hard muscles on his body, but one in particular was hard as steel in his pants. Why did he agree to stay? It wasn’t like he wasn’t having a good time, but those damn three months without sex was on his ass heavy now that they were alone. He could feel the attraction stronger now that there weren’t any distractions.

“I used to work out a lot more, but now I only go about three times a week.”

“I should get back into the gym.” He listened to her as he looked around for anything to keep him distracted from picturing her soaking in the tub a few feet away from him.

“Women say that all the time.” He stood. The pictures on the wall leading to the only bedroom caught his attention.

“I know. Personally, I would feel better if I had someone with me. The gym is an intimidating place for a woman.”

He took a peek in the room that was only divided from the living room by a wall that didn’t touch the ceiling, surely to bring in more light. In the room was a queen-size bed that sat in the middle with a canopy encasing it. The white, sheer fabric draped around the white fluffy duvet and ten pillows. There was an L-shaped desk against the far wall, cluttered with papers. Vines of a plant ran over the back of the desk, branching out from the root of the nice size plant that sat on the corner.

He backed away from her room and examined the wall to his side. It was labeled *STAGES*, and underneath was pictures of her at different ages and above was one word he could only assume described the way she felt at each stage.

“Caleb?”

He realized he hadn't responded to what she said yet. "I agree to a certain extent, but you block that out if you have a goal to reach."

"I guess that's another one of my problems. I don't have a goal to reach."

Maybe she didn't have any fitness goals, but according to her wall, she had immense life goals that he had no doubt she would obtain.

"So why do you even want to go to the gym?"

"To be healthier, I guess."

"You eat right and take walks every day, you can be just as healthy. But, if you want to use some gym equipment, you can use my home gym. No one will bother you there."

"Good advice. I'll probably start with a walk, and maybe one day, I could use your gym."

"Mhmm." He was still lost in her wall. The last picture of her made him smile. She was walking down the row of a vineyard. She had on makeup, enhancing her features. She wore a flowy wine-colored dress and a giant smile. The picture was labeled, *The Becoming*.

"What's your brother's name?" she asked, pulling his attention back to their conversation.

"Cannon."

"Do you have any other siblings?"

His phone vibrated on the table. He moved back to the center of the room to check his phone. He grabbed it to see it was his best friend, Levi, calling. He would call him back later. "Yes. I have a younger sister name Carmen," he answered.

"And Cannon is the oldest?"

"Yep. How'd you know?" He sat on the couch and looked over his shoulder like she was behind him.

"The way you spoke when you mentioned him, like you looked up to him." He had, but he wouldn't admit it out loud.

“What’s life like as a middle child?” She followed up her statement with a question.

Caleb responded without thinking because the answer was always the same. “I don’t have any complaints. What about you? Do you have siblings? You kind of give me only child vibes.”

He heard the water move as she cackled. “Don’t do that. I’m not the only child but I am the youngest of two. My brother Gregg is the oldest. He lives about two hours away with his wife, Aniya, and their two kids.”

His phone went off, the hard vibration cutting into their conversation. He picked it up and saw it was Alanah. He declined the call and put his phone on do not disturb.

“Everything okay?” Kacie asked.

“Yeah.” He placed his phone back on the table by his keys.

“I think I’m ready to get out. I’ve soaked long enough.”

“Okay.” He heard the tub unplug and the water draining. After a few minutes, the shower kicked on. He made himself busy, looking for the remote to the TV, which he found on the stand. He turned it on, then scrolled through the apps.

“Sorry, I don’t watch much TV. I usually just watch the free movie apps.”

She stood before him in cotton, lilac-colored shorts and a matching spaghetti strap top. The scent of lavender and vanilla filled his nose. He resisted the urge to pull her into his arms. “That’s cool. I really just watch sports and old movies on occasions.”

She sat down on the couch, and he joined her, dropping the remote on the table.

“What’s your favorite sport?” she inquired.

“I used to play football, so that should be my favorite, but I really enjoy track and field. I wanted to throw in high school.”

“Why didn’t you?” She faced him, sitting Indian-style.

It was another thing he wished he would've done instead of going with the sport that would have given him more popularity. He wished someone had told him being popular in high school meant nothing after graduation. The world had a way of humbling young adults.

"I thought I would be better at football. At least that's what everyone kept telling me." It was half the truth.

"So you were persuaded, but if you had things your way...?"

"I would've been on the track team," he answered honestly.

She nodded. "My mom used to run in high school and college. Her events were sprints and relays, I believe. Don't quote me. I wasn't born then." She laughed but stopped when the hard hum of his phone vibrated.

Caleb didn't even reach for his phone. He knew it was Alanah. His phone being on DND meant she had called back to back to break the silence it was set on.

"That thing has been going off all day. I really don't want to hold you up. You don't have to feel sorry for me. I was pouting yesterday, but I promise I'm good. I always bounce back."

Somehow that made him feel sad knowing she had suffered probably more than she had deserved. "You don't understand. It's my ex. I would block her, but she's the type to call private or from someone else's phone." He hated it, but it looked like he was going to have to change his number.

"When did y'all break up?"

"I broke up with her last night."

Her eyes grew to the size of saucers. "Do you mind me asking why?"

He snorted. "We were supposed to have dinner last night."

"Did I mess that up?"

“No.” It was funny how the world worked. There was no telling how last night would’ve unfolded if he would have been there when Reggie showed up. Alanah probably would’ve persuaded him to believe the man was crazy and tripping off their breakup. And he would have been still going along, living a life with her, knowing she wasn’t *the one*, just the one available.

“I walked in on her in the bed with another man, and to think that I felt bad for going to the hospital to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m sorry.” He wasn’t sure which part she was apologizing for, but he didn’t want it.

“Don’t be.” He grabbed her hand. “I see you’re burning to ask something, so ask.”

“Why did she cheat?”

He tried to think of a reason, and he came up short. He had given her everything she ever wanted. “I don’t know. She always said I wasn’t like the guys she was used to. Maybe that was it. The guy she was cheating with was her ex.”

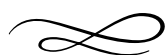
“Wow, that’s crazy. I feel like you’re a really good guy.”

“I like to think so.”

Comfortable silence sat between them before she stood, pulling him up with her. “I have an idea.” She raced off to her bedroom and came back with a camera.

“Are you camera shy?”

Five



MY MISTAKE

KACIE LED Caleb out to the balcony from her bedroom. He walked to the rail, looking out into the distance. The open plain was beautiful, especially in the spring. “You didn’t answer me. You’re not camera shy, are you?” She took a few test shots to check the lightning.

He looked over his shoulder. “What stage are you in now?”

Of course, he had looked over her *STAGES* wall. It wasn’t like she was trying to hide it from anyone. The wall was a personal reminder of how far she had come. “Still becoming,” she replied. “I’m not rushing it, though. There’s so much beauty in becoming who you’re supposed to be.”

He turned back to the wonderful view that would always lift her spirits whenever she came out there. It was why she brought him out to take pictures. Hopefully it would lift his spirits a little. She almost felt bad that instead of him mourning his relationship, he was there with her. Yet, she felt delightful knowing it was where he’d rather be.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he confessed. “But I’ll give it a try.”

“Just do what comes natural. You can actually start by gazing out like you were when I first stepped out, and I’ll guide you from there. Let me take the lead, and you’ll be fine. Just relax.”

He nodded. “I’m ready.”

She pulled the camera toward her face and noticed the gray clouds moving toward them. They didn't have long, but she didn't need long with the magnificent muse in front of her.

"Take a deep breath and relax your shoulders."

"You know, these are the same clothes I had on yesterday as well."

She flashed him with the light of the camera before fussing at him. "Do what I said. No one will know but me and you. It'll be our secret."

He took a deep breath, and she watched the tension in his shoulders melt away. "I like the sound of me and you," he flirted.

She would have become flushed if she wasn't in her zone. "Perfect. Now, look away."

"You're quite bossy behind the camera," he teased as he turned away from her.

Kacie moved around, catching him at different angles.

"Can I move now?" Caleb asked when she stopped to change her lens.

"Yes, maybe lean back and cross your—yes, that's it!" He knew what she was saying before she could finish, and it excited her beyond measures.

She was far and then she was close, snapping away. She hadn't worked with a lot of men, but the one in front of her ate up her camera. Though he said he'd never done a shoot before, he was a natural.

"Just like that, Caleb." He looked down at her as she rested one knee on the ground and the other stretched out. His naughty expression made her realize maybe that wasn't the best thing to say while she was practically kneeling in front of him.

"You're making this hard for me."

She forced her eyes not to look at his crotch. "Maybe you can open a few buttons of your shirt?"

He did as she requested, and she took a few shots from below. She knew those would look good in black in white. “You take directions so well.”

“Do you?”

She hid her smile behind the camera. Instead of answering his question, she directed him in a few more positions.

The smell of rain was the first sign their time was up. The second was the cool dots against her warm skin. “One more...” She angled her camera and caught her last shot before the sky opened up. “Okay! You can come in.” She raced under the awning.

He didn’t move as heavy drops decorated his shirt and slacks.

“Caleb, I said we’re finished. You’re going to get soaked.”

He shook his head and started unbuttoning the rest of his shirt. Her throat dried instantly, making her thirsty for a taste of him.

“Keep going, Kace.” His stare was so intense as he worked the smooth fabric down his powerful arms. She snapped a few more shots before running in to get the cover for her camera.

When she reappeared, his defined back was facing her. She wasted no time capturing those. “Raise your arms up and out like wings.” He did as he was told, and she loved what she saw. “These are amazing.” She was already thinking about the edits she would do.

He glanced over his shoulder before lowering his arms, and she took those too, not letting anything go to waste.

“Come here.”

They were drenched, but neither of them seemed to care as she went to stand in front of him. He took the camera, and he turned it on her. She had been in front of the camera before, but not with Caleb behind it. Her nipples pressed against the thin material of her shirt. If she looked down, she would see the outline of her dark areolas and pebbled points.

“Oh, it’s my turn? You know how to work it?”

She got her answer when the flash took her by surprise, and she laughed. He took a few more pictures of her before he shocked her by picking her up and sitting her on the railing. She held on to his shoulders for support.

“I won’t let you fall, and if you did fall, I would fall with you.”

That made her heart swell.

He rested his forehead against hers, water sliding down their faces. She tried to read his face, but they were too close for her to see the emotions she felt coming from him.

He lifted the camera and took a picture of them like that. He nudged her head to the side to nuzzle her neck. She closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of his lips grazing her skin.

The camera went off again.

She couldn’t keep up with the pictures he took because she became lost in the moment. Her hands went from his shoulders, around his neck, to his head, caressing the short hair there. She ran delicate tips over his face and used her thumb to remove the dew that sat on his long eyelashes. When his eyes opened, she was stuck in his stare.

“I am a good man, Kacie.” He leaned in so close... She closed her eyes, feeling his warm breath against her lips. “Now, we can go in.”

Sadly, she felt her feet on the solid surface. Kacie led the way back inside, making sure to check her disappointment at the door.

“What are you going to do next since you didn’t get that job you wanted?” Caleb asked as he rubbed the towel Kacie had given him over his head to dry his face and hair.

“I’ll get more clients.” She dabbed at her face and chest.

“Why do I feel you want to say more?” He eyed her.

She walked over and took the towel from his hands after he dried himself as much as he could.

“How was your first photo shoot?” Kacie asked as she went to her room to discard the towels. She changed the subject, and he let her. It wasn’t easy stepping out on faith, but he knew in the end, she would be alright.

“It was cool. It was definitely an experience and somewhat inspiring.” His emotions had overwhelmed him, but he didn’t feel weird about her witnessing him in a vulnerable state. “Thank you. This made me feel better.”

“I’m glad I could help.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?” she asked when she came back into the room.

“I assume you’re single, since I’m all up in your space.” Shit, he hoped she was single and wasn’t dogging out her man.

“I’m single.” She propped against the frame.

“For how long?”

She snorted. “Shit, too long.”

“What happened?” He was all up in her mix, but he wanted to know more about her. He couldn’t imagine her being single for long.

“If we’re going to get all in my business, I need to sit and have a drink, but since I’m not drinking at the moment...” She held her hand out to her couch. “Join me.”

“We’re both wet.”

She spread out her throw blanket that rested on the back of the couch and sat. He joined her, and she continued.

“His name was Eric. He was good. He didn’t cheat nor lie. He was the most upfront person I knew. But, he was static... No goals, no passion, no motivation. He woke up, went to work, and came home ready to do the same shit the next day. He was happy with the way things were and didn’t want to make a change and didn’t want to see me change. It was so stressful and draining being with someone who didn’t understand my ambition.”

He could understand. He had friends he wasn't close to anymore because of the same reason.

“It took me a while to understand he never wanted to see me evolve. He never wanted me to be better than him because then he would have to do more, and that was a problem.”

Caleb frowned. “How long were y'all together?”

“Two years,” she said bitterly.

“Where is he now?”

“Married with four kids. I dodged a bullet. I wasn't having all those kids.” She laughed.

“That's why he didn't marry you, or did you not want to get married?”

“He hinted at it a few times the first year of us being together, but I couldn't shake the feeling that he just wasn't the one. So anytime he brought it up, I would tell him I wasn't ready.” Her face was blank. “I cried so many days thinking about how I gave up something good, hoping there was something better.”

“Settling, basically?”

Her answer was a shrug.

“It takes a real woman to walk away from something like that and stay true to you.”

He leaned in, using the back of his hand to stroke her cheek. She held his wrist as his fingers brushed over her lips. He was breathing her air, and he'd be damn if he didn't want to steal a kiss, but he pulled back. “I should be going.” He looked around the room for his keys, forgetting he had placed them on the table with his phone. “Seems like the rain has let up.”

“Yes. That reminds me, I need to change this dressing.” She touched her head where the gash was covered.

“Please do. I'm sorry I got you wet.”

“No, don't apologize for that. I know those are going to be some of my favorites.”

“Can I hug you?” He didn’t want to leave on such an awkward note.

She nodded, and he pulled her into his arms. He closed his eyes, savoring the feel of her in his arms because he didn’t know when he would be able to do that again. “It was nice hanging out with you. I’m glad I got the chance to meet you and get to know a little about you.”

“Thank you for everything.” She slowly pulled back, holding his triceps as she looked up at him. “Goodbye, Caleb.”

His jaw clenched. He had to get his ass out of there before he did something stupid. He grabbed his phone and keys from the table and headed out the door.

He climbed into his car, and that was when he saw her things in the back seat, and he knew that was a sign.

Caleb climbed the stairs by two until he reached her apartment. He knocked on the door, waiting impatiently for her to answer. When she opened the door, he pulled her into his arms and claimed her lips.

He felt the world rock beneath his feet as he found solace in her arms. Their kiss was sweet, but he wanted more, and the way her hands moved up his back to clench his shoulder, so did she. He walked her inside and closed the door before he put her back to it.

Her nails dug into the tight muscles of his back. To keep from fucking her there, he grabbed her wrists and pinned them to the door above her head. He was the good guy, but the sexual beast she was awakening wasn’t a gentleman. He was fierce and had a healthy appetite for pussy. Hers was warm, wet, and easily accessible. He could smell her, and God, he wanted to taste her. He broke away from the kiss to clear his head, but the fog of his fantasy clouded his judgment.

“Caleb,” she whispered his name as he trailed kisses down her neck. “God, you’re killing me.”

She didn’t know she was having the same effect on him. Caleb pulled back, slowly releasing her wrists. He knew if he didn’t stop, the outcome would ruin any chance at something

real with her, and she was too precious to lose over temporary pleasure.

“I forgot your things are in my car.” He panted.

She nodded, still trying to catch her breath as well. “Okay. Let me put shoes on, and I’ll come down.”

“Okay, I’ll start bringing things up.”

Kacie was still shaking from their kiss. She had no business kissing him or wanting to do it again. He just got out of a relationship not even twenty-four hours ago, and she didn’t believe in casual sex. She had to pump her brakes before she ended up with a broken heart. If they went there, she knew she would want more from Caleb than a few sweaty nights. There was no doubt the night would be full of pleasure, but she would crave more. Everything about him let her know she could easily fall head over heels for him.

“What are you going to do about transportation?” Caleb asked once they had all her things secured in her apartment.

“The dealership will have a rental car for me. I just have to call and do all that in the morning.”

“Let me see your phone.” She went and found her phone in the bag from earlier, then handed it to him. When she received it back, his number was programmed in her contacts. “Call me if you need me.”

“You’ve done enough for me, more than I could’ve asked for.”

“Kacie, it’s simple. If you need me for anything, call me. Even if you don’t need me and just want to talk, call me. If I’m overstepping and you don’t want to be bothered with me, just delete it. Simple. Okay?”

“Okay.”

This time when he leaned in, he placed a kiss on her cheek. Seconds later, he was gone, leaving her with a belly full of butterflies.

* * *

WHEN CALEB PULLED up to his house, he wasn't expecting to see Alanah's car in his driveway, but he should have known she wouldn't give up so easily. She took rejection as a challenge.

He pulled around her car and parked in front of his garage, not bothering to park his car inside. He wouldn't avoid her. She would just have to wise up today and learn that when he said he was done, he meant that.

"Get the fuck out of here, Alanah," he called out as he climbed out of his car. "It's the last time I'm going to warn you." She grabbed his arm as he tried to move around her. He snatched away, turning to her with a snarl. "Where's Reggie?"

"Fuck Reggie! I'm sorry, CJ." She cried.

"I really don't care. I'm over this, and I'm over you." He moved up the sidewalk with her following behind him.

"So, that's where you been?"

He turned to her once he got to the steps. She wasn't coming any further. "Where have I been, Alanah?"

"Apparently somewhere getting over me. I've been here since last night."

"And what did Reggie have to say about that?"

"Don't act like you know what's up with me and him. You don't know our history!"

"Frankly, I don't give a damn! You're here at my house, begging me for another chance. Don't get it twisted. How are you mad at me when you were the one cheating?"

She didn't have an answer, and he wasn't waiting for her to come up with one.

"Where I was, who I was with, what I did, and how I did it don't concern you anymore." He couldn't stress that enough. "Now, get off my property before I forget how to be a

gentleman.” He walked up the stairs and typed in the code to unlock his door.

“Okay, you slept with someone, and I slept with someone. We’re even.”

His body twisted to look at her as if she grew two heads. “You’re sick in the damn head if you think this is how it works. If I love you I couldn’t fuck someone else, hide that shit from you, and still look you in your eyes every day and say that I loved you. Take your ‘L’ and move on or go back to Reggie. He was right when he said y’all were perfect for each other.”

“She must’ve had some bomb ass pussy to have you talking like a philosopher instead of someone who works in a gas station, using daddy’s money to pull women out of your league.”

He laughed, shaking his head. She was trying a different tactic to get under his skin, but it wasn’t working. “Or it could’ve been that three-month stretch you put me through that cleared my head.”

Her face frowned up.

“You know, last night I had time to think, and you just confirmed what I already knew. You didn’t love me. Shit, you barely even liked me. You loved what I could do for you. The fact that you think all my money comes from my family is wild to me. I spent days venting to you about business things I had going on.” He shook his head. “You don’t know me.”

“I do, baby.” She tried to step up and put her hands on his face, but he knocked them away.

“What high school did I go to? What was my football jersey number? What was my major in college? What’s my favorite color? Shit, how old am I?”

Her head dropped.

“That’s what I thought. I’m not even mad at you, though. This is what I get for settling. I won’t be settling anymore.” He walked in and closed the door in her face.

“Your favorite color is blue or red. No, it’s green!” She knocked at the door. “CJ, please.” He heard her sniffing. “I’ll just give you some more time. You’ll be back, and I’ll be waiting with open arms.”

She’d be waiting for hell to freeze over.

* * *

AFTER MAKING sure Alanah was gone, Caleb got out of his damp clothes and took a shower. He tossed himself in bed and didn’t wake until hours later when someone wouldn’t stop banging on his front door.

He checked the camera from his phone and saw that it was his best friend, Levi Martin.

As soon as the door was open, Levi brushed past him, and Caleb closed the door.

“Man, Alanah has been blowing me up, asking where you were. I figured y’all had a fight, but you weren’t answering my calls either. I had to come over here and check on you. I was about to call in the cavalry.” They slapped palms as Levi went into the kitchen.

Caleb dropped to the couch, and Levi returned with two beers. His was already opened, and he tossed it back while he held the other out for Caleb.

“I can’t even tell you how bad that bitch played me. I’m too embarrassed.” Caleb opened his beer and took it to the head, wishing it was something stronger.

Honestly, he was embarrassed, though that didn’t stop him from telling Kacie, but it was different with her. She didn’t know the history. She hadn’t been around to witness all the times Alanah had done him dirty and he’d turned a blind eye. Shit was past embarrassing. It was downright shameful how he allowed her to get the best of him just to say he had someone. Damn, he needed to learn how to be alone.

“I’m your homie. Come on, now. You know there’s no judgment over here.” Levi sat on the loveseat to his left. He picked up the remote and turned on the basketball game, but had the volume low so he could hear what Caleb had to say. “I’m listening...”

Caleb huffed. “Alright, remember I told you Alanah and I was having dinner last night?”

“Yes, celebrating the end of celibacy. Shit, I was counting down for you! Don’t tell me she tried to back out?”

“Worse. I’m the only one who’s been celibate for three months.”

“What?” Levi pulled the bottle from his lips.

“I caught her in bed with her ex, Reggie.”

“What the hell did you do?” Levi slammed the bottle on the table. “Why you ain’t call me? We could’ve jumped that fool, and Courtney would’ve taken Alanah. She has been waiting to lay hands on her for how she acted at our party last month.”

“I told her we were done, and I walked out.”

“CJ, don’t tell me you went out like that? Man, that was the time to explode!”

“She’s not even worth that type of energy.”

“It’s the disrespect, but I get it. I’m glad you’re done with her, and you better be done with her for real this time. I never knew what you saw in her anyway.”

“Oh, I’m done.” He should’ve never allowed her out of the fuck buddy realm.

“So tell me where you were last night. Alanah’s big mouth didn’t leave out the fact you hadn’t been home all night and day. I don’t even want to know how she knew you hadn’t been home.”

“It was nothing like that...” Caleb took his time telling Levi everything from his scheduled meeting with Avery to the accident that caused him to meet Kacie. He told him about

staying at the hospital overnight and kicking it with her until the afternoon. He added the icing on the cake telling him about finding Alanah sitting outside his house, waiting on him. "... Then I took a nap, and you showed up."

"These last two days have been crazy for you!"

"Who you telling?" Caleb took a swig of his beer.

"Little mama sounds dope."

"Yeah. Her vibe was nothing like I've experienced before."

Levi laughed. "Don't you do it."

"Do what?" Caleb looked at him with a frown.

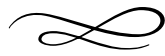
"Do you think it's a good idea to hop right into another relationship?"

"Who said anything about a relationship?"

"Just the way you talk about her, I can tell you want to pursue her. Listen, I'm not saying don't get to know her, but take your time and be careful. You're too good of a guy to let these women use you."

Levi's words stayed on Caleb's mind long after he left. As much as he wanted to get to know Kacie, he had to take some time for himself. For the first time since middle school, he wouldn't entertain any woman until he felt like his head was screwed on right. More importantly, he had to find the love he once had for himself.

Six



ANYTHING TO FEEL ALIVE

KACIE SPENT the last three days getting her life back on track after the accident. She had finally secured her rental car. A salesperson would be in contact with her about purchasing a new one when everything was resolved with the insurance company and she was given a check for her totaled out car.

She walked down the hall from her room to the kitchen to get breakfast, when she spotted her camera on the coffee table. She had been meaning to upload the photos of her and Caleb, but she hadn't had time. Now she did, and she longed to see his handsome face.

She grabbed the camera and moved to her computer desk in her room. While she waited for the photos to load, she grabbed her phone to check her usual three apps, when Gia's name popped up on the screen.

"Good morning. Good morning." Gia's chipper voice came over her line.

"What has you in such a good mood?" Kacie asked, tucking the phone between her ear and shoulder.

"Jalil woke me up with a quickie before he had to go to work."

"Lucky you." She rolled her eyes.

"Do I detect jealousy?" She could hear Gia shifting around in bed, and that elevated her envy. She looked back at her made bed, wishing she could crawl back between the sheets, but there was work to be done. "Where's the mystery

man you've been hiding from me? You've never mentioned a Caleb."

"I haven't been hiding him. I met him the day of the accident."

"Y'all seemed pretty comfortable around each other to be strangers."

"When that truck hit me, it must've knocked me out. I didn't remember much at the time. I just know he was the first person I saw when I came to. He stayed with me until the ambulance got there. We said our goodbyes when they were about to load me up. It felt weird letting him go, not knowing if I would see him again. Thankfully, he offered to come see me at the hospital. I didn't know that was going to lead to him staying overnight at the hospital and coming home with me."

"Sounds like a keeper. Few people would stick around. I know I wouldn't for a stranger unless it was something I wanted from said stranger."

"Don't go there. I thought it could be the beginning of a wonderful friendship." Kacie could taste the lie as it rolled off her tongue.

"Friendship? What medicine do they have you on? You need a man. Scratch that. You don't need one, but it would be nice to have one scratch that itch. Something tells me he has the proper tools for the job." Gia giggled. "If somebody kisses you, you'll probably explode."

"He kissed me before he left, and I didn't explode," she rushed to say.

"Oh my God! I knew it." She had Gia's full attention. She could imagine her popping up in bed. "He's so cute, Kacie. The two of you would make a nice-looking couple."

"No. No. He just got out of a relationship." Kacie gave Gia the rundown of Caleb's breakup.

"Wow, his ex was trifling." *My thoughts exactly.* "But you're not going to let that stop you from getting with him, right? We all know the best way to get over somebody old is to

get under someone new, and I remember you being an excellent rider.”

Kacie pinched the bridge of her nose as she tried not to laugh. Her best friend was crazy, but real. She would consider her advice, but she honestly felt it was too soon. “I can’t let the next relationship I hop into be his rebound relationship. I don’t want to be used to get over her. I don’t even know if I want to be in a relationship.” She leaned back in her chair, staring at the ceiling. She didn’t want a relationship. She wanted forever.

“You made some great points, but I wouldn’t say throw yourself in the friend zone when there are obvious sparks between the two of you. I suggest starting slow. Test the waters out with a friendly text. Send him the pictures. Mention how you had a good time hanging out with him and suggest y’all do it again if he’s not busy. I’m sure he’ll respond and just go from there. If he just so happens to not respond, that’s fine too. Look at it as God sent someone to look after you when you couldn’t and go on with your life.”

Kacie sighed heavily. She hated this part of meeting someone new. It was why she avoided dating like the plague. She wanted simple, easy. Her life was tough enough.

“Okay. I’ll do it. Now, I’m about to edit the pictures. I’ll call you later.” Previews of their pictures were popping up on her computer screen.

“Alright. Don’t be a punk,” Gia scolded.

“Bye.” Kacie hung up the phone, setting it on her desk.

As she looked over the photos, she admired Caleb from top to bottom. He had been an excellent subject, and now she studied him. She took her time appreciating every single feature and flaws, if any.

She looked at his lips and hers tingled, thinking about when he barged into her apartment, claiming her mouth like he had every right. She remembered his firm hold. They fit together beautifully. She remembered being poked in the stomach by his thick erection while he rained kisses down her

neck. If he told her to get on her knees, she would've dropped before the command could finish rolling off his tongue.

That was what he did to her, made her weak in the fucking knees.

“And why did he have to be so sweet?”

She thought about what Gia had said, and she could see herself being with Caleb. He had made her feel things she hadn't felt in a long time: safe, supported, and sexy.

After a few hours, Kacie had finished editing the photos, and she was more in love than she was before. The outcome of the pictures was amazing. Caleb killed the session, and she didn't look too bad herself, considering her bandaged head, wild hair, and bare face.

Now there was only one thing to do.

She muscled up the courage and attached some of her favorite shots to the message bar on her phone, along with a few sentences she read aloud. “Thank you for letting me capture these wonderful yet vulnerable moments. I hope you like them as much as I enjoyed shooting them.” She looked over the photos and message one more time before she let her finger hover over the blue button.

Kacie closed her eyes and hit send.

* * *

LAST NIGHT, Kacie posted two pictures of Caleb on her social media pages. One of his defined back and brawny arms stretched out like the horizon. The other was an up-close side profile that she edited darker. One, to conceal his identity. Two, so the focus wasn't just his face but the surrounding scene such as the dark sky, gray clouds, and the drops of rain.

She expected some comments, but the unruly amount of notifications and messages were insane. One comment in particular caught her eyes.

Dom commented saying, ‘You sure know how to capture a moment.’ She deleted his comment and continued scrolling.

Even with the ridiculous amount of attention, it didn’t escape her that the only notification that mattered to her wasn’t there.

She was sad Caleb hadn’t texted her back, but she didn’t take it to heart. He was indeed a stranger, and he’d helped her more than expected.

Maybe he’s not over his ex.

Maybe he’s not into me like I thought he was.

Maybe he was just being nice and got carried away.

Either of those things could’ve been the reason, but she didn’t dwell. Today was a new day filled with new opportunities.

“Hello.” She answered her ringing phone.

“Where did you find him?”

It was Marco Delanie, her photography mentor, who kept his eye on her even after their coaching sessions ended.

“Good morning to you, too, Marco.”

“Good morning. Listen, I need you and him for a photo shoot in a couple of weeks. The two of you together would be perfect!” It wasn’t uncommon for Marco to use her to make sets for shoots or videos, but it was rare for him to ask her to be a part of the actual production. She could be a part of the project, but she couldn’t deliver his other request.

“It was a luck of the moment thing. I highly doubt I’ll see him again.” The thought alone made her sad.

“Damn, that’s too bad. Well, I was going to get you to help with the set as well, so it’s not a complete loss, but he was definitely someone I was looking forward to shooting.”

“I’m sure.” She rolled her eyes.

“Any who, the theme will be dipped in chocolate. I want everyone covered in that shit, and I’m talking about real

chocolate, Kacie.”

She pushed the covers away to grab her laptop from the nightstand and went to work. “I’ll see what I can do.” She was already googling places to buy chocolate in bulk. “It’s going to be a pretty penny.”

“I’m not worried about money. The payback from this is going to be very rewarding, I can tell already. And, Kacie?”

“Yeah?”

“If you do see him again, make sure you do whatever it takes to make sure his face is in the place.”

* * *

CALEB SAT in the brown leather chair in the den with a drink hanging loosely in his hand. The lights were low, and “Four Seasons of Loneliness” by Boyz II Men played in the background.

He lifted the paper he held in his left hand and laughed. “What a joke!” He tossed it to the end table beside him.

Caleb had wanted to get his mind off everything that happened with Alanah. She was still blowing up his phone, so he dived into work, looking for someone else to do business with, but that only put him in an even deeper rut. It was all just more lies and deceit. He couldn’t stand being a part of dirty dealings. He watched his father almost destroy their family, playing foul. He wanted no parts of it.

Crossing the room to snatch the bottle from the cart, he brought it back to his seat. He wanted to continue to sulk in sorrow.

“Nope.” He looked over at his phone on the table and ignored his brother’s call for the third time. He didn’t want to talk to anyone today, just like he hadn’t the day before and the day before that. He was sad and heartbroken. Not just because of Alanah, but life in general. Why did good people get the short end of the stick?

Caleb wanted to say fuck love and fuck being a good person because where had that gotten him? God, he wanted to mourn the good side of him and wake the savage that lay dormant, but he couldn't. His heart wouldn't allow it.

Even with the amount of pain he was feeling, if someone came to him now in need, he would bring a smile to his face to do whatever it would take to make sure that person was okay. That was the type of person he was, the good guy.

I am a good guy.

The words he mumbled to Kacie played in his head.

Caleb slowly sipped his drink, thinking about her and how he had felt the calmness swirling around her like a protective shield. It offered comfort to others as well. It was what drew people in to her. The hospital staff was so friendly and attentive to her.

He could use some of her calm aura now, but he refused to reach out, though she had reached out to him. She deserved someone who wasn't so emotionally damaged. He'd ruined himself. He didn't want to ruin her too...

So that led to her text going unanswered.

* * *

WITH THE MUSIC blasting and air conditioner down low, Caleb pumped iron, puffing like a bull.

It had been three weeks since he left Kacie's house. Three weeks since he felt alive. Now, after being alone with his emotions, he felt different.

For the first time, he had ignored a text from a woman, and it pained him that it was the only woman who had treated him like a man and not a credit card. He thought about Kacie every day. It was worse at night. He swore he could still smell her scent, feel her smooth skin against his, and taste the flavor of her kiss.

Caleb slid from under the bar when the door to his home gym opened and Cannon came in. One look at him and Cannon would know to come in and work out or leave. He had finally answered his brother's call, telling him he had been busy with work, playing off his feelings. Cannon knew better though, so Caleb wasn't surprised by his popup. He was honestly surprised it took this long.

He nodded in his brother's direction, then grabbed hand weights and went to work.

Cannon did pull-ups after his stretches. Every now and then, he peeked at him, but still no words left his mouth. It had to be those older brother instincts.

Two hours later, after cleaning the equipment, taking showers, and hopping into clean clothes, it was time to eat. Cannon was already in the kitchen when Caleb arrived.

Instead of joining his brother at the table, he pulled out a pack of bacon, four eggs, two avocados, and the container of spinach.

"You've been lying low lately." Cannon was the first one to speak, and by the tone of his voice, Caleb knew it was time to put everything on the table because Cannon wasn't leaving unless he did, but he would do it in his own time.

"If you want breakfast, I suggest you keep your mouth closed."

Cannon held his hands up in surrender. "I don't want any problems. You know I gotta have my breakfast."

Caleb made quick work of whipping up the food. He set a plate of food in front of his brother and then made one for himself. They ate in silence, using their phone as a distraction from the awkward silence.

He found himself back at Kacie's message. He read over it now like he did every morning since he'd opened it. He scrolled to the picture of him and her. His lips were grazing her neck, and her hair was over her face, covering some of the dressing on her head. Damn, he could still smell her fresh scent mixed with the rain.

“Is that you?” Cannon snatched the phone from his hands.

The chair slid across the floor when he stood. “Give me my phone before I beat your ass.” He was mad that he’d been so caught in the picture he didn’t see or hear Cannon get up from the table.

“You wish,” Cannon scoffed. “You a model now?”

“No. Now give me my phone.” He held his hand out, demanding his property.

“Who is she?” He gave it back to Caleb, who went back to the home screen before locking his phone. “She looks sexy from the side. I don’t think I’ve seen her around.”

“Her name is Kacie.” He moved back to his seat and set his phone on the table before Cannon wrapped a swollen arm around his neck.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” He released him with a hit upside the head. Caleb shot daggers at him. Sometimes he hated being the little brother. “So why are you moping around here?” Cannon asked.

“It’s complicated.”

“Just say what’s on your mind. I’ve been here way too long. Two hours in the gym has my patience low.”

“I don’t want to be played.” Caleb made sure he was looking at anything but his brother when he spoke.

A deep frown formed on Cannon’s face. “No you didn’t let Alanah’s ass dog walk you.”

“Bark, bark.” He moved around the island and threw his plate in the sink. He started explaining to his brother everything that happened that day except the part where he was supposed to meet someone earlier. That wasn’t his brother’s business.

“I told you she was foul,” Cannon griped as he placed his plate in the sink.

“You think I want to hear that, *I told you shit?*”

“I would’ve—”

“She ain’t worth that type of energy,” Caleb said as he put the dishes in the dishwasher.

“It’s about the disrespect.”

“So I’ve heard.” He scoffed. “She doesn’t deserve that type of energy to pull me out my character.”

“Your new girl is?” Cannon lifted a brow.

“She’s not my girl.” He started the dishwasher and turned away from him. He didn’t want to talk about Kacie with his brother. He already knew what he was going to say.

“But she could be, if that’s what you’re looking for, or she could be something to do when there’s nothing to do.”

Caleb ignored his last statement. “The message was from three weeks ago. I haven’t responded yet.”

“Damn, CJ. What the hell is wrong with you? Don’t answer that. It’s time to do damage control. You’ll have her in your life or in your bed in no time.”

“I don’t want her just in my bed.”

“I can’t believe you’re actually thinking about another relationship.” Cannon had a mocking smile on his face. “You’re definitely a better man than me, but anyway, it still doesn’t change the fact you need to do damage control. Not hearing from you in three weeks is a sign that a man is not interested or playing games. Let her know you were getting over Alanah’s rat ass. Wait, don’t even bring her up. Make it about you.”

“Right.” Caleb couldn’t agree more.

“No woman wants to hear about another woman, and that way she knows your ex isn’t a problem.”

“Okay, I’ll do it. Not now, but I’ll do it.”

“Now, hear me out. She might be wifey material, but you need a little flame to put you back in the saddle. It’s been like four months now. Go crazy tonight, then go get your girl.”

On that note, he escorted Cannon out the door.

Later that day, Caleb dressed in light jeans, a black graphic tee from his homeboy's collection, and white Forces. He finished the look off with two gold chains he layered around his neck, a white and black Nike hat, and a gold watch. He couldn't believe he was listening to Cannon.

"When did I start listening to that fool when it came to women?" He sprayed cologne over his shoulder, then grabbed his phone and keys, and headed out the door.

Ten minutes later, Caleb met Levi at the door of Poolhall Palace.

"I was surprised to hear from you earlier," Levi said as they moved inside, grabbing a pool table.

"Yeah, Cannon came by today and gave me some brotherly advice." Caleb couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his tone even if he tried.

"Tell me more about it after I get us some drinks." Levi went to the bar as he gained company at the table.

"CJ, you're looking good tonight."

"Thanks, Larissa," he replied as she moved around him as he racked up the balls. He paused, turning to her when she stood behind him.

"You still with Alanah?" She smiled brightly, glad to have his full attention.

"No. We broke up a little while ago."

"I knew she would mess up a good thing." She rubbed her hands up his biceps. "It's my turn to ride this ride."

Larissa had beautiful skin that matched his. She was almost half his height, stopping right under his pecs. Not only was she short, but she was tiny. He could crush her if he wasn't careful. A lot of men found that perfect for their taller frame, but that was a double negative for him.

Larissa was a good-looking woman, and she would probably do for the night, but he wanted Kacie. He wanted to caress every curve, lick every inch of her skin, and kiss every

mark on her body. He wanted her from her dainty feet all the way to her curly top.

“Sorry. It’s down for repairs.”

“I figured you would say something like that. You have my number.” She shrugged. “Call me when you need a test run.”

“Damn, Larissa,” Levi said as she switched past him as he returned with the drinks.

They both let their eyes wander over her frame as she moved to her group of friends. “What’s wrong with you, man? She was offering it up on a platter.”

“Let’s play, fool.”

It was good getting out the house. Caleb had enjoyed himself, but it was time to call it a night. He was headed back to work in the morning at his normal time instead of the late shifts.

“Let’s get out of here, Levi.”

“You didn’t see anything you liked tonight?”

He had been getting lustful looks all night, but not one had him intrigued enough to go home with.

“No. Let’s bounce.”

“Yeah, Crystal will be calling me in a minute, asking me where I’m at.” He laughed.

“Getting ready to leave?” Larissa asked as she made her way over to them as they started cleaning up their area. He nodded. She pulled at his arms, and he lowered for her to place a kiss on his cheek. “Have yourself a good night, CJ.”

“I’ll pay for your drinks tonight. Enjoy yourself, Larissa.”

He paid the tab and headed for the door.

“You sure you don’t want to tap that real quick?” Levi asked as they walked out.

He looked back and caught Larissa watching him leave. She winked at him, and he offered her a smile before he allowed the door to close behind him. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

He wanted Kacie Renee Benjamin and only her.

Seven



MEANT TO BE

TAKING GIA'S ADVICE, Kacie looked for a fresh approach to her career. Forgoing the new car in her driveway, she took a short stroll downtown with her camera around her neck. She wanted to capture unexpected moments, which were done best on foot.

As she walked the sidewalk of the bustling area, she came across a woman schooling her boyfriend on how she wanted her picture taken. They were standing outside of the beauty shop, and by her hair, Kacie knew she had just left the building behind her.

“Bae, you have to tilt the phone. I need them to see me from all angles.”

“Excuse me.” They turned at the sound of Kacie’s voice. “Your hair looks so good, straight out the nineties.” She had her nails long and curved. Her fingers were decorated with tons of gold rings. She was eating the look up, and she hadn’t even dressed for the occasion yet.

“That’s what I was going for. Thank you!” She stuck her tongue out at her boyfriend. “I told you.” She turned back to Kacie. “We’re having a nineties themed party tonight.”

“I’m sure your pictures will come out nice. It would be bomb if you were in a record store or even a gas station to complete the whole aesthetic.”

She looked down at the camera resting on her stomach. “Are you a photographer?”

“I guess, by default. I mostly work on art, and you are a beautiful piece. I’m Kacie.” She introduced herself, shaking the woman’s hand first.

“Are you trying to steal my woman away?” They laughed as the man put one arm around the woman and took Kacie’s hand in the other. “She’s Courtney, and I’m Levi. My homeboy owns a gas station not too far from here. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind letting y’all take a few pics as long as we don’t get in the customers’ way too much.”

“That’s perfect, and I can work around customers.” Kacie was the most excited she had been in a while. Though she wasn’t working on a set she built, it was still nice to be out, meeting new people and creating memories they could have for a lifetime.

“Let’s go then. I can’t wait to get my picture taken for real.” Courtney grabbed her hand, looping their arms. “Did you drive?” she asked.

“No, I walked. I was trying to find something to inspire me.”

She blushed. “You hear that, Levi. I’m out here being someone’s inspiration.” She squeezed Kacie’s arm. “Do you have an Instagram? We can follow each other.”

“Yes.” Before she could dig out her phone, Levi spoke.

“You can ride with us, if you’re cool with that. When I say close, I mean about fifteen minutes out. We promise not to kidnap you. Well shit, you approached us. You not crazy, are you?” He raised a brow.

“No, I’m not crazy!” She cackled as she followed them to their car. Levi opened Courtney’s door, then hers.

“Thank you, I got it.” She checked the child lock before she closed the door. She couldn’t be too trusting, though Courtney and Levi seemed cool.

“Here, pull up your account.” Courtney turned in her seat, handing Kacie her phone. She pulled up her page and handed the phone back to Courtney for her to follow her if she wanted.

“Look, bae! She is a real photographer. She has over fifty K followers.”

Levi looked at her through the rearview mirror. “You literally made my girl’s day. Thank you.”

Kacie was only too happy to photograph Courtney, even if it was for free. How she lit up when Kacie mentioned how the photos could be better was priceless. The fact she could come along on the journey was reward enough.

* * *

CALEB SAT behind his desk at the gas station when Levi came into his office with a goofy smile on his face. “I hope you don’t mind Courtney taking pictures out front.”

“What you mean?” Caleb tossed the papers on his desk and leaned back in his chair.

“Some little artistic cutie stopped her and talked her into a little photo shoot. She just got her hair and nails done, so she’s feeling herself. You sure you don’t want to come tonight?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I’ve drunk enough in the last month to last a lifetime. Plus, y’all are going to be booed up. What I look like?” He got up to walk up front, wanting to see Courtney in action. He knew she was carrying on something serious between his aisles, probably scaring his customers away. His only thought was to provide damage control.

“You could always invite the baddie from the bar, or you could’ve invited this new chick that has your brain scrambled. What did you say her name was?” Levi asked as he walked out behind him.

“Kacie?”

When Caleb walked out, he felt like he was hit in the gut.

Kacie looked even better than the last time he saw her. Her bandages were gone; her curly hair was loose, going over her shoulder and down her back. She wore light makeup and a yellow strapless maxi dress that slightly hugged her figure.

“CJ, leave us alone,” Courtney fussed. “We’re almost done. Come on, girl.” She gripped a stunned Kacie’s arm to turn her back to the task at hand. “My Instagram is about to blow up! Can you put me on your page?” she asked Kacie.

Shaking her head, probably to clear her foggy brain, Kacie responded to Courtney. “I would love to.” She giggled, and it was music to his ears. They had shared a lot of laughs the day after her accident, and he wanted more.

“Don’t let me stop you. I only own the place.” He directed his fake aggravation toward Courtney, but she paid him no mind. In fact, she shooed him away with a few flicks of her wrist.

Kacie’s eyes moved from his, hiding her face behind the camera. She resumed snapping pictures of Courtney and all her glory and gold.

“You know her?” Levi asked.

“She’s the one from the accident!” Caleb elbowed him.

“Get the fuck out of here! My bad, man. I forgot the name you said.”

“Don’t worry about it. You just walked her ass in my store.” He relaxed against the counter, watching his future woman work.

“You need to pursue her. Her little artistic ass is cute as hell. She has the sweetest little voice, too. Courtney out-talked her in the car.” Levi shook his head as he watched his woman change poses.

“You don’t think I need more time?” Caleb asked, remembering the many talks he had with Levi about relationships.

“You haven’t been able to get her out of your mind, and now that I’ve met her, I see why.” Levi’s smirk turned into a frown. “Alanah was too much for you, and we all know she was using you for your money. But her...” He pointed to Kacie. “That’s you right there.”

As if she could sense they were discussing her, Kacie peeked out of the corner of her eyes. Her stares didn't go unnoticed. Yes, he was watching her, and he didn't plan to let her out of his sight. Today, he was going to bring her back into his life. If he was being honest, his life hadn't been the same since he met her.

"No woman has ever looked at me the way she does. When she sees me, there's a gleam in her eyes, and it's for me. I still don't believe it, and I thought I was imagining it all the other times, but no. She wants me. Even now..." She was trying to mask it, but there was no covering what was destined.

Kacie was going to fight it, and he didn't blame her. He had ghosted her on some little boy shit, but he was going to make her understand he wasn't ready then. Now, he was all in. Somehow, he had to convince her to give them a fighting chance and that their meeting wasn't completely accidental.

"More reason to pursue her. Seems like she has too much potential to let get away. You need a good girl like her. These *bad bitches* ain't nothing but trouble." He scoffed. "A girl like that will let you lead. You just have to give her something to follow."

"You're right." He stared off in the distance, rubbing his chin. It was time to stop hiding behind his misfortunes and create his own destiny.

Levi nudged him. "You going to let her get away?" He pointed to the door Kacie rushed for.

He cursed as he pushed off the counter, racing after her as she moved outside. "Kacie. Kacie!"

She ignored him, keeping her stride strong.

He couldn't let her get away. "Kacie, wait!" He jumped in front of her. "I've been busy becoming."

Kacie froze.

She planned to slip away. When he called her name, she planned to keep walking, but when he spoke those words, how could she not stop? Instantly, memories of that day played in her head.

She shouldn't be so hard on him, but her feelings were hurt by how he left her hanging. Though Caleb looked good, she could see he hadn't been treating himself kind. The stress lines on his face, the dullness of his skin, and his lackluster eyes told his story.

"Busy becoming, huh? How has that been working out for you?" She folded her arms over her chest.

"How's it been working for you?"

She didn't answer. As much as she wanted to believe Dom not using her hadn't affected her, it did. She second guessed everything she did since that day. It was why today had been so important for her to get out of her apartment and free shoot. Who knew that would lead to her seeing Caleb again?

"I see your head is healing up pretty nicely." He reached out to run his finger across the small scar, but she turned away. She would fold immediately if he touched her. She couldn't allow him to slip back into her space so easily.

"I finally told my parents. My mom acted like she was going to have a heart attack. Leave it to her to make my accident about her." She snorted. "How are you handling the breakup?" Kacie asked, hoping it would give her the answers she was looking for without sounding concerned about him ghosting her.

Disappointment had followed the days of him not responding to her text. He had made such an impression on her, then disappeared. That was fucked up.

"It wasn't really the breakup that was the problem." He rubbed at the back of his neck.

"What was the problem then?"

"Me."

She shifted her weight, uncomfortable under his stare. She was good with eye contact, but his confession wasn't what she was expecting. She avoided his eyes so she wouldn't see the pain she heard in his voice. It was hard to be upset with him, knowing he had been suffering.

“Can we go somewhere and talk?”

She wanted to talk to him and let him explain, but she couldn't keep in her snappy reply. “Why? There were a lot of times we could've talked a month ago.” She looked away, shaking her head. “You could've said something, but I guess you didn't owe me that. It's not like I'm your girl or something.”

Caleb gripped her arms and stared directly into her eyes. “What we felt was real. I still feel it now.” He trailed one hand up to cup her face, and subconsciously, she leaned into his touch. “All I'm asking is for you to hear me out.”

If she was really going to hear him out, she wanted it to come from within. Searching the area, she saw the open field behind them. With no shade in sight, they would really be one with the earth and relaxed. For privacy, she pulled him to a section hidden behind the building. His car was parked there, so it seemed like it was a good place where they could let their guards down.

“Come on.” She dragged him to the grass. She slipped her feet out of her sandals and encouraged him to do the same.

“You want me to take my shoes off in this grass? Do you know what's possibly out here?”

“Take your shoes off.” His brows furrowed at her demand. “Trust me,” she added, stooping in front of him to unlace his shoes.

His face showed he was unsure, but the rest of his body radiated trust. He toed off his sneakers, and she yanked off his socks before placing his feet in the grass. “Now what?” he asked.

She stood. “Give me your hands.”

His hands swallowed hers, but that didn't stop him from feeling the pull. She could tell by the way his grip tightened. She told him to relax. “Close your eyes. Center yourself. Empty your mind. Just be here with me. Be present.”

“What is this?”

“It’s call grounding.”

“Should I be afraid?” His voice was teasing, but she was serious.

“Not unless you’re afraid of yourself.” The words she whispered held so much meaning.

When he seemed settled, she prayed over them. Whether their talk ended with them apart or together, they would both leave there content in the decision.

“Alright, sit down with your back against mine. Feet stay flat on the ground.” They got situated, and she spoke in a soft, calming tone. “Breathe, Caleb.”

He seemed to breathe easier and became more relaxed against her. “Keep talking to me, Kace. Please.”

His body listened to her voice. It followed her command, confirming their connection was real.

The sounds of heavy traffic from the interstate and people talking in the distance vanished. The only thing Caleb heard was Kacie’s soothing voice. She was the one. There was no doubt in his mind.

“I feel you, Caleb.” She meant more than just his back connected with hers.

“You see me, Kacie,” he confessed.

“I see you.”

It wasn’t a question. He knew it when they sat in her car with her staring into his eyes. She may have had a mild concussion, but she was still the woman he was extremely interested in and the woman he would grow to love.

“You’re a strong man, a beautiful man on the inside and out. You’re kind and loving. You’re more than what meets the eyes. You’re more than your finances. You’re so much more...”

She was literally speaking life into him. She said things he sometimes found hard to believe about himself. This was why he wasn’t the same, because of her. He was out in dirty ass

grass with the sun beaming down on him, about to have a breakdown. Yet, he felt cool. He felt comfortable. He felt emotionally safe. Most importantly, he felt seen.

“What is it?” she asked.

It was almost scary she knew he was fighting to keep his sobs at bay. He had to get away from her, but he found himself leaning more into her. He laid his head back, resting it on her shoulder. His chest hurt from holding it all in.

“Release it, Caleb.”

“Get out my head, Kacie!” He rocked from side to side like a psych patient.

“I’m not in your head. I’m in your heart.”

He choked, squeezing his eyes tight. “I feel used. I feel overlooked. I don’t know if I’ll ever be enough.”

She laid her head back and pressed her face against his. “You were used but by God. He used you as an introduction to love for women who weren’t ready to be loved. There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re so full of love, and somebody needs that from you, and you’ll get it in return. Accept who you are. The person you really are and not the one you built yourself to be, he’s enough.”

He wiped his hand down his face before turning to her. She shifted with him, coming face to face. Her fingers danced over his skin. He found immense comfort in her touch.

“You have a way of bringing emotions out of me.”

“Is that a bad thing?” She traced over his thick eyebrows.

“I don’t know. Do you look at me as less of a man?”

“You’re more of a man in my eyes. Holding that shit in does nothing for you besides make you look tough. When I find myself interested in someone, I look at how he expresses his emotions. Now, I don’t want a cry baby,” she teased. “But I need someone in touch with their emotions. When I’m feeling down about something, I don’t want to hear, ‘suck it up.’ I want someone to actually feel what I feel and help me work

through it. You can't do that if you're shut off from your emotions."

"I never thought of it like that."

"Your father is tough, huh?" Her hands fell away from his face. He caught them and interlocked their fingers.

"Yes, but I don't want to talk about him now. I want to talk about me and you."

"There's a me and you?" she whispered shyly. She wasn't so shy a few minutes ago when she was fussing at him. He did deserve it, but it was like night and day. She was feisty under the cute, shy persona.

"I want there to be, if you're willing to give me another chance."

"I thought..." She sat back on the ground and stared out to the street.

He didn't like that she wasn't making eye contact with him, so he turned her head back to him. "Thought what?"

"I thought we had a connection or something. How many men would stay by a woman's side they don't know?"

"Not many. Kacie, we do have a connection that I can't explain. I want to explore it with you, if you're willing to give me another chance."

"How do you plan to make this up to me?"

"Can we start with dinner?"

She moved her head from side to side as if weighing her options. That move shouldn't be so attractive but it was. "If I agree to dinner, will you agree to do another photo shoot?"

"Am I your muse, Ms. Benjamin?"

"Mine and a few other people." His brows dipped. "Um, I posted a picture of you on my page. No one can see it was you because of my edits, but a friend of mine saw them and wondered if you would be interested in doing a shoot with us."

He shrugged. "Sure."

She looked surprised. He didn't know why she was shocked. He would do anything to be back in her good graces. What was another photo shoot?

“Just that simple, huh?”

He pulled her into his lap, straddling his thighs.

“I'm not playing about getting to know you. I'm letting my intentions be known now. You're going to be mine.” He was so close that when he spoke, his lips lightly brushed over hers. “I want something with you, Kacie. I left in the worst possible way, and I beat myself up about it daily. I had good intentions. I didn't want to come to you heavy and broken. You're so light and free. You feel so good to my soul.”

His confession seemed to rock her to the core. A shiver ran through her body. He stroked her lower back, and she closed her eyes, enjoying his caress.

“So, is that a yes?”

“To?” She popped one eye open.

“Giving me a chance?”

* * *

CALEB WAS ON CLOUD NINE.

Kacie had agreed to go to dinner with him. When they parted, it was with a kiss and a promise to talk later. It felt so good to be back home.

Wow.

To think of Kacie as home was insane, but it was the only way to describe how he felt being reunited with her.

“What is he doing here?” Caleb pulled into his garage, going around his brother's car that was parked in his driveway. As the garage door closed, he climbed out of his car. He whistled as he let himself into the house.

Caleb was convinced nothing could pull him out of his good mood, but that was before he saw his brother sitting at

his kitchen table. With a drink in his hand, papers laid out before him, and a scowl on his face, he knew some shit was about to hit the fan.

“Why are you in here sitting in the dark?” He tossed his keys on the table, then moved around the kitchen to pour him whatever his brother had on the counter. Surely he would need it for whatever Cannon wanted to talk about.

“Where you been?”

He put the glass to his lips, and before he could even taste it, he knew it was the imported whiskey their father kept in his office at the casino. “The gas station. Where else would I be?”

“Which one? The one you’re trying to sell?” Cannon leaned in, resting his arms on the table. His eyebrow rose, waiting on him to answer.

“What are you talking about?” He gulped down the alcohol before pouring more, a lot more.

“Why the fuck did Avery O’Neal come to the casino looking for you? You better be glad Dad wasn’t there! What have you done, Caleb, and don’t lie? I can’t clean up your mess if you don’t tell me what’s going on.”

“I don’t need you to clean up my mess. Avery had no business coming there looking for me. He knows where to find me.” Shit, he knew Avery wouldn’t go away quietly.

“He said he’s buying our gas station from you.” The casino and the gas station were all split between their father, Cannon, and Caleb. They all had a percentage, but Cannon had controlling vote over the casino, and he had control of the gas station. Caleb’s other two gas stations were solely owned by him. Yet, the one with his family’s blood on it was the one he had wanted to sell. Not anymore, though. He had learned so much about the history of the gas station over the last few weeks his head was still spinning.

“That’s a lie.”

“Is it?” Cannon stood with his face twisted up.

“He’s not buying the gas station.”

“I told Dad not to give you the gas station. I’ll buy you out since you don’t give a damn.”

He was in his brother’s face in seconds. He might have been older, but Caleb was bigger. “Did you not hear me? I said I’m not selling it!”

Cannon pushed him away and started pacing. They hadn’t fought since they were teenagers, learning better ways to deal with anger, and Cannon’s was pacing. “You act like you don’t care about the gas station. Sometimes you act like you’re not a part of the family. I always went the extra mile to make you feel included.”

“You shouldn’t have had to.”

Caleb lowered his head. His brother was telling the truth. He had always been by his side, but because their father would rather have Cannon by his side, it made him try to distance himself from him. He didn’t think Cannon cared enough to notice; now he knew he had been wrong.

“I don’t get you sometime, CJ.” He sighed. “I brought these here to have you look over them. Then you’ll see why you shouldn’t sell the gas station and especially to Avery O’Neal. If you still want to sell after looking at this, just promise to let me know first.”

“I’m sorry,” Caleb called out as Cannon walked to the front door. He didn’t know what he was apologizing for, but he felt like he needed to say something.

“I pray one day you’ll see who you really are and stand up to claim what’s rightfully yours. That means your businesses, your family, your woman... your life.”

He made a vow. “I’ll do better.”

“You’re not the fat kid getting teased on the playground anymore. You’re a man. A Jackson. Just do it.”

That was easier said than done.

Caleb swiped the papers off the table. Cannon left him with heavy thoughts and a heavy heart.

Eight



TYPES OF WOMEN

TONIGHT WAS Kacie's dinner date with Caleb. Nervous excitement danced around in her belly as she prepared for the night.

He said tonight would be fun and to dress nice because they were going to dinner but a little casual because he was taking her somewhere after, so he suggested flat shoes instead of heels.

She wanted to be cute but still comfortable, so she picked out a white button up. She rolled the sleeves, cuffed them at the elbow, and tied the bottom of the shirt in a knot at her waist. It accentuated her large breasts and showed off her double-pierced navel. For her bottom half, she picked out a burnt orange floor-length skirt that had a thigh high split. Paired with white sandals she placed on her pretty manicured feet, the outfit was complete.

She used gold jewelry to decorate the look—small hoops, a dainty necklace with a crescent moon pendant, a watch, and the diamond ring her father gave her for her twenty-first birthday.

Kacie swooped her hair into a bun that sat on the top of her head, exposing her neck. She pulled curly pieces down to bring the look together. Since they were going somewhere after dinner, she kept her makeup light with skin tint, brown lip gloss with sprinkles, blush, and lashes. She sprayed her body with her favorite intoxicating perfume that made her smell like vanilla, a bit of citrus, and coconuts. It was tantalizing.

She wanted Caleb sweating, regretting the time they spent apart.

When there was a knock at her door, she looked down at her phone and saw that he was early, but she was almost ready. She exited the bathroom and grabbed the door.

He said nothing, but his face told it all. She knew she had done herself much justice.

“Kacie.”

“Come in.” She left him standing at the door, walking back to the bathroom. Soon, he stood in the doorway, watching her touch up her lip gloss and give herself the once over.

“You look amazing.”

She turned around, resting against the sink as she looked him up and down. “Thank you. So do you.”

He wore a plaid orange and white button-down with dark jeans and brown loafers. He had a fresh cut and his beard trimmed, making her want to tug on it.

“You wanted to be my twin?” she asked with a teasing smile.

“I could never look as good as you.” He pulled a tiny Succulent from behind his back.

She pushed off the sink with a wide smile. “Is that for me?” Now that she was closer, she could smell his light scent, definitely different from the one he wore the day of her accident, but she still liked it.

“Yes. My first thought was to get you roses, but I saw you like plants. So...” He handed it to her. “Do you not like it?”

“I love it, but why this?”

“If this date goes well, I’ll tell you.” They shared a laugh. “Ready?”

“Let me grab my purse.”

She carried her plant to the window to place it on the sill for the direct light the Echeveria needed to survive. Once she

had her new addition taken care of, she went to her room and grabbed her everyday crossbody bag.

“I’m ready now.”

Once on the road, Kacie sparked up conversation, asking Caleb questions he answered easily.

“What’s your hidden talent?”

He shook his head. “If I tell you, then how will it stay hidden?”

“You can tell me anything. It’ll be our secret.”

He laughed, then confessed, “I can sing a little.”

“What?” she exclaimed. “I wasn’t expecting that. Will you sing something for me?”

He sang her the chorus of Brian McKnight’s “Back at One.” Perfect song for how he felt about her.

She clapped her hands once he finished, and he waved her off. His cheeks heated uncomfortably. It was the first time he sang to a woman since high school.

“Brian McKnight is a favorite when it comes to nineties/two thousands R&B.”

“What’s an underrated song of his you like? Let me see if you’re really a fan.”

“I like ‘You Used to be My Girl’. I had that song on repeat.”

“That salty ass song! I hate it.”

They continued talking and laughing all the way to the restaurant. When they arrived, Caleb and Kacie were seated quickly and had their orders taken and drinks in front of them in no time.

“What’s important to you in a potential partner?” he asked. They had talked about a lot of meaningless things as they waited for their food, but he was ready to shift the conversation to a more important subject.

“A lot of things.”

His brow lifted. “You care to elaborate?”

“Not really. Either you’re what I’m looking for or you’re not. A lot of men used that question to paint themselves to be the person described to get what they want.” She held her hand up. “Excuse me, that’s not just men. Women do it too.”

He sat back in his chair and rubbed at his beard. He didn’t know how to receive that. Just when he thought he had her figured out, she threw in a curveball.

“Did I offend you?” Kacie asked.

“I don’t know yet,” he answered honestly.

“What I said is not that complex.” She sat up, resting her forearms on the table. “You have money, so women flock to you, but they would want to secure their spot. Beauty doesn’t do it anymore. So they would ask you what you see in a potential partner or how do you like your women. You would tell them, of course, not thinking much of it. Then they turn into the exact woman you described.” She snapped her fingers. “It never lasts, though. You can only hide your true self for so long. They just hope by then, you wouldn’t care.”

“You make a valid point.”

“I know.” She winked at him. “I like you. You don’t have to worry about being my type. I don’t have a type.” She took a sip of her water.

“I have a type,” he announced.

“You do?” It was her turn to sit back in her chair. “I see you want me to ask, so tell me, Caleb. What is your type?”

He opened his mouth to reply when he saw Alanah with a group of women, entering the restaurant. If he only had one wish, he would use it to make sure she didn’t see him, but there was no such luck. Like she could smell him, her eyes went straight to his. She started to smile until she saw he wasn’t alone. Her lips turned up in a smirk as she strutted in his direction.

“My ex...”

She recoiled. “Your ex is your type?”

He looked at her with a frown. He had forgotten what they were talking about. “No, my ex is on her way over. I’m not worried about her, but I don’t want her to spoil our evening.”

“Should we just leave?”

“No. We’re going to continue our conversation while we wait for our food. I’m on a date with you, Kacie. I’m here to get to know you so I can make you mine. No one is going to come between that. Just relax and let me handle it.” He held his hand out to her, and she placed hers in his.

“Hey, CJ,” Alanah sang, stopping beside him. However, she kept a watchful eye on Kacie. He couldn’t quite read Kacie’s face, but that meant Alanah couldn’t either.

“Alanah,” he greeted flatly.

“Is this your new girl? I’m Alanah Adams.” She held her hand out to Kacie, who looked at him like, *is she for real?*

He pushed Alanah’s arm down. “She’s not shaking your hand. What can I help you with, Alanah? We’re on a date, and I would like to get back to our conversation before you so rudely interrupted. Matter of fact, what are you doing here? This doesn’t seem like much of your style.”

She folded her arms. “I want to talk to you.”

“We have nothing to talk about.”

She looked at Kacie, then back at him. “What about your clothes at my house?”

“Burn them.” He knew he was pissing her off with his brief responses, so with a change of tactic, Alanah moved her attention back to Kacie.

“What’s your name? No need to be impolite.”

“I’m Kacie.”

“And what do you do, Kacie?”

With a straight face, she pointed at Caleb. “Him.”

Alanah’s mouth dropped open, and he damn sure had a hard time keeping his off the floor. He wasn’t expecting that to

come from her. Her answer shocked both of them.

“Oh, and here I thought you were a mousy, innocent little bitch.”

Kacie stood. “Bitch?”

“Yeah, bitch!”

“Alanah!” He clamped his hand around her wrist just as she was about to toss the glass of water on Kacie. He rose, towering over her, keeping a firm grip on her. “This is a public place. That’s why I’m letting you slide,” he whispered dangerously. “Please. Please, heed my warning. Don’t strike out with me.”

“You’re hurting my wrist,” she whimpered.

He applied more pressure just to prove a point. He wanted to snap her fucking wrist, but he resisted the dark temptation. “Next time you see me, do yourself a favor and don’t.”

“Let’s just go, Caleb,” Kacie said, resting her hand on his back.

Alanah’s eyes grew wide with bewilderment. “She calls you Caleb?”

He shoved her away. “Stay away, Alanah. Just stay away.” He threw a couple of bills on the table, then guided Kacie out of the restaurant. When she was in the car and he was secured in the driver’s seat, he pulled off.

“I had one more thing planned for us tonight, but I’ll understand if you want to go home.”

“Is that the type of women you like?”

He stole glances at her as he maneuvered through traffic. She didn’t seem mad, but he didn’t know if he could answer her question. There wasn’t a straight answer, so he put it back on her. “I like you, so you tell me.”

“I’m nothing like that. I would never approach my ex after I did some fucked up shit. It takes a lot of balls.”

He agreed. Alanah was bold, but that was one thing he liked about her in the beginning. He hated everything about

her now. “What type of woman are you then, Ms. Benjamin?”

“I’m a good girl,” she whispered seductively.

He raised his brow as he looked at her out of the corner of his eyes. “I want you to be my good girl,” Caleb challenged boldly.

“What does that consist of?”

He wondered if she meant sexually. “You doing whatever I say.”

“I’m not good at that unless you can do the same when it’s my turn.”

Her saying that reminded him of something. “Yo, when you told Alanah you do me, I almost fell out my seat.”

She shrugged. “I match energies.”

“You know you’re going to have to back that up, right?”

She gave him a naughty look that sent blood rushing to his lower region.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked, changing the subject.

Since they had arrived at their next destination, he would allow her to shift the conversation in a different direction, but they would be revisiting the conversation. “See for yourself.” He pointed ahead of them.

She looked at the flashing sign. “A casino?”

“It’s a special casino.” He winked.

“Does it take special money? You’re not about to have me going broke in here.” She laughed. “Well, that’s not true. I don’t know how to play half of the games in a casino.”

He loved her smile. “I’ll supply the money, and we’ll put you at a slot machine.”

In ten minutes, they were engulfed in the heavy crowd of the casino, and even with the ocean of people, his brother still could make him out.

“It’s good to see you here tonight.” Cannon pulled him in for a brotherly hug, but he never took his eyes off the beautiful woman at Caleb’s side. “Who is this majestic woman on your arm?”

“Kacie.” She extended her hand to him.

“Cannon.” He brushed a kiss over her knuckles.

“The brother?” She looked up at Caleb.

“The one and only. You’ve been talking about me?” Surprised, Cannon nudged him.

“No.” Caleb rolled his eyes.

“Liar.” His eyes moved back to Kacie. “I hope it has been all good things.”

“Wonderful things. I hear you’re a fantastic big brother.”

“He said that?” He pulled Caleb, locking his arm around his neck. Cannon whispered in his ear. “Dad is here, and unless you want him to meet Kacie now, you should make your way to the office.”

Shit. He definitely didn’t want that. He thought his father would be home by now. “Watch out for her.”

“I got this. I know better than to leave a beautiful woman alone,” Cannon flirted, going from Caleb to Kacie, taking her hand in his. “Caleb’s going to handle some business really quick, but why don’t I show you around our casino?”

“Our?” She looked at Caleb, and he shrugged his shoulders. “I told you it was special. I’ll be right back.” He grabbed her hands, giving them a reassuring squeeze before he moved to where the offices were located. He nodded as the staff greeted him until he made it to Cannon’s office. The door was pushed open, and his father greeted him with a giant smile.

“I’m glad you could finally stop by. It’s been a long time since you’ve been here.” Even at sixty, Barry Lamar Jackson still was refined and radiated power he adapted from his own father. The Jacksons were well known. Sadly, it wasn’t for all good things.

“You know I keep my distance.”

“Things have changed, CJ. Remember? That was discussed before you accepted your inheritance.” He moved behind the large oak desk and had a seat. “Pour yourself a drink.”

“No thanks. I need a clear head tonight.”

“For that date of yours? Pretty lady.”

Of course, the word had spread like wildfire that he was there and with a woman, no less.

“Thank you.”

“By you being here tonight means I can expect to see you around more?”

“Why does it mean so much to you that I’m here? I’m already running the gas station along with the two others. I have my hands full with that. Cannon is doing a good job here, better than I would have done. He’s who you always wanted to run this place.”

“You wanted the casino?”

Why he suddenly wanted to act like he cared what Caleb wanted brought a scowl to his face.

“No, Dad. I wanted you. I wanted your attention, your affection, your blessing, but a dirty gas station was a great substitute.”

“You still don’t know what you have.” His father shook his head. “Why don’t you fix it up so it can be more than a dirty gas station?”

“I know what I have.” He looked directly into his eyes. “You still don’t know what you have?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Did you hear what I said?”

“My affection, my attention, my blessing? You have all of that.”

“Why don’t I feel like I do?”

His father swallowed the rest of his drink, clearly uncomfortable.

Caleb ran his hand down his face. “Listen, I didn’t come up here to argue with you. I wanted to speak since Cannon told me you were still here. Now I’m going to get back to my date.”

“You didn’t bring her to meet me. I’m a little disappointed.” *Good.* He had been disappointed since he was a kid.

“I have to go. Tell Mom I said hey.”

* * *

KACIE PUSHED AWAY from the table, stuffed.

When Cannon left her with a security guard while he went to cash her out, she made her way to the buffet. Her personal security, Steven, pulled her to a private section. The cooks brought out her own spread she had picked off the menu of buffet items.

“Kacie?”

She couldn’t believe her eyes. “Dom? What are you doing here? I thought you would be back in Atlanta.” He had been looking through the glass partition. He moved until he found the entrance, but Steven stopped him.

“I’m visiting my parents.” Dom looked the security guard up and down. “Call off your guard dog. Since when do you need security?”

“Since you dropped me from our agreement.”

“That’s why I came over here. I saw you and wanted to apologize. Can I do that?” He was still trying to move into the private section.

“Save your sorries, Dom. I’m good off of them. Nick made it clear and apologized on your behalf.”

She made her way to Steven, asking if he could take her to Caleb.

“I’m already here.” She turned around, bumping into Caleb’s solid frame. “Who’s this?” he asked.

“No one,” she said to his chest.

“I’ll leave you alone. I’m sorry about how that went down, though. I should’ve handled that better.” With that, Dom disappeared into the crowd.

“What is he talking about?” Caleb asked as she went back to the table to finish her drink. She needed it after interacting with Dom.

“That’s the guy who didn’t want to use my services anymore.”

He sighed. “This is turning out to be a hell of a date.” He looked down at the table. “You eat buffet food?”

“They brought it from the back, but yeah, you don’t?”

“Sometimes. You didn’t wait for me.” He pinched her cheeks.

“I didn’t know how long you would be. I can sit with you while you eat.”

“No, it’s okay. We should get you back home. It’s getting late.” He looked around. “Where is Cannon?”

“Yo, get your lady out my spot. This first timer luck is eating into my pocket.” He handed her a money bag. “It’s all there. CJ would try to kill me if it wasn’t.”

“Thank you, Cannon.” She hugged him briefly.

Caleb’s brother was handsome. They shared some features like their nose and eyes. Their height was almost identical, but that’s where the similarities stopped. Caleb was built like a tank while Cannon was medium built. He had less facial hair, showing off his slightly pink lips against his fawn-colored skin. He was suave, moving with confidence that was hard to match.

Usually he was the one she would be attracted to, but she wanted her papa bear.

“You’re welcome, beautiful.”

“You ready?” Caleb asked.

“Yes, get her out of here. Taking all my damn money.”

She laughed. “It was nice meeting you, Cannon and Steven.” She waved at him before grabbing Caleb’s hand, and he led her to the car.

The drive back to Kacie’s place was done mostly in comfortable silence. He let her connect her phone to the car, and she played Miguel’s *All I Want Is You* album. He loved they had the same taste in music. She sang along to a few songs before she fell asleep.

When he pulled into her driveway, the song “Hero” came over the speakers. It was his favorite song on the entire album.

He put the car in park and turned off his lights. He shifted in his seat to admire the beauty in his passenger seat as he softly sang along to the music.

He wanted to be her hero, her friend, her protector.

“Kace.” He used the back of his hand to brush over her cheek. She was so gorgeous, and he wanted her to be all his. “Wake up, love. You’re home.”

She stirred and turned toward him with a lazy smile. She always had a smile on her face. He would make sure she kept one when he was around.

“You let me fall asleep.” She stretched.

“It’s alright. You deserved a little rest.” He offered her a smile. “Did you have fun tonight?”

“I had a great time, but not as much fun as it was trapped inside my car with my head bleeding,” she joked.

Caleb felt a little guilty at her statement. Being honest with himself, tonight had been a bit of a test. He had dressed down, not wearing any designer clothes. He wore some of his less expensive cologne. He didn’t take her to a high-end restaurant.

He had brought her to the casino where he hadn't even given her money like he said he would. It had slipped his mind, rushing to see his father. Yet, she had the time of her life, playing the slot machines and eating buffet food.

Not once did she complain. She had enjoyed spending time with him, and that made him want to spoil her more than any woman he ever entertained.

"Come on. Let's get you into the house. It's close to twelve in the morning." He walked around and helped her out of the car. "I didn't mean to keep you out this late."

"I'm a big girl. I can handle a few late night activities. Wait, not like that... You know what I mean."

"I'll keep that in mind." He walked her up all those damn stairs to her door. "I know you said you had a good time, but tonight was one disaster after another. I don't know how—"

She rose up to cut off his sentence with a kiss. "Not completely."

God! "Am I imagining you?" He sandwiched her face between his hands.

She giggled. "No, you're not."

I said that out loud? She could pull things out of him he would normally keep in.

She placed her hands over his and closed her eyes like she found comfort in his touch. "Can I ask you a question?" she asked.

"Anything."

She slowly opened her eyes, and he was instantly hypnotized by the dark orbs.

"Why the plant?" she whispered.

He touched his forehead to hers as he still clung to her face. "Can I be honest with you?"

"I always want honesty, Caleb, even when you think I can't handle the truth. Lying takes away my choice, and as long as I'm sane, I should always have a choice."

He kissed her forehead. “When I asked if I was imagining you, I hadn’t meant to say that out loud, but it was a truthful thought. I don’t pick women like you, Kacie. I fell into this habit of picking women I thought people would want to see me with. I know it’s early, but I feel like I could fall in love with you. And if you could appreciate, love, and nurture that plant, then I know you could do the same for me.”

The feel of her lips on his was earth-shattering. He’d never been kissed like this before. Her movements weren’t urgent. They were precise, determined to drive him wild.

Her tongue sought his, and he glided it against hers. She sighed, gripping his shirt in a tight fist.

Caleb guided her until her back hit the door, and his body was pressed into hers.

“Mmmm.” She panted against his lips as they finally pulled away to catch their breath. He placed wet, open-mouthed kisses on her neck, and it had her pressing her thighs together.

He groaned, hiking her leg around his waist, feeling the heat. He glided up the smooth skin of her thighs. He couldn’t get enough of her. He didn’t want the night to end, but if he stayed any longer, they would be tangled in her sheets.

“Come inside.”

So much for taking things slowly.

Kacie wanted Caleb in the worst way.

“I would love to, but I can’t. I want to take this slow.”

That was what his mouth said in between kisses, but his hands had a mind of their own, wandering up her bare thigh until he met her panties. The thong did a terrible job of concealing her flesh. She could feel the breeze against her damp lips.

He could easily make her explode, but he started to pull his hand away. She grabbed his wrist to keep him there, and he petted her. She wondered if he could feel her piercing, but he

wasn't high enough. Only the tips of his finger brushing over her exposed lips, sending raging sensations through her body.

"Caleb," she whimpered, needing his firm touch, but he continued to give her light, teasing strokes.

"I have to get out of here if I'm going to keep my promise. You're about to see a different side of me." Reluctantly, he pulled his hand away and slowly opened his eyes.

"Such a gentleman." She rubbed a hand over his waves as she looked up at his lovely face.

"I could not be a gentleman and fuck you right here, against your door for your neighbors to hear you scream and moan."

"Fuck me? Right here? With no care in the world?"

"Yes, with not one single fuck given. I may not be good at relationships, but one thing I know how to do is fuck, making you cum over and over again."

"That's very impressive. Not a lot of men know how to do that, but do you know how to make love?"

"I know you have to be in love to do it. Are you looking for love?"

"I'm looking for forever."

Nine



PRIZE AND PASSION

“ARE you going to pick one, or you’re waiting on it to talk to you?” Kacie snuck up on Gia, whispering in her ear.

“Shut up, Kacie.” Gia laughed as she shoved her away. “How’d you know I was here?”

“I was passing by, looking for something inspiring, and saw you through the window.” Kacie could feel Gia staring at her while she checked out the pottery plant holders on the floor by her feet. “What?” she asked as she peered up at her.

“You seem different. Smiling more, laughing more. I like it.”

“I feel different.” She ran her fingers over the smooth surface of the pot.

“Caleb is doing a good job of keeping you happy. When are you going to see him again?”

They hadn’t seen each other since the date a week ago, but they talked every day.

“I don’t know. We’re kind of taking things one day at a time, and for both our sakes, it’s the right thing to do.”

“Well, you can bring him over one day, and we can have a barbecue or something,” Gia said as she went through the bags of seeds. “Look in my cart. I picked you out a plant for your office.” A Marble Queen Pothos sat in the cart. Kacie knew it well.

“I took my mother’s. She was going to give me a piece to start my own, but she gave me the whole plant. I’ll take it for

her to start over with this one. I'm sure she'll repot it and have it in her room in no time."

"And your dad will hate it."

Kacie laughed. "It'll definitely get a rise out of him, but it won't be actual anger. He be going through the motions."

The ladies continued through the store, and after Gia almost bought up the entire store, they said their goodbyes.

Deciding to put her camera to rest for the day, Kacie took the plant and headed to her parents' house.

* * *

"HEY, Mommy. I got something for you," Kacie sang as she entered the door.

"No you didn't bring something else to add to that forest in there." Her father tried to sound upset, but failed miserably. He was the one to spoil her mother the worst. Every holiday, birthday, and anniversary, he got her a plant or flowers.

"Hey, Daddy. I was out with Gia and knew Mommy would love if I replaced the one I took, so this doesn't really count as a new plant."

"She could stand to lose a plant or two."

"What did you say about my plant room, Gregory?" Wynn Benjamin came into view in all her gloriousness. Her mother didn't have the most luxurious life growing up, but when she met Kacie's father, he turned her world around and treated her like a princess. Her mother didn't have a care in the world.

After she married, she never had to work again, being a stay-at-home mom until the nest was empty. Now she spent her days helping Gregg and his wife with the new baby and charity work until his dad decided to retire.

"Nothing, dear," he said as Wynn came to stand beside him.

“Mmhmm.” Wynn playfully slapped him on the chest before she turned her attention to Kacie. “It’s beautiful. Thank you, Kacie. I’ll find a spot for it, but you know I have to repot this baby. I can’t stand these plastic containers.” She took the plant from her.

“Yeah, I know.” Kacie couldn’t fight the spread of her lips. She knew her mother so well.

“Go have a seat at the table. Dinner is almost ready,” her mother said as she made her way down the hall to the plant room.

“How’s work going, sweetheart?” her father asked when they were seated at the table in the kitchen.

“Good, Daddy. I didn’t get the big client I was telling you about, but Marco reached out to me again, so we’ll be doing more work together.”

“Well, I know you like working with Marco, so congratulations.”

“Thanks, Daddy.”

“Since you didn’t get this little assignment, does that mean you’re here for money?” her mom asked as she washed her hands to prepare plates.

“No, ma’am. I just wanted to stop by.” Kacie didn’t feel the need to tell her she still got paid. Her mother never really understood her desire to not work a regular job.

“Ms. Sheila asked about you. She still needs help at her café.” Kacie cut her eyes in her mother’s direction as she moved around the kitchen. “Her son asked about you as well.”

There was no way to avoid the discussion. She wasn’t lying when she said she knew her mother. It was a conversation they had almost daily. “Um, the client still had to pay for my service. I’m good for a while, Mommy.” And she was really good off Ms. Sheila’s son, Fred. He had money, but he was so uptight and lacked personality. He also had the same opinion on her career choice as her mother.

I’ll pass.

“I would feel better if you had some steady income and clothes that covered you completely.” Kacie wore a camouflage half jacket that she buttoned up to wear as a shirt, a pair of black biker shorts, and a pair of black Converse.

She looked to her dad for help, but he shook his head to let the conversation die there, but she couldn't. “Life is about living freely. I can't be confined in the day-to-day life of a nine to five, existing instead of living.”

“I'm sorry, Kacie. I would never get this living freely. It just seems like a tremendous risk all the time. I couldn't stomach living like that again. Paycheck to paycheck. We're from two different generations.”

The words about to slip out of her mouth surely would get her popped in it. She quickly caught them and found better ones. “I know, Mommy, but I believe in me and my work. Don't you believe in me, in my ability to make it? I haven't asked you guys for money in a long time, and I'm not struggling. I'm actually doing pretty well right now.”

“Until you're not.” She placed a plate of food in front of her dad then her. “I think your work is nice. It's a great hobby.” She moved back to get her plate, then joined them at the table.

Kacie flopped back in her chair when her dad patted her hand. “I think that's where the lines get crossed. To us, in our day, it was a hobby, but now these kids have made careers out of it and are very successful at it, Wynn, like our daughter will be.” He pulled her head over to kiss her hairline. “Sit up and eat your food.”

“Not before we bless the food.” Her mother took their hands in hers. “Say grace,” she addressed Kacie.

She said a quick prayer, and when she opened her eyes, she looked at her dad because he had squeezed her hand. He winked at her before he turned to her mother. “Wynn, you remember how I liked to play the guitar. It was all I wanted to do.”

“Yes, love. Kacie, he plays for me every now and then.”

“If I could’ve done that full time before I had a wife and kids, I would have. I’m proud my daughter gets to live out her dreams.”

Her mother started talking more about the old days, and Kacie listened. She loved when they talked about the times before she was born, when her parents’ love was young, fresh, and always aligned. She hoped to have that one day, maybe with Caleb. He seemed like he could give her exactly what she was hoping for.

“Kacie, do you remember when we took you to the Soul-Fest? I know Gregg will remember. You were standing on the blanket, moving your little tail to the music before your daddy could even start playing.”

Before she knew it, she was smiling and laughing along with them. She could never stay mad at her mother for long. At the end of the day, she only wanted what was best for her.

“You have room for dessert?” Wynn slid a bowl of banana pudding with extra cookie crumbles on top, in front of her. The pot roast with potatoes and carrots with a side of green beans had been filling, but she always had room for banana pudding.

Kacie perked up. “You have a spoon?”

She pulled one from behind her back.

Kacie dug in.

“Don’t sit down.” Her father came and danced with her mother.

She watched as they danced around the living room, wishing she could have a love like her parents. Caleb came to mind, and she smiled at the thought of him.

Yeah, she could see herself with him for a long time.

* * *

“... You must’ve been reading my mind.”

Kacie was on her way home when Caleb called her. She welcomed his calming tone, making the drive home much smoother.

“Thinking about me?” His deep voice seemed to send deep vibrations through her.

“Mmhmm.” She closed her eyes for a second to savor his tone.

“I hope it’s good things.” She could hear the smile in his voice. She pictured those cheeks sitting high, sexy lips spreading across his face, showing off beautiful white teeth.

“Great things,” Kacie replied in her sexiest voice.

He laughed. “It sounds like you’re in the car.”

“Yeah, I’m just leaving my parents’ house.”

“You up for some fun?”

“What kind of fun?” She looked at the screen like she was staring at him.

“I was calling to see if that luck of yours has run out.”

“What did you have in mind? The casino?” She wasn’t the social butterfly, but she would love to spend time with him no matter the location.

“Something a little different... I have treats for you hidden throughout my house. Anything you can find in five minutes, it’s yours.”

“Like a treasure hunt?”

“Except no map, but you won’t need one. Trust me.”

It sounded too good to be true. “Five minutes? How big is your house?”

“You’ll see.” Her phone dinged, and his name popped up on the display of her car. “I shared my location with you. What’s your ETA?”

She pressed the button to direct her route, and the map jumped on the screen. “Twenty-three minutes.”

“I’ll see you in twenty-three minutes, baby.”

* * *

WHEN KACIE PULLED up to Caleb's house, he was waiting outside his door, typing on his phone. He was dressed comfortably in a simple white tee and black cotton shorts. She rushed to put her car in park, before she crashed trying to look at the fine specimen of a man that she wanted to be her man.

Caleb came over and opened her door. "Hey, baby." He helped her out and pulled her into his body. She melted into his embrace and inhaled his intoxicating scent. The man felt like home, and she wanted to be locked inside of him and never let out.

"Hey, papa." She kissed his lips when they pulled back from each other. "How was your day?" she asked as she followed him to the door.

"Good. You?" He stopped there to turn to her.

"Better now." She looked up at him with a mischievous stare.

He moved into her personal space. "That look is going to get you in trouble." He stepped back, placing his hand on the knob. "Give me your purse. Once this door opens, the time starts. There's a basket and a wagon for your convenience."

"How many prizes are there?"

He looked over his shoulder. "A lot."

"I'm ready. Let's go." She was slightly intimidated by the size of his house, but she knew she would find something. "Anywhere off limits?"

"Nah, baby. The whole house is your playground. Your gifts have red bows on them. You have five minutes. Ready?" He had his right hand on the door and his left hand holding his phone to start the timer. "Go!"

He pushed the door open, and she took off, but ran back to grab the basket. She was in the living room, but it was three ways she could go. She went to the right. She saw the glow of

the pool and moved out there first. A red bow brought her to the lounge chairs. She grabbed the swimsuit and threw it in her basket. She scanned the area quickly for another prize, then moved back into the house when she saw there wasn't another.

Immediately to her right was a rinse room, and in the basket was a small bottle of oil wrapped in a bow. She grabbed it and moved a little down the hall where she found a game room. In there was a game system area with two chairs in front of the massive screen, a pool table, and a small bowling area. On one lane was a giant ring light. She grabbed the box and hauled it back to the living room, where she dumped the items in the wagon.

“Check you out!”

“How much time do I have?” she asked as she moved out of the living room again.

“Enough!” he yelled.

In the kitchen, she found gift cards for restaurants. In a guest bedroom, she found a watch on the clock, and in that bathroom was perfume.

She had another hall to go down, but she hadn't been upstairs, so when she dropped her last set of items off, she rushed upstairs. She had a small amount of time left, so she raced down the hall to the door on the end. She found his bedroom and paused at the door. The same scent that had sent her in a daze claimed her.

“Sixty seconds.” His voice over the intercom almost sent her to heaven. She got her feet moving and grabbed the lingerie off the bed, the camera off the chair in the corner, and the gift cards to craft stores off his dresser. A quick peek in the bathroom, and she tucked the basket of body care products under her arm from the soaking tub.

“Fifteen seconds!”

“I'm coming!” Kacie damn near slid down the hall. She stomped down the stairs with a winning smile stamped on her face.

Ten



BEST OF ME

CALEB WATCHED Kacie race toward him with a basket full of stuff in her left hand, the self-care kit in her right. She hadn't found half the things he had stashed away, but he would surprise her with the rest in the morning.

"Time's up!" he called just as she dropped both baskets in the wagon. "Job well done. Come take a look at your prizes, big winner."

He pulled her and the wagon to the area in the living room. He set it up with a bed of pillows and blankets, and off to the side was a tray of snacks. Wine was on the table, and when she was seated, he passed her a glass.

"Thank you." She tilted the glass to him before taking a sip. "That's good, but I need to catch my breath to really appreciate it." She rested her hand over her chest as she took controlled breaths to slow her pounding heart.

He grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. 112 started playing in the background. "You have fun?" he asked.

"Definitely." She took another sip of wine when she was no longer panting. "You didn't have to do this, but I loved it. Usually, I wouldn't take gifts from men so early, but the fact you made this into a game instead of shoving gifts down my throat feels authentic. You really put some thought into this. That's what really matters to me, not the things I collected."

"I'm glad we're on the same page. The only thing that was on my agenda tonight was to put a smile on your face." He

leaned over, and she met him halfway, placing his lips on hers. She crawled into his lap, and he held on to her hips.

The song switched, and so did the conversation.

“We still waiting?” she asked as “Sweet Love” played, setting the mood.

He wanted to wait, but any coherent thoughts were being scrambled with dirty thoughts. The need for her was intense, so instead of saying yes, he would go with the flow.

“Mmmm.” His head rolled back as Kacie whined her hips. She laced her fingers at the nape of his neck, pulling his head up. She stared down at his lap where she was working her warm center over the erection that fought to be released.

“I don’t know.” He didn’t bring her to his house for sex, and he damn sure didn’t buy her gifts for it, but he didn’t want it to stop right now. “We’ll do what feels right.”

“You feel so right.” She trailed kisses down his neck. He leaned his head to the side to give her better access. She stumbled upon his spot behind his ear, and he tugged at her shorts, pulling her closer to his dick.

“Shit, Kace!” His hands were now in her hair as he yanked her head back to stare into her eyes. “I may be reserved, but I promise, when it comes to sex, I’m a different person.”

“Prove it.”

She was asking for trouble.

Caleb went straight for the buttons of her jacket. She couldn’t have had a shirt on underneath the half jacket.

When he was at the last button, he panted. He hadn’t spotted a bra, so he knew when he pulled the material away, he would be eye to eye with round, ripe melons.

Even with him preparing himself, he wasn’t ready for the sight before him. Ink around her nipples was the last thing he expected. Adorned around the chocolate circles was a mandala crescent moon with flowers accenting where the moon curved.

“Damn, these are beautiful.” Calloused fingers traced the ink, unintentionally teasing her.

Her hands came up, cupping her breasts, offering them to him. He wasn't one to turn down much, so he attacked her bare breasts, feasting on them like he hadn't eaten for days.

She moaned his name as her back arched. She abandoned her breasts to grip his head, wanting to keep him there, but he had to explore.

“Big ass titties.” He put his face between them, smothering himself. He placed hickeys there, marking her body. Traveling around the round globes, he thought of how it would feel to slide his dick between them. The warm sanctuary of her breasts would hold him tight while her mouth sucked the head of his dick. His erection pulsed and leaked precum at the thought.

He wondered if she was into that. He smiled against her flesh. He would revisit the position another time when he wasn't so hard up for her, though he didn't think there would ever be a time he didn't crave Kacie as much as he did now.

Going back to the beaded points that begged for his attention, he sucked the tips of her breasts, then pulled back to blow cool air, causing them to pucker more.

“Yessss,” she hissed.

He pressed her down to the blankets. “I can't stop here. I want more of you.” His hand traveled down her stomach, beneath her pants, until he found her underwear. “Can I?” She nodded with her bottom lip between her teeth.

He worked his hand under the soft fabric of her panties. She lifted her hips, a silent invitation to welcome him inside her body.

His fingers moved over her mound, down until they brushed over two small metal balls. His heart almost stopped.

“You don't,” he said in bewilderment.

Kacie sat up, using her elbows to brace herself up as she watched him.

Caleb leaned back to undo her pants. With one tug, he pulled them and her underwear off her body. He had to see what he felt.

Right there between her thighs, in the middle of wet lips was a piercing in the hood of her clit.

He pushed her back and arranged her legs so they were on either side of his as he kneeled in front of her. His wide hand spanned over her belly, applying a small amount of pressure that made her mewl. Slipping lower, his hand rested on her mound, while his thumb lightly pulled the hood of her clit back, revealing the pretty pink nub. It was a beautiful sight.

The two little balls pressed against her swollen clit while honey sat at her entrance and clung to her lips.

“Calleeebbb, do something.” The needy wail couldn’t pull his stare away. He heard her, but he was stuck. He wanted to play with it, kiss it, suck it into his mouth, and tease it with his tongue. He wanted to live there, between her legs, and never come out.

“Oh God.” She threw her head back as her hand slipped between her legs. “I need to cum. I want you too bad to deal with the teasing tonight.”

She rubbed over her slippery lips. She dragged her wetness to the exposed bud. She shook on contact, letting him know she was super sensitive.

He grabbed her hand, bringing her wet fingers to her mouth. She licked them clean, and he leaned down to kiss her. He was glad he had someone as nasty as he was.

“What does it feel like?” He used one finger to rub where the bar sat snugly against delicate flesh.

“It feels like pleasing torture.” She lifted to get closer to his hand. “More.”

He couldn’t help himself. He leaned down and kissed it.

“Oh, yessss,” she moaned.

He pulled back, but she grabbed his head, helping him find his way back to her pussy.

“Shit!”

The way she was moaning and twisting as he ate her pussy had him losing his fucking mind. He slipped his hand in his pants to grip his dick. It felt like it was about to break. He set himself free and massaged his shaft to calm it down.

“Caleb.”

If she called his name one more time... He smeared the liquid from the tip of his dick down his shaft as he pumped it to the rhyme he was flicking his tongue. The way her legs shook around his head, there was no way he could survive her climax. He wanted to ride the wave with her.

Slipping down between her slit, he parted her lips with his tongue, working into her entrance.

She tasted so good. He could never get enough of her.

“Baby, fuck!” Rubbing her clit and fucking her with his tongue was the match that sent her up in flames.

Shaking and trembling, he felt her tightening on his tongue. He pushed it deeper, not wanting to miss one drop of the essence she was about to release. He jacked himself faster, matching the way she rocked her hips.

“Caleb!” she screamed as her climax overtook her. He groaned in her pussy as his cum shot to the blanket beneath him. She grabbed the back of his head, burying his face in her convulsing pussy. With her other hand, she pressed firmly on her clit, surely feeling the heavy thump of her heartbeat. If he died, he was going to die a happy fucking man.

Her hands fell away, and he took her clit back into his mouth. She shot up like she had been electrocuted. He used both his hands to keep her thighs apart as he stared into her eyes. She tried to force his head away, but he wasn't going anywhere.

Kacie's mouth hung open as she watched him devour her pussy. He sucked her right into another orgasm that made her cry.

“Fuccckkkk. Get off of me.”

She pushed his head away carelessly, then fell back. She was rough with him, and he loved that shit. He couldn't wait to see how wild she was when they went all the way.

“You alright?”

“I don't know. You're fucking hell. I don't know if we need to fuck. You're going to have me turned out.” He could hear the teasing in her voice. He tucked his semi-erect member back in his pants before pulling her to him.

“You already have me turned out, so it's only fair.” He rubbed circles on her back as she calmed down. “You're exhausted. Stay with me tonight.”

She hummed and snuggled into his body. He took that as a yes.

Caleb led her to his room, then into the bathroom. “You can shower, and I'll let you sleep in some of my clothes.” He started the shower, then went to get her a shirt. When he came back into the bathroom, she was in the shower. He put the shirt, along with a towel, on the counter, then moved back to the room to pull the covers back. Once things in his room were set, he went back to the living room to clean up their mess.

When he returned, she was wrapped in his covers, but sat up when she noticed he was back.

“You look good in my shirt.”

It swallowed her. However, it still looked good.

“Thanks. Who put you on to these silk pillow cases?” She fluffed the pillow before tossing it to the bed.

“My mom, actually. She always had two on her bed and one for our beds.”

“Thank her for me. I can never keep a scarf on my head, so I have silk pillowcases, too.”

He kissed her forehead and helped her lie back down. “I'll be back in a second. I'm about to take a shower.” He handed her the remote to the TV. “You can watch whatever you want.”

“How about music?”

“Whatever you want, Kace.” He threw the words over his shoulder as he strolled into the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, he was back in the room with a towel wrapped around his waist. He was quiet as he pulled out the drawers to grab a pair of shorts.

Kacie was sleeping with soft R&B playing. He got underneath the covers and lay back. It felt good to be in the bed after a long day, but what felt better was Kacie there with him.

“Mmmm. It’s cold in here like I like it,” she murmured, throwing half her body over his. He wanted to punch the air in glee, but settled for wrapping his arms around his woman.

“Good night, Kacie.”

“Good night, papa.”

* * *

KACIE WOKE up to an empty bed. She sat up, rubbing sleep from her eyes. At the end of the bed were a toothbrush and other items she would need to get herself together. She took them into the bathroom, where she did her morning routine. When she finished, she went on the hunt for Caleb.

She walked into the living room and found her wagon running over with gifts she hadn’t found. A slow smile spread across her face before she moved to the direction of the kitchen.

She found Caleb in front of the stove. “More gifts?”

He turned around, and she felt every caress of his eyes against her body. She wore his shirt that came to her knees, but he stared like he had x-ray vision. He had seen her entire body last night, so she wasn’t ashamed. She was heating up, if anything.

“Come here.” When she was close, he pulled her into his arms.

She looked into the pot and saw grits, and her stomach growled.

“I was going to give you the rest of the stuff you didn’t find, anyway. What am I going to do with makeup and shit?”

“I don’t know. You might could pull off *Dangerous*.” She used her finger to trace his lips.

“What’s that?”

“A red lipstick.”

“I’ll let you handle that, my dear.” He slapped her ass, and she shrieked. “Go sit. Breakfast is almost ready.”

She climbed up on the stool where a placemat and a glass of apple juice sat.

Caleb set a plate of bacon, eggs, and toast in front of her. A bowl of steamy hot grits was placed to the side. Before she could dig in, he caught her chin and pressed his soft lips against hers. “Good morning.”

She shied away, embarrassed she had forgotten to greet him like she had home training. “Sorry. Good morning.”

“It’s all good. Just don’t let it happen again.” He came to the table with his own spread that was twice the size of her portions. A big man like him needed the nutrients.

He grabbed her hand and said grace. After the prayer, he asked about her plans for the day before he attacked his plate.

“I’ve been slacking on my website. I need to update that, then post pictures on social media to get back in the loop of things. I need new clients. I might work on a project for myself, but I have to come up with a concept first. What are you doing today?”

“I’m working on a few projects for the gas station. I would like to get up with you this week, but I’m not sure how long this will take me.”

“You’ll still be able to do the shoot, right? It’s in a few days.”

“Of course. I can’t wait to see you dipped in chocolate.” His hands went to her neck, down her breasts, and fell away at her stomach.

She giggled and blushed like a schoolgirl.

They ate over light conversation, and when they were finished, Kacie helped him clean the kitchen.

Since she was going straight home, she opted to keep on his shirt, and he gave her a pair of shorts she had to tie tight at the waist to keep up.

When she moved back downstairs, Caleb had her gifts packed up so he could help her take them to the car. She was going to have a good time getting them up her stairs. She groaned at the thought.

He helped her get the wagon on the ground, and she rolled it to her car while he grabbed the other things that couldn’t fit.

She popped her trunk, and when she was at her car, a shiny, silver BMW pulled in behind her.

When the woman from the restaurant got out, Kacie called for Caleb. She wasn’t dealing with the woman. Plus, she wanted to know why she was there from his mouth, not hers.

“Caleb,” she called again. He came out with her ring light and the basket of goodies.

“It’s funny. I tried to surprise you before work, and I’m the one surprised.” Alanah rested her hands on her hips.

Kacie moved to Caleb. “I don’t do drama. What is she doing here?”

“I didn’t invite her.”

Kacie sucked her teeth.

“Just ignore her,” he said, putting her things in the back seat before lifting the wagon and storing it in her trunk.

“I’m not leaving until you talk to me.” Alanah propped against her car with a sly smile on her face that Kacie wanted to slap off.

Caleb mugged her. “I have nothing to say to you.”

Kacie jumped in before Alanah could reply. “No, you need to talk to her and end this officially. The next time she pops up, I won’t be so nice to her or you.”

“I’ll handle it, baby.” He went to kiss her lips, but she gave him her cheek.

Caleb smirked. His baby was being territorial, and he loved that shit. Even though she was upset, it showed she had feelings for him. He would get back in her good graces. The first step of that was taking care of the woman behind him.

To reassure Kacie that Alanah meant nothing to him, he grabbed her chin and took her lips. She only fought for a split second before she softened and flattened herself against him. He pulled away a few seconds later, not wanting to get carried away. “See you in a few days for the shoot. I’ll call you this evening when I’m settled at the store.”

“Okay.”

He had a huge driveway, so with his cars in the garage, Kacie could move forward and drive around to get out.

When all he could see were her taillights, he gave Alanah his attention, hoping he could get rid of her quickly.

Caleb folded his arms over his wide chest. “What, Alanah?”

“Wow. You really let her call you Caleb?”

“Yeah, she does.” And he wallowed in it every time she called for him. “I never said you couldn’t, but don’t start now. Kacie’s the only one who calls me Caleb.”

“You’re really trying to move on? She’s not me. I saw all the stuff you bought her. You can buy her all the clothes and the makeup, and she’ll still never be me.” She tossed her silky strands over her shoulder.

“You’re so full of yourself. Who said I wanted her to be you? I want Kacie for Kacie. I want her to be set-builder Kacie. I want photographer Kacie. I got her those things

because that's what she likes, not because of you. I didn't lie when I said I was done with you."

Her shoulder slumped with his confession. "I miss you, CJ." She stepped into his space. "Can't we work this out? I feel you're giving up on us too easily." She pulled at his arms and tried to put them around her waist. He snatched away from her and stepped back further to add extra space between them.

"I don't want to work it out. I'm a new man. It feels good not to have to pay for attention and affection. I'm happy, Alanah."

"So you're a new man because of her? I didn't make you happy?"

"She helped me see things I didn't see in myself, but I'm better because of me. However, I can't deny Kacie makes me want to be better for her, too. She deserves healed me, the best me."

"What did I deserve? I dealt with you before you were the so-called new version of you."

"I was good to you, Alanah. Spoiling you and shit. I turned a blind eye to your flirting and all your disrespectful ways. I'm giving my best to someone who gives me their best."

"So I didn't make you happy?" She chuckled when he didn't reply. "Little miss sunshine is so perfect."

Kacie hadn't done anything to him, but he knew she wasn't perfect. No one was, but he had a feeling she was perfect for him.

"No." He was done talking about Kacie to Alanah. He had to set the record straight once and for all. He moved to her, wanting to make things crystal clear that they were over.

He gripped her chin, locking eyes with her. "Look at me and understand what I'm saying. We're done, Alanah. Go be with that guy and leave me alone. I promise I'm not telling you this again. I won't let you come between me and Kacie."

"Is that a threat?" She snatched away. "I tell you I miss you and you threaten me?"

“It’s not a threat.” It was a promise. “You don’t miss me. You miss what I used to do for you. Let’s not kid ourselves.” He pulled out his phone, and for the last time, he transferred money into her account.

“What are you doing?” she asked with a deep frown on her face.

“It’s done. Check your account. Now, do yourself a favor and forget about me. I’ve already forgotten about you.”

Caleb turned and walked away, hoping it was the last time he would ever have to see Alanah Adams.

Eleven



CRAVING CHOCOLATE

CALEB FINALLY FIGURED out one of Kacie's flaws.

She was a hypocrite.

She preached to him about letting his emotions out, and she was in his passenger seat, hoarding hers. He felt the vibes over the phone the last few days they talked, but to sit in the car with her? The tension could be cut with a knife.

They rode in silence, only the robotic voice of the GPS speaking, directing them toward the venue for the photo shoot.

He decided to try to break the silence. "How do I get you to open up to me?"

"Try being honest," she snapped.

"I am!" Now she was about to piss him off.

That escalated quickly.

Rightfully so. He had been honest with her from day one. Too honest, if he was being real. He had never opened up to anyone the way he had to her.

"How did you and Alanah meet?" she asked, looking upside his head.

He looked between her and the road to see if she was serious. "Come on, Kace. I'm not doing this."

She turned, giving him her back as she gazed out the window. This was his fault. He had let Alanah get close to her not once, but twice. It was his job to fix it, but she could be

more receptive to him. Only if he was in a perfect world, but being with Kacie was next to perfect.

Releasing a heavy sigh, he answered her question. “I met her eight months ago. My brother wanted to drag me out to this club with him and his homeboys.”

“I didn’t take you as a club person.” She peeked over her shoulder.

“I’m not, but I’ll step out now and then if asked.”

“Alanah take you to clubs often?”

He didn’t dignify that with an answer. “Anyway. Long story short, she spotted me in the club. She came to our section and danced on me. A dude she claimed she fucked once tried to yank her up, but me and the crew intervened. He was trying to hit her and shit. We got her away from him, and he told me to keep her. I did and made her my girl after a few dates.”

“Such a beautiful love story.” She rolled her eyes.

“I know you’re not jealous?”

“Not jealous, just disappointed she keeps popping up. I’m trying to see why she can’t let you go. You haven’t mentioned any romantic shit. I guess it’s the dick.” She looked down at his lap, then back at his face.

“Thinking back, we never really had a genuine connection. I think during the three months, we were trying to find something that was never there. It wasn’t like when I met you.”

“How was it when you met me?”

“I don’t believe it was by accident. I think it was fate. I believe you’re it for me, Kacie. I told you I didn’t want anything to come between us. So, I gave Alanah some money and sent her on her way. That’s all she ever wanted anyway.”

“You did what!” she shouted.

He hadn’t meant to say that part, but it was out now. “I’ve got plenty more where that came from. It’s no big deal, Kacie.”

“It’s not about the money, Caleb. Why would you reward her for the shit she pulled? When that runs out, she’ll be back for more because she thinks she can. Money doesn’t buy everything,” she stressed.

“How would you know? Do you know how many money-hungry people are out here waiting, wishing someone would just give them five-thousand dollars?”

“You gave her five-thousand dollars! Are you—” She stopped herself mid-sentence and took a breath. “You’re right. How would I know?” She folded her arms over her chest.

“I didn’t mean it like that. Money makes people do crazy, desperate things.”

“Like pay their ex to leave them alone?”

He pulled into a parking space at the venue. He went around to open her door, but she was already out. He rushed around and pushed her against the car. With both of his arms on the car, he trapped her between it and his hard body.

She pushed at his chest, but it was no use.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Move.”

“I’m not moving, so you can stand still a minute and hear me out.”

She sighed. “I have a job to do.”

“And you can do it after we talk. Now listen, money ain’t shit to me. I’ll do anything to make sure she doesn’t interfere with me getting to know you. All of you, even the parts you try to hide from me.”

“Caleb...”

“Don’t let this come between what we built so easily. I like the pace of things. Don’t back down now. I understand it’s more than about money. I can’t deny I’m used to it fixing my problems, but I know it could never fix things with you.” He stroked her cheek.

She looked up at him. “Are you done?”

“Yeah.”

“Open the trunk.” She ducked under his arm and went to the trunk to grab her things.

Caleb sighed and pushed the button to pop the trunk. He came up behind her, resting his hand on her waist. “Kace, don’t shut me out.”

“Oh, Kacie! You really came through!” Caleb turned and saw a well-dressed man come down the stairs.

Must be the boss for the day.

“Marco Delanie, meet Caleb Jackson.” She made introductions as she pulled her bags from the trunk.

“Nice to meet you.” He gave the man a quick handshake before he pulled the bags from Kacie’s hands.

“Oh, the pictures don’t do you justice. He’s beautiful and a gentleman.” He noted how he took the bags from Kacie. “This is going to be perfect.”

Marco held his hands out to her and she slipped her hands into his. He examined her nails. “Yeah, this was the perfect color. Try not to break one before your time.”

“Sir, yes, sir.” She pulled her hands away.

“Matter of fact, make sure the team we hired does most of the work. You sit back and oversee.”

She cut her eyes at him. “Whatever you say, Marco.”

“The two of you have a tent. I know you have more set stuff, so I scheduled Caleb’s solo shoot, which will take place in a few minutes. Then the couple shoot is a little after that. A few more models are here already. I’ll introduce you all to them.”

“You can introduce Caleb. I have things to do.” She stormed off.

“Somehow, you have managed to piss her off.” Marco laughed as they followed behind Kacie like her entourage.

“A misunderstanding that’s getting blown out of proportion, or maybe I just don’t understand women like I thought I did.”

“You will never understand women. I’ve been around them, immersed myself in their ways, and still don’t understand them. What I can say is that she won’t be upset for long. Shoots always bring out the softer side of her.”

Caleb shook his head, not knowing what to say about his temperamental partner.

“Come on. I’ll show you around, introduce you to everyone, and then you can get ready. Once I have you in your attire for the shoot, she won’t be able to take her eyes off of you.”

Damn! Look at him.

Kacie pulled the curtain back as Caleb turned to face her. His magnificent body was on display. She forced her legs not to tremble. The way he was looking, she could go to her knees in front of him and give him the best oral performance of his life.

Of course, she was fucking jealous of Alanah. Kacie hated she had Caleb first, and though he tried to assure her they were over, her pulling up on them like she owned the place didn’t sit right with her.

“I have to oil you up.” Kacie held up the tube for him to see she came to do a job and not to ogle him.

“Come on.” He moved to the center of the tent. “I didn’t think I would see you until later.”

She dragged the cart over from beside the chair and used the towel from there to tuck into his swim trunks to make sure she didn’t stain them with the oil.

“The crew we hired finished up most of the work last night and this morning. Usually, when that happens, I get the wonderful job of playing Marco’s assistant.”

She uncapped the oil and poured some into her hands. She went to the floor to start with his feet, legs, and thighs.

Collecting more oil, she worked it into his stomach and chest.

“Turn around.” He did what he was told, and she continued rubbing oil over his back.

“I like your nails,” he said out of nowhere.

“Thanks. I’m not scratching you, am I?”

Marco took her to get her a full-set and pedicure yesterday. She hadn’t had long nails since her twenty-first birthday party. However, Marco wanted some close shots of neck grabbing and hands on the chest. She shook her head, still hearing his voice in her head. They could’ve got some press on nails, but she had enjoyed being pampered on Marco’s dime.

“I could take more,” Caleb uttered.

She stopped rubbing, shocked by his words.

Growing up, she heard red was for whores. Well, she planned to whore herself out to the man in front of her tonight. Her attitude was a front for her needing to be broken off properly.

“You’re all done.” She started to walk away, but he grabbed her.

“Don’t be mad at me.” He held her wrists to keep her from escaping. She was sure he would pull her into his chest if he wasn’t covered in oil.

“I’m not.” She swayed as he looked into her eyes to see if she was lying.

“Prove it.”

“Hmmm.” She walked her hands down his stomach. He sucked in a breath and she looked up at him as she pulled at the band of his shorts. She snatched the towel away and moved back from him, laughing.

He chuckled, but not like her. His was more in a revengeful way, saying he would make her pay later. “You wild.”

“What’s wild is you. I see you in your hoochie daddy shorts. Real slutty-like.”

He looked down at himself, pulling at the hem of his pants.

“Marco got me in these little ass shorts. He said you wouldn’t be able to resist me in them. Was he right?”

Kacie bit the corner of her bottom lip. Marco had been on to something. Sure, he wanted him in the shorts for the shoot, but they were in her favorite color, black.

Did he just growl?

She looked up at him after hearing the rumble come from his chest.

“Don’t look at me like that unless you want someone to see your dick.”

“My dick?”

“I’ve been telling you, you’re mine. That means I’m yours. Every inch of you belongs to me, and all of this belongs to you.” He smoothed his hands over his slick body.

“We’re ready.” Farrah, Marco’s daily assistant, stuck her head in the tent, breaking the spell she was under.

“We’re coming,” said Caleb.

“Alright, Kacie knows where you’re shooting.”

When Farrah disappeared, Caleb focused back on her, stepping into her space. “I’m going to say this, and that’s going to be the end. Either you’re going to forgive me now or keep being stand-offish. We’ll either have an amazing day, enjoying the shoot and other things I have planned, or a trash day where we finish the shoot through all this tension. I’ll take you back home and wait for you to cool off. It’s up to you, but I’m ready to move on.”

“You—”

“And one more thing; I won’t let Alanah use me. That was the Caleb I built to make sure everyone around me was happy. This is the real me, choosing my happiness first.” He grabbed her chin. “I apologize for hurting your feelings. I was fixing things the only way I knew how, but it won’t happen again.

You can bet that on your pretty ass.” He pecked her lips. “You forgive me?”

“Were you this firm with her?”

“Kacie.” He glared at her.

“Stop pouting. Yeah, I forgive you.” She wrapped her arms around his waist. “She better not pop up at your house again.”

“Give me a kiss, woman. I missed your lips.” She stood on her tiptoes, and he leaned down, giving her the kiss they both craved.

She wanted it to be a quick kiss because she knew how Marco was with time, but the feel of his tongue teasing her lips open blew her mind. He mated her tongue, gliding over hers. The kiss grew nasty, sloppy. She was glad she hadn’t gotten her makeup done yet.

“Marco is going to be mad at you.” Caleb kissed down her neck, into her bosom, where he tried to pull her top down.

“Ah!” She struggled to get away. “Let’s go before you get me in trouble.”

“Kacie!” Marco yelled.

Caleb followed Kacie and Marco from the tent, watching her ass move in the leggings she wore. He knew she didn’t have on any panties by the way her small cheeks jiggled. He adjusted himself in the small ass shorts Marco forced him to wear.

Pulling his eyes from Kacie’s ass, he looked at the scenery. Where they were on the beach was wonderful, but it didn’t outshine his woman’s work. She created many backdrops and sets for Marco to take advantage of for pictures. Kacie discussed ideas with him, and seeing them come to life was incredible.

“Alright,” Marco said to get everyone’s attention on his set. There were three other shoots going, but he made sure to focus on his. He wanted to make Kacie proud. “Most of these shots will be from the waist up.” He slapped his hand against the wall behind him. “We have this stone wall we’re going to

put to use; a few pictures by the pool, and then it'll be time to get dipped in chocolate. Sounds good?"

Caleb wouldn't say good, but he was invested, so he said yes and moved into place. Shooting with a crew was different than with Kacie. In a short time, he realized he only liked shooting with her.

His eyes moved to her as she stood behind the monitor with Marco, watching the pictures pop on the screen. She pointed as they chatted. After a few shots of him looking at her, she lifted her head. That was what he wanted. Her eyes on him.

"Yes!" Marco went crazy with compliments and noises of excitement. "Kacie does it again."

They took a few more pictures before moving to the pool. Kacie wasn't present for that, but she would be on the next one.

"Alright, we're going to move inside for the chocolate scene." Marco handed him a towel. He dried off quickly, then wrapped it around his waist.

He spotted Kacie, then he noticed the set around her. The brown backdrop was pinned nicely and off-centered was a barrel, probably full of chocolate. Props of spilled chocolate and melted bars were all around, pulling the set together.

He made his way over to her. "You did this?"

"You know it. Now, let's get you in."

The barrel opened in the back. Inside was a contraption that went around his stomach, so there wasn't literally a barrel full of chocolate, only the illusion.

Kacie had to climb a ladder to the side of him. She had an assistant who was holding the bucket of warm chocolate. The photographer was in front of him on a smaller ladder, wanting an angled shot of the chocolate being poured.

"Ready. Slow pour, Kacie," Marco instructed.

The first drop of chocolate went over his left shoulder, then the other. It dripped down his chest, pooling in the

catcher. The flash went off, and when it stopped, he dared to glance up at Kacie. She winked at him, and the flashes started again.

“That actually was a good one.” The photographer showed Marco.

“Look up again,” Marco directed Caleb. “You, down—”

“And shoot up.” The photographer finished his sentence, climbing off the ladder and going to one knee.

“I love that view,” Kacie said after the photographer took a few shots from that angle.

“I’m sure you do,” Marco teased.

She threatened to throw chocolate on him while laughing her ass off. “Not like that. I took his photo from that angle.”

“Mmhmm. Get into position for your chocolate contribution.” On a stool, Kacie stood behind him. She dipped only the tips of her fingers in the chocolate and placed them on his chest.

Her hand moved over him, making him hot enough to melt the chocolate.

“His neck now.”

Her hands glided up to his neck. She let her tiny fingers rest there, barely gripping him.

The camera flashed.

“Harder,” he groaned.

Tighter, she squeezed. His eyes closed, calm darkness surrounding him. It was just him and his woman in his mind, and he couldn’t wait for them to get out of there.

“Whew! The two of you go on somewhere before y’all have me calling somebody I’m not supposed to.” Marco fanned himself. “Kacie, go get dressed. The couple shoots are up next.”

Caleb finished up the chocolate scene and went to change into brown shorts. He was thankful they had a little more

length to them. He thought he would catch a peek of Kacie, but she was in another tent getting her makeup done.

Marco took over the camera, shooting him poolside as the sun started setting for the day.

“There’s your girl.”

Marco continued to snap away as he watched Kacie approach him with a brown two-piece bathing suit that matched her flesh. It had to be a nude suit because he knew damn well she wasn’t naked in front of everyone.

“Like what you see?” she called to him from the distance.

“I’m about to fuck up your shoot.” Caleb met her in front of the bar. She screamed when he hoisted her up and sat her on the bar.

“This is perfect, but slow it down for me,” Marco coached.

Besides the flashing light, Caleb forgot he was there and what they were supposed to be doing. When Kacie was around, she had a way of consuming his thoughts and spinning him into a world where they were the only two who existed.

He laid her slowly back against the bar and let his hand trail down her stomach.

“Yessss!” Marco cheered as they gave him all the sexual vibes he begged for.

His lips followed his path, making Kacie’s back arch. She hissed when he dipped his tongue in her belly button. Light from the camera flashed. Caleb didn’t have to see that shot to know he wanted that picture over his bed.

“Before this turns into porn, can I get you both to the lounge chairs?”

They moved from the bar to the loungers, where Kacie sat between his legs with her back against his front. Marco snapped away as they looked off into the distance.

They switched positions, and Caleb was close to pulling her bottoms to the side when she straddled his lap, facing

forward. The last set of pictures was done on the sand where they held hands.

“That’ll do it, you two. Showers are in the back.”

Caleb carried Kacie into the outdoor shower, the wood door slamming shut behind them. He slapped his hand against the button to start it, then turned the knob to adjust the temperature.

“I don’t know how much longer I can make it without being inside of you.”

She tightened her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist.

“Take me, Caleb. Fuck me right here.” Her back pressed against the wooden frame, keeping her up once he let go to pull out his dick.

“You refuse to let me treat you like a lady when it comes to sex.”

She gripped his stiff pole in her hands. “You’ll learn I’m not an ordinary lady when it comes to sex.” She bit his lip, then kissed the sting away.

He tugged at the strings of her bottoms when there was a knock on the wood door.

“Kacie, Marco said if you could quickly clean up and change into another suit. He needs you for one more set.”

“Duty calls.” He kissed her lips. “She’ll be right there,” Caleb replied to Farrah.

“Alright. The suit is in the make-up tent where you’ll be touched up too.”

“Okay.” Kacie groaned. “I can’t tempt you for a quickie?” she murmured against his lips.

He chuckled as he forced his erection back into his pants. “You almost got me, but be patient. I have a special night planned for us.”

She rained kisses all over his face, thanking him for being an amazing man. He walked them under the shower and

helped her rinse off.

“Go on now. You have work to do. I’ll be waiting in the tent for you.”

“I won’t be long.”

An hour later, they were leaving the venue. Another hour, Caleb pulled into his driveway. It was almost eight o’clock when he checked the time.

“Whose car?”

He could hear the uncertainty in her voice.

“It’s the chef I hired for tonight.”

“You hired a chef to cook for us?”

“I told you I have a special night planned for us.”

The doors to his home were operated by key and code. He had set a code up for the chef. While he did that, he had deleted Alanah’s code and added one for Kacie. He would give it to her tonight.

“Yes. I admit I didn’t pull out the red carpet for you on our first night. I wanted to know how you would feel about a regular date. Out of all the women I ever entertained, you were the one who deserved the high-end treatment. I plan to give you the world if you’ll let me.”

“Show me what I have to look forward to.”

Caleb walked them inside. Chef Chrissy greeted them with wine.

“Mr. Jackson, Ms. Benjamin... welcome home.” She handed them both a glass. “I’ll be out with your appetizer soon.”

“Let’s change and head out to the pool.”

In a spare room, Caleb let Kacie change in the ensuite while he changed in the room. When she came out in the swimsuit he purchased her, his tongue almost fell out of his mouth.

“I knew you wanted to be my twin,” she teased.

He had on white swim trunks that hung low off his hips. She wore a suit that looked like a regular one-piece in the front, but the back had crisscross straps disconnecting from the bikini cut bottoms that had tassels that rested against her full hips.

When they made it outside to the pool, Kacie jumped into the deep end. He laughed as she surfaced and started to tread the water. She didn't care about her hair or makeup, and he loved that shit.

“Coming in?” she asked.

He took the stairs, ignoring the slight chill as he made his way to her. He pulled her into his arms, her legs automatically wrapping around his waist.

“Thanks for coming to the shoot. I saw a few of your pictures, and they're amazing. Marco really appreciated you participating.”

“Anything for you.”

She rested her chin on his shoulders as they floated. “Do you think we're moving too fast?” asked Kacie.

“Excuse me. Your appetizers.” Chrissy carefully placed the tray raft on the water and glided it in their direction. Caleb caught it and moved it between their bodies so it wouldn't float away.

Instead of answering right away, he let them eat first. When she seemed to have had enough, he lifted the tray and set it on the concrete. He pulled her back into his arms, and she came willingly.

“No, I don't think we're moving too fast.” He knew he needed to explain. He could feel her body reaching out for insight on the emotions she felt. Kacie was feeling things for him that probably felt as foreign to her as they were to him.

He could tell from the way she acted earlier. Her jealousy was a sign that she was into him, and now she was trying to pull back, and he couldn't allow that. “I remember days I prayed for you, meaning, I prayed for days like this with a person like you. I'm not questioning this.”

He was so thankful to have her finally walk into his life. To think, he almost let her get away... He thanked God for a second chance. There was no way he was letting her go again.

Kacie didn't respond verbally, but her body language said it all. She wrapped herself tighter around him as he treaded the water. She rested her head on his shoulder and lazily stroked his back.

Nothing had ever felt so right.

"That sounds so beautiful, and it's definitely the most precious thing anyone has ever said. I just hope you really mean it." Now it was his turn not to respond. He would prove it to Kacie, every day, that he was for real.

"Let's get out and go get dressed for dinner."

To not tempt temptation, Caleb placed her in the guest room to shower and change, with instructions to meet him downstairs.

Caleb dressed casually in light jeans, a gray t-shirt, and slides. When Kacie made it downstairs, she wore a periwinkle blue tube dress that scrunched at her calves. White and silver flip flops were on her feet, showing off her red polished toes.

Easy access.

One pull and the dress would be in a heap on the floor, leaving her body open for his hungry eyes.

"You look nice," he said as she slinked across the room to stand in front of him.

"Yeah, I saw you undressing me with your eyes."

"It's no secret I want you." He kissed her lips.

"Have me then." She was steadily tempting him. He hoped she was ready because he wouldn't show her any mercy. After sucking her dry and sinking deep inside of her, he would let her adjust. After that, he would take her on a trip to pound town.

"Soon... very soon."

He led her into the dining room that was decorated with candles and roses. Red petals were scattered over the floor, and a bouquet of roses was the centerpiece as they ate their dinner.

“This food is amazing.”

On their plates was homemade lasagna, salad, and garlic bread. The cheese tray and cocktails were perfect to start with, but he was happy to have an actual meal after snacking all day.

“I was hoping you would be satisfied with my choice.” He wanted to be sated but not stuffed where he couldn’t move. The night was far from over. “Can you cook?” Caleb asked.

“Enough to survive, but if you want something like this, you better keep Chef Chrissy around.” Kacie held her glass up in Chrissy’s directions.

The chef nodded in appreciation as she wiped down the counters.

“I’m glad you got me those food gift cards. They will definitely come in handy.”

“You’re welcome. You ready for dessert?”

She looked at him through lowered lashes and asked, “What kind of dessert?”

“Cake.”

Why not continue with the theme of today? The twenty-layered chocolate cake was the best on the east coast, yet the only chocolate he wanted in his mouth was her.

“Hmmm.” She bit her index finger. “What flavor?”

“Chocolate.”

Twelve



WORTH THE WAIT

KACIE STOOD by the island holding a piece of chocolate cake, while Caleb helped Chrissy to her car.

She had never been so hot for a man before. She couldn't wait to submit to her body's demands, letting him ravish her. After he had already stolen her mind, he could have her body. If things continued the way they were going, he would steal the last piece... her heart.

"Good?" asked Caleb as he came into the kitchen.

"Great, but I know something else in this house that's better." She walked over to him and held out the plate. "Want some?"

"Yes." He gave her a look that made her think he wasn't talking about cake, but that was all she was offering at the moment. She snagged some of the icing on her fingers and put it to his lips.

He closed his mouth around the digit, and she pulled it back clean.

"It's good, but like you said, I think it's something in this house that tastes much better."

She looked him up and down. "I was talking about you."

"And I'm talking about you."

He took the plate from her and set it on the island. He grabbed her hand and led her to his bedroom.

He released her, and she moved over to the massive bed that sat in the center of the room. The covers were pulled back. The cool, black sheets were ready to receive them. She ran her hands over the silk sheets. She looked over her shoulder at him.

“Let me see you, baby,” he coaxed.

His shirt was the first thing to go missing. Her eyes roamed his robust body. She loved the look of him. His shoulders sat high, his chest poked out, his stomach was curved yet firm. Underneath that little belly and slightly loose skin was muscle.

He discarded his pants and underwear next, showing off toned legs. She watched the thick stalk jump free between muscular thighs.

“Catch up,” Caleb encouraged when she became mesmerized by his lower half.

Kacie made quick work of pushing her dress down her body and stepping out of it. She moved until she was in front of him.

“Let me kiss you.”

He lowered to take her lips. She gave him a peck before abandoning his mouth. She kissed his neck, then his chest. She moved over and tongued kissed the stretch marks on his shoulders and arms.

“What are you doing?”

She lowered herself so that she was eye level with his dick.

“Kissing you.” She kissed the tip, leaving her lips damp from his excitement. She licked it off. “Can I kiss you? Anywhere?”

“Anywhere,” he groaned.

Her tongue met his thigh, swirling around. She was close to his erection but so far. She looked up at him staring down at her, biting his lip. Teasing a man never felt so good.

His hairs were trimmed low, so she didn't mind dragging her tongue over his pelvis, kissing and licking the other thigh.

“Stop playing, Kacie.” His voice was shaky, but the hand in her hair was firm as he brought her to his dick that dripped with precum.

“So big,” she mumbled before taking in a mouthful of him.

“Fuck!”

Caleb sucked in a breath.

Had he received oral sex before? Yes. Had he experienced it like this? No. Kacie was loving his dick with her mouth.

His past lovers were selfish, so the head was typically trash, and he ended up pushing them away, but with Kacie, he pulled her closer. Taking her damp hair into a ponytail, he silently asked her to take him deeper, and she did, expertly.

“Oh shit.” He threw his head back, enjoying the feel of her throat opening up for him. She pulled back, mouth and face wet from her exploration.

“I can take more. Give me more.”

He guided her back to where he wanted her. “Take it then. Get what you want.” He dropped his hands.

Kacie was a head specialist, swallowing him whole, then pulling back to let that good shit out. She was sloppy with it, nasty with it, and she didn't hold back. His dick was throated. His balls were sucked. His gooch was licked. If she wanted to be his wife, that was all she had to say.

“You like sucking my dick, baby?” She was working overtime to make him erupt, and he was going just as hard to hold back.

“You want my cum? You got to work harder. I'm loving this shit too much.” He threw his head back when her jaws tightened around his length.

Damn, that shit good.

“Take what you want. Snatch that shit from me.”

His knees buckled as she applied more pressure.

“Stop holding back.” She kept his erection on her lips, hands working his length as she spoke. “Let me have it. Give me that cum.”

He couldn't fight it any longer. He would let her win the battle, but he was winning the war. “Where you want it?”

She took his question as a challenge. With her plump lips wrapped around the tip, she locked her eyes on his face and moved her head up and down. Her tongue teased the undersides of his shaft, caressing the thick vein there. She fondled his sacs, pulling a deep groan from his throat.

He couldn't stop his hips from meeting her strokes. He tugged at her head to get her to ease up as cum erupted from the tip.

That set off something in her.

Kacie slurped up his nut like it was her favorite treat, and she didn't stop until his body stopped jerking.

Caleb didn't know if he wanted to pull her close or kick her out his house. A mouth like that was dangerous, and he could feel himself being attracted to her like a moth to a flame.

“I knew you would taste good, but that was better than I thought.”

He beamed with pride. It was the best compliment next to the size of his penis and his smell.

She stood to her feet. He snatched her against him to take her mouth. She was hesitant about opening her mouth since she just swallowed his semen, but with a squeeze of her cheeks, she let him in. She moaned as his tongue moved against hers.

“Thank you.” Caleb surprised her when he lifted her in the air and gently placed her on the bed. He hooked her legs on his arms and brought her to the edge.

He kneeled in front of her, sucking the cream that spilled from her pussy to her thighs.

“I need you inside of me,” she begged.

“You teased me, but now I can’t tease you?”

He sucked on her clit, pulling a scream from her throat. She tried to snap her legs shut, but he held them open.

“Caleb,” she whined.

“Shhh. I’m a big man. I like to eat.”

“Later, baby. I need you now.”

He sucked her outer lips then her inner sets before licking over her entrance. “You’re going to let me in?” He teased her opening with his middle finger.

“Yes.” She arched her back, welcoming the invasion.

He gave her a little play before he stood and rubbed the tip of his pole between her drenched lips. Feeling the balls of her piercing on his dick was enough to make him cum prematurely. “Put me in.”

Her fingers wrapped around the thick member, and he watched intensely as he was sucked inside.

“I need to watch you take me,” he said through gritted teeth.

The gold bar reflected off the low lights, and he didn’t dare look away. It was a beautiful sight to behold.

KACIE SIGHED in relief as she felt the head of his shaft push between her folds, entering her body at an alarming moderate rate. His entry was agonizingly slow and sinfully pleasurable.

She placed her legs around his waist, clenching his sides whenever the feeling became too strong.

“I love this piercing.” His thumb brushed over it, and she almost exploded.

“Don’t, Caleb.” He didn’t listen.

She tried to grab his hand, but he grabbed both her hands and held them in one of his. He went back to playing with her clit piercing while he fucked her, and she was blinded with pleasure.

“You’re going to make me cum!”

Cum, she did. She also died a little, but Caleb brought her back to life with powerful thrusts, stroking through her climax.

He growled, releasing her arms.

“I can’t last like this. Not this time around.” He switched positions, bringing her close as he turned to sit on the edge of the bed with her in his lap. “Ride me hard.”

Feet planted on the bed, she bounced and rocked like her life depended on it. She chased her orgasm while listening to his change in breathing, wanting to throw him over as well.

“You trying to fuck me?” He slapped her ass.

Oh, so he could tell I was trying to make him explode?

He yanked her down, making her fall from her feet. He whispered harshly in her ear, “I fuck you, baby, regardless if you’re on top or bottom.” He sunk lower to where only his upper half was resting on the bed, and his hips moved rapidly, fucking her from the bottom.

It was apparent he wasn’t going down without a fight.

“Oh God!” Kacie wrapped her arms around his shoulders. She buried her face deeper in his neck to keep from screaming as he hammered her sex. He was fucking her so good. The only thing she could do was hold on for the ride.

“One more. I want one more.”

His words were all it took to send her over.

“Can you handle more?” Caleb pulled out with a grunt. She had rained down on him after fucking her on the side of the bed. He had tossed her on her back and feasted on her pussy, pulling yet another climax from her. He had talked a lot of shit, and he had to back it up. He was making up for four

months of no sex, but he would have mercy on his baby if she wanted to tap out.

“Yes.”

With that, he helped her to the middle of the bed, then flipped her over onto her stomach. He crawled behind her, and she parted her legs a little wider for him to easily slip inside her.

“Fuck, you’re still so wet and warm. Close your legs.”

Kacie closed her legs and locked them at the ankles for good measure.

“So damn tight. I feel you gripping my shit. I know I won’t last much longer.” He started moving inside of her.

“Give it to me, baby. I want you to cum,” Kacie begged. He knew she was exhausted. Shit, he was too, but both of them were greedy.

He felt her hand wander between her legs, pressing on her clit as she rotated her hips in a circle, pulling his climax to the forefront.

“I’m going to cum so hard for you.”

“Oh God. Baby, yes!”

“Take it, baby. Take all this good dick.”

It took everything to hold back long enough for her to fly. When she rained down on him, he roared and snatched away just in time for white droplets to decorate her ass.

He lay on top of her for a few minutes before he rolled his heavy ass off of her. She threw her arm across his stomach, and he pulled her close.

“I’ll clean us up in just a second.” *When he could remember how to walk.*

She snuggled closer to him, not seeming to be worried about the fluids on her body. “I’ve never been made love to like that. You can’t leave me now,” she mumbled with closed eyes before her breathing became even.

He had no plans of ever leaving her. She had fucked up giving him some pussy. With her aura and personality, he was already falling, but with that fire between her legs, there was no turning back. She was his for life.

* * *

CALEB STIRRED, slowly opening his eyes. He jerked back when he saw Cannon standing by the bed. He flipped over and was thankful Kacie was buried deep in the covers, concealing her nude body from Cannon's view. "What the hell are you doing in here?" he whispered sternly.

"Wow, you fucked the shit out of her. Is she alive?" Cannon leaned over him to peer down at Kacie. Caleb pushed him back as he crawled out of bed.

"Get out of here before you wake her, and give me my damn key!"

"She's out like a light, and you're not getting this key. I need it for emergencies. Oh, and did you forget I have a code, too?"

"Fuck you, and this is not an emergency. Now, get out so I can get dressed."

When Caleb made it downstairs, Cannon was sitting at the island eating leftovers from last night.

"Why are you here, besides to eat my food?" Caleb asked as he grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

"Can you believe I came to check on you, thinking you were in your feelings about Alanah, and you're in here laid up with Kacie? I'm proud of you." Cannon wore the biggest smile on his face.

"Why would I be feeling some way about Alanah? I told you I was done with her."

Cannon paused. "You haven't heard?" Caleb shook his head. "She got engaged last night. I called you when I saw it online, and when I didn't hear from you, I thought you needed

a minute to sulk. I came to make sure you weren't crying over that whack ass hoe."

"I'm glad she's engaged. Now she can leave me alone. She came over the other day, causing a little rift between Kacie and me. I had to lay it down simple and plain to her that we were over. I'm glad she's out of my hair and is somebody else's problem."

"Well, I guess I owe you an apology for popping up unannounced."

"No, thanks for checking on me." He drank some of his water, then said, "Remodeling starts next week at the gas station."

Cannon beamed with pride. Caleb knew his brother was happy with him finally accepting what was his all along.

"I'm thinking about calling it Tri-Station." He hunched his shoulder.

"That's what I'm talking about, boy!" Cannon clapped his hands until Caleb gave him a look for him to settle down before he woke his sleeping beauty. "My bad. I'm not used to a woman being here during these hours... one I care enough about, anyway."

"I want to put Kacie a little studio on the back side where I use for outside storage. If she has some stuff to do, I want her to have a little spot. Creativity comes at any moment."

"Damn. It's like that already?"

"Mark my words. She's going to be my wife."

"You usually claim these women quickly, but I never heard you talk like this. You don't want to play the field some more?"

"I never wanted a hoe phase. I've always wanted one woman to call my own. And if you fix your mouth to call me soft, I'm going to throw you out of my house."

"Nah, I actually admire that about you. Not enough to go falling in love, but I find it admirable." They shared a laugh. "She seems good, though. I like her, and I know Mom will too."

Your dad keeps asking if she is still around. It's crazy how he likes her and he ain't even met her."

"Good morning." Kacie's silky voice sent chills down his spine. He turned to see her standing in the doorway, wearing his shirt.

"Hey, baby girl," Cannon greeted. "It's good to see you... outside of my casino. You can come back, but you can't play," he joked.

She threw her hands up. "I know where I'm not wanted." She laughed. "I'm going to go get dressed."

"Baby, Cannon was just leaving. Come sit at the table. I'll make some breakfast."

"I believe we're cut from the same cloth, Kacie. I, too, know where I'm not wanted." He stood from the stool and put his plate in the sink. "Will I be seeing more of you around?" he asked as he made his way toward the door.

"I would like to think so. You'll have to ask your brother."

If last night wasn't reassurance enough, then he would have to show her how sure he was that she would be around for a long time. "You'll be seeing more of her. That's a promise."

"Good. The air is lighter with you around."

The door closed behind his brother, and he heard the lock slide into place. He watched her walk more into the kitchen to the table, but she didn't sit. She turned to him and gave him a sly look.

"Is your father as charming as the both of you?"

"He's alright." The last person he wanted to talk about was his father. Knowing that she was naked under that shirt had him ready to do some things. Last night confirmed he could never get enough of her. The way she smelled, the way she tasted, the way she looked when he pushed inside of her. He shivered. Just thinking about it had him hard in his pants.

"Just alright?" She leaned her head to the side.

“Yep.” He licked his lips.

“You cooked last time. Let me.”

He forgot he had suggested breakfast. The only thing he wanted in his mouth was her, but they both needed to refuel, so he played nice and asked her what she needed for breakfast.

“You have stuff for pancakes?”

Kacie ended up making two types of pancakes, one with blueberries and the other with strawberries. She fried a couple of pieces of turkey sausage and potatoes with onions and peppers. Then she finished it off with scrambled eggs.

While finishing up breakfast, she received a call from Gia. He told her to talk to her friend while he washed the dishes. She kissed him on the lips before leaving him to go upstairs.

That was twenty minutes ago. The kitchen was cleaned, and now it was time to revisit the softest place on earth.

When he made it upstairs, Kacie was sitting on the bed, freshly showered. She had changed into a plain white spaghetti strapped shirt and highlighter green lounge shorts.

The bed was made, and she was putting her finishing touches on it by placing the pillows against the headboard. The old sheets were on the floor, letting him know she had stripped the bed and added fresh ones from his closet.

“I didn’t know where you would want me to put them,” she said as she typed away on her phone.

Seeing her bent over his bed made him think of something he always wanted to do.

She stood with a smile. “I felt you staring at me. What are you looking at?”

“You.”

“Why?”

He hit the switch, and the ceiling fan and light turned off. The sun had the room lit so he could still see.

“Are you camera shy?”

“Oh, that sounds familiar.” She placed her phone on the nightstand. “What did you have in mind?”

“You’ll see.”

He stepped up on the bed and stopped the blades of the fan completely. He dug in his pocket for his phone and put it on the front facing camera. He went to video mode and hit the red button to start recording. He placed it on one of the ceiling fan blades. It took a few tries to keep it up there, but he finally got it to stay.

She tilted her head. “What are you doing?”

“You turned me into a monster. I can’t stay out from in front of a camera now.” He dropped down to one knee then pulled her onto the bed. He bent her over in the doggy style position, then looked up to make sure he had the perfect view.

“Don’t move,” he told her as he moved a bold hand down her body. Her head twisted, and he smirked, knowing what she saw when she looked up.

“A sex tape?” When she didn’t object but leaned more into his touch, he knew it was on.

“Mm hmm,” he confirmed.

Kacie moaned as he lifted the tail of her shirt and placed kisses on her lower back. He continued tasting her flesh as he pulled her pants down.

“You like the idea of being recorded while I please you?”

“Yes.”

“I know my baby so well. I know you’re going to love this.” He moved his kisses lower, pressing his lips against her cheeks. He spread her open and was greeted with the most beautiful sight. He licked from her clit all the way to the puckered hole that had her gasping for air.

“Caleb.” She gripped the sheets. She was messing up the bed she just made up. Shame.

He took another swipe, and she moved forward, but he was there to catch her, keeping her in place. “Nah, where you

going?”

“No one’s ever touched me there.”

“That’s even better.”

She was tense for a few seconds until she looked back to see him discarding his pants. He came back to her, wasting no time becoming reacquainted with her pussy.

“Oh, yes.” She hissed, pushing back on his dick.

Seconds later, she was moving, her ass meeting his stomach. Caleb used her shirt as reins, guiding her movements.

“Yes, baby. Just like that. Throw that shit on me.”

She was about to make him cum, so he had to throw her off her game. He cuffed her face and used his thumb to graze her lips. Like he knew her nasty ass would, she sucked his thumb, moaning around it like it was his dick. He pulled it free and rubbed it against her asshole. She slowed, looking back at him.

He watched her as his finger teased her there. Her glazed eyes were getting heavy.

“Tell me.”

“Caleb...”

“Stop calling my name and tell me.” He pushed in a little while still slow stroking her. “You want my thumb in your ass?”

“Yes, damn it!”

“That’s all you had to say, baby.”

He pushed his thumb in and started pounding her. Instantly, her walls locked and vibrated around him.

“Yes. Yes,” he said through gritted teeth, encouraging her climax to take hold of her.

“Ah. You’re so damn deep.” He propped one leg up then grabbed her hips.

“My spot.”

“I know, baby. Cum.” Skin slapping, and screams filled the air. They were lost in ecstasy.

“Fuck, I’m cumming!”

“Shit! Me too, Kace. All of me. Take all of me.” He pulled his thumb away to have both hands gripping her hips as he filled her to capacity.

“Ugh.” Her body went stiff beneath his rigid body as their juices merged, and they reached erotic bliss at the same time.

“Damn.” He slapped her ass after pulling out. She fell to her back and stared at him through lowered lashes, making him hard again. He stroked himself as she licked her lips.

“You haven’t had enough?” He moved between her thighs, pushing inside of her.

This time, when he came into her body, he moved slowly and stroked deeply. He made love to her, enjoying how tight she wrapped around him. Shit felt better the second time around. He felt like he was floating, but that’s what Kacie did to him. She made him feel like he was flying without wings.

“Yes, Caleb. You feel so good. Cum with me again.”

Their second release was shared, holding each other’s eyes, tying their souls.

“Damn. That was definitely worth the wait,” Caleb said, wrapping his arms around her as she rested her head against his chest. “You know we can’t stop now.” He rested his head back, and the sight of his phone on the fan had him shaking his head with a smirk on his face. He would grab it once he regained strength in his legs.

“You might be stuck with me forever, if...” She paused when she realized what she had said.

“Forever?” He tilted her head up. “I like that.”

Thirteen



BECAUSE OF YOU

CALEB STOOD BACK with a wide stance and his arms crossed over his chest that was filled with pride. He admired the progress on his gas station and how far he had come in accepting his place there.

Today was the best he felt in all his life. He had a beautiful woman by his side, his family was in good health, and his success in business was at its peak.

“I’m glad I could finally catch up with you.”

A familiar voice had him spinning around. He caught sight of Avery approaching him from a white Mercedes. He looked thinner, and heavy eyes gave his face a sunken appearance.

“Unless you here for some candy or som’, you’re in the wrong place,” Caleb said as he turned his back to him.

“Can we talk?”

“We were supposed to like three months ago. I really don’t have much to say.” He moved toward the store, hoping that the other man would get the hint. “Things have changed.”

“I see.” He looked over the construction going on around them. “I’ve been trying to call you.”

“And I’ve been ignoring you like you were doing me. My time is valuable, whether you think so or not.” That was another thing Kacie had taught him. She said, just because she worked for herself didn’t mean she was at someone’s beck and call. Business was business.

“Can we just talk for a second? Give me a chance to explain everything. I even made some adjustments to compensate for my actions. Trust me, it’s worth hearing me out.”

Avery could talk until he was blue in the face. He wasn’t changing his mind. However, he was intrigued by what he had come up with to entice him to reconsider. Business was indeed business.

“Come on back.”

Once settled in Caleb’s office, Avery wasted no time speaking up for his inconsistencies in their dealings.

“I must admit I have lacked sincerity when doing business with you. Our last meeting, I knew it was my third strike if I wasn’t here. I was racing here when I was involved in an accident. I was knocked off my bike and hospitalized for quite some time.

“I’m actually just getting back on my feet. The accident put a lot of things into perspective for me. It made me realize the importance of things around me. That’s why I’m here with a more suitable offer. My father would want me to have ownership of this gas station again, and I’ll do what I can to make that happen.”

There was so much Caleb wanted to say...

“Where was this accident?”

“Um, off of St. James.”

“That was you,” he mumbled.

“What?”

Caleb was out of his chair in seconds, gripping Avery’s collar. “I was there that day. You could’ve killed them!”

“I feel bad about that, but I was the one that suffered the most. Everyone else was already released after a few days. I had to stay behind, months in recovery.”

If it hadn’t been for him, he probably would have never met Kacie. But then again, he could have killed her as well.

Caleb tossed the man away. "I'm not selling."

"Look at this." He produced a white envelope from his back pocket.

"Whatever it is, I don't want it."

"It's a brand new gas station in exchange for this one."

"Get out."

"Do the right thing, Caleb." Avery tried to hand him the envelope, but placed it on the desk when Caleb didn't make a move to take it. "Everything is in here. "

"Get. Out."

When the door closed behind him, Caleb dropped down in his chair behind the desk. He ripped into the envelope. Of course, Avery had all the information for the new gas station in the envelope.

He grabbed his keys and headed out the door. It was a lot for him to process. He had to get clarity once and for all.

* * *

CALEB WENT TO HIS PARENTS' house in search of his father.

"Hey, Ma," he greeted when he came through the side door.

"Hey, baby. Did you bring someone with you?" She looked over his shoulder.

"Nah, Ma." He laughed, closing the door behind him. "Is Dad busy?"

"If you want to hog her, that's fine." She pouted before turning back to the stove to stir in the pot of whatever she was cooking.

"I just want to keep her to myself a little longer. She seems like a dream I'm scared to wake up from." The *her* in question was Kacie. It felt like he had been in a relationship with her

for a few days instead of a few weeks. Everything still felt exciting and new.

“What’s for you is for you.” She accepted his kiss on the cheek before pushing him away. “So that means you can bring her around.”

He shook his head. “Where is that old man?”

“We just got out of the shower. He should be dressed.”

“Together? Ew.” He turned his nose up.

“Shut up, boy. Go on back there.” His mother pushed him away.

“Ah, Ma.” He stopped in the archway. “I’ll bring her by soon. Okay?”

“I know you will,” she threw over her shoulder as she walked to the fridge.

“Entitled ass,” he mumbled under his breath. He looked back to make sure she didn’t hear him.

When he was for sure in the clear, he continued toward his parents’ room. When he walked in, his dad was sitting on the bed wearing a sky-blue lounge set.

“Hey, CJ.”

“What’s up, Dad?”

“You bring that young lady over?” He moisturized his feet, then covered them with socks.

They were obsessed with meeting Kacie. It wasn’t like him not to bring a woman around. The fact he was holding out with Kacie made them anxious. “Not this time. I actually want to talk business.”

“It’s about the gas station?”

“How do you feel about me selling it?” he asked, testing the waters.

His father sat up and folded his arms. “I thought you were putting some work into it? You’re doing all that to sell it?”

Caleb shrugged.

He stood from the bed to put the lotion on the dresser. “Who are you thinking about selling it to? The O’Neal family?” His father couldn’t hide his frown, even if he wanted to.

“To anybody.”

He released a deep sigh. “It’s yours to do with as you please, but I thought you were accepting the idea of making it your own. I always felt you didn’t want it, even when we discussed you having it.”

Caleb tossed the envelope on the bed beside him.

“Leaves you wondering if I know what you know.”

After scanning the papers, his father threw them to the bed and moved to stand in front of him. Face to face. Man to man.

“If you knew what I knew, you wouldn’t be considering a trade. Damn what he’s offering you! I don’t trust him, like my dad didn’t trust his dad. Their entire family is snakes.” He moved away, busying himself, picking up stray clothes and setting them in the chair in the corner of the room. “I know you know that, so what is this really about?”

“Cannon gave me the information on Granddad.”

Barry nodded. “He must’ve sensed you were up to something.” He laughed. “I wanted you to figure this out on your own so it didn’t feel like I was playing. I know you always felt like Cannon was my favorite, but no. I love all my children equally. He happened to take more after me. Can you understand where I’m coming from?”

“If you knew I felt that way, why didn’t you try to assure me things weren’t what they seemed? Too busy still trying to be the man. I see you at the casino all the time. When do you ever come to the gas station? I could sell it. It seems you don’t give a damn about it anyway.”

“CJ. CJ. Caleb!”

He didn’t know why he came there looking for a resolution. Like always, nothing was resolved.

“Good night, Ma.” He stormed past her. Caleb was thankful she didn’t try to stop him.

“Let him go. Let him go,” he heard his mother tell his father before he walked out the front door.

He wanted to be alone, but like the night of the accident, he found himself heading to the one who gave him comfort and understanding.

* * *

KACIE'S LIPS perched as she looked down at the video call from Instagram. “Why are you calling me?” She sat up from her slouched position on the couch.

Dom’s face appeared on her screen. “You’re really doing big things.”

“I’m about to hang up. If I didn’t make myself clear at the casino, I’m doing it now. We’ll never work together, and you don’t have to apologize again for your unprofessional behavior.”

She had just come back from shopping and having dinner with Gia. Her day had been good. She didn’t need him coming along, ruining it.

“I guess that’s why Marco won’t work with me? You told him all about my *unprofessional behavior*?” He chuckled. “I didn’t know the two of you were friends until I saw the post. He spoke so highly of you and y’all friendship. What did the post say?”

Look at my stunning friend, showing up and showing out! The best on my team. Work or personal, she’s who I call. Keep becoming, beautiful!

“He’s riding for you! He won’t even take extra money. He said he’s all booked up.”

“I didn’t tell Marco about you pulling out at the last minute. So, if he said his books are filled, then he’s full. He’s a

working man and stays booked and busy. I can only hope to be as successful as him one day.”

“You will, little love. You know, I deserve all of this. I didn’t have to do you like that. I didn’t think it would be a big deal until Nick told me I fucked up. I was a punk for not coming to you myself.”

“I said you were a bitch, but I’ll take punk.” She relaxed against the couch now, seconds from hanging up.

He laughed. “Listen, I apologize again, sincerely. I knew you were excited about working with me and what that could do for your career, but you never needed me.”

Gia’s words about the ‘no’ being a blessing in disguise came to her mind. She had been torn up for weeks, but now she was on top of the world.

“Thanks for saying that, Dom. Now, we both got that off our chests. Don’t call me again. We can be cordial in public, but that’s it. I have to go. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Kacie. Continue becoming.” He held a glass of brown liquor to the camera as if they were toasting, and she ended the video.

No wonder he called. *Drunk ass.*

Kacie exited out of the app and called Marco. She threw herself across the couch with the phone to her ear. “Marco, I’m calling to make sure we’re still good for Friday.” She thought about bringing up Dom but dismissed the thought. He didn’t know about her and him, and she wouldn’t bring it up now.

“Yes. I’ll be there around one or two so we can pack the truck up and go over any last-minute details.”

The TV was on, but she wasn’t paying it any attention. Her second attempt to work with a popular influencer was in a few days, and she wanted to make sure things were in order. She was determined not to fail.

“The warehouse is a little past the casino, so it’ll take us about an hour and a half to get there, so that’ll be perfect. Thanks for partnering with me on this.”

“I owe you for bringing Caleb and you hopping in two shoots. You were superwoman that day. This is the least I can do. The pictures are fire, by the way.”

“Why haven’t you sent me any proofs?” She had been waiting patiently to see the results.

“You saw one.”

“You know what I mean, and who told you to post me?”

“It’s in the contract you signed, dear,” he teased. “Plus, the rest are a surprise.”

She rolled onto her back, playing with the strings of hair that fell into her face. “Speaking of surprises, can you give me canvas prints of our couple’s shoot?”

“How soon are you trying to surprise him? I can—”

“There’s no rush. I don’t know when I want to give them to him yet, and I’m sure he’s not even thinking about them. He went along with it for me.” There was a knock on the door, and she moved to look out the peephole. “Speak of the devil. I have to call you back.”

“Alright, you lucky heffa. I’ll talk to you later.”

She hung up the phone before pulling the door open for Caleb to enter.

“Who were you talking to?” He kissed her and when he pulled back, she could see something wasn’t right.

“Marco. He’s going to help with my gig on Friday, but don’t worry about that. What’s wrong with you?”

CALEB SWORE he could breathe better when she rested her hand over his heart. He knew he made the right choice coming to her. She was always the answer, guiding him to an appealing solution.

“What are you feeling?” she asked, rubbing circles on his chest.

“I don’t know how to feel...”

She took them to the couch where she sat in his lap, facing him. “Talk me through what happened.”

He threw his head against the back of the couch. “Where do I start?”

“Wherever you want. I’m here to listen.” She laid her head on his shoulder.

He looked down at her. “Do you believe in destiny?”

“Yes.”

Of course she did. He forgot who he was talking to.

“You remember me telling you about a guy I was doing business with name Avery?”

“Vaguely. You rarely talk about work, though.”

He moved to stand, and she eased off his lap.

Caleb never wanted to talk about work, because work related to his family, and he didn’t want to talk about the strange relationship between them. It was about time he shared more with her, especially since he saw her being a permanent part in his life.

“He was on the motorcycle the day of the accident. He was rushing to meet me.” He paced the floor. “This is some freaky shit. It was hard to be mad at him. I never would’ve met you if it wasn’t for him.”

“Is that all that’s on your mind?”

“The gas station you met me at is owned by my family—owned by me. Avery’s family once owned it. There’s been beef between them and us for years. When they got word that I was over the gas station, he came running. He wanted to buy it back, and I wanted to sell it to him.”

“Why?”

“Just the history behind it. The way my grandfather obtained it just didn’t sit right with me. But now...!” he stressed. “Nothing is what I thought it seems.” He sighed. “It’s so much deeper than I want to go in right now, especially since I’m not selling it to him anymore.”

“Is this is a big part of why you don’t talk about your family much?”

“I love them, and from the outside looking in, we’re perfect, but no family is perfect. My relationship with my father is strained because of how he used to be. The casino was heavy in illegal gambling and drugs. It’s how my grandfather got the gas station. I never wanted to be a part of that.

“When my grandfather died, my father took over his businesses, legal and illegal. He almost lost us because my mother didn’t want him involved in those things. Eventually, he cleaned enough of his money and rid the casino of all illegal activities.”

“That’s not all, is it?”

He stooped down in front of her, laying his head in her lap. “My dad and I are just different. It’s time I realize that and move on. I’ve been fighting a losing battle for years.” Talking about emotions with his father was like talking to a brick wall. He didn’t know why his validation was so important to him, but Caleb wasn’t chasing it anymore. His own happiness was the key to life.

Kacie wasn’t usually at a loss for words, but she was now. Nothing she could say would help, so she did the next best thing.

“Come on.” She led him into the bathroom and started up the shower. In no time, the bathroom was a sauna. “Take your clothes off.” She moved around him to the cabinet and grabbed one of the eucalyptus and camphor shower melts from The Sugar Fix NBE. She had them stored in a basket along with some bath bombs.

“What’s that?”

“Shower melts. They are called *The Healer*.”

When he finished showering, she was sitting on the vanity, lotion in her hand. She curled her finger to beckon him closer. When he was standing in front of her, she pumped lotion into her hand and added a bit of coconut oil and smoothed it over

his skin. He was semi-erect, but she ignored it and her nagging body. It wasn't about sex, but more about intimacy and comfort.

Once she was finished moisturizing his skin, she guided him to her room. She pushed the sheer netting behind the frame to open her bed to him.

“Get in the bed,” she commanded before she stripped out of her clothes.

“Baby, I’m—”

“Shhhh. Bed.” She pointed.

Kacie watched him get comfortable between the sheets as she slipped the last piece of clothing from her body. She crawled behind him. He started to face her, but she put a hand out to stop him. “I want you to feel me. I mean, really feel me.” She held him tight. If someone looked at them now, they would think she was a backpack on his back.

“You’re going to be the little spoon tonight. Does this feel okay?” she whispered in his neck.

“Nothing has ever felt better.”

“Good. Close your eyes and rest.”

Her command was all it took for him to fall into a deep slumber. She smiled. She had done the right thing. He didn't need her words of wisdom today, just her presence.

Kacie kissed his shoulder and snuggled more into him. Tonight, she would sleep peacefully knowing she was lying with the man of her dreams instead of dreaming about him.

Fourteen



SAFE IN YOUR ARMS

“WHAT DO you like to do for fun?”

Caleb felt rejuvenated when he woke. He was now the big spoon with Kacie in his arms, lying against his chest. She toyed with his hand he had interlocked with hers as she talked.

“You only talk about work. I never hear you mention activities outside of that unless you’re with your homeboys. I know you like singing, but that’s a talent, and you don’t really like to do it, so what else?”

“I don’t know. I just be chilling. When I want to step out and do things, I do.” But he rarely did. He wasn’t artsy like her. He didn’t have any hobbies that made his life worthwhile.

“What were some things you liked to do growing up?”

He and his siblings did a lot of things growing up, but only one stuck out.

“Bike riding. My brother and I used to race a lot until Carmen was old enough and we had to take her. It’s been a long time since I’ve even thought about riding a bike. For fun, that is.”

She sat up, looking down at him. “Let’s do it.”

“Okay.” Caleb knew the perfect place they could go riding. It would be a perfect time for her to meet his parents. “We have bikes at my parents’ house, and I can show you the path we used to take. That’s if you’re okay with meeting the creators of Caleb.”

“I would love to meet them.” She shot up in bed, beaming with joy.

“Go get ready. I’ll call my mom. I know she’ll be excited.”

“You told your mom about me already?”

He was trying to find any uncertainty, and all he saw was a look of surprise with the hint of a smile.

“Kacie, I’m trying to tell the world you’re my lady.”

“Oh snap.” She did some corky dance while she reached for the remote. She went to the Spotify app on the TV. She typed in the search bar, and before he could see what she was up to, “Lady” by D’Angelo sounded out throughout the room. Kacie turned to him with a smile as she rolled her body to the beat, sashaying into the bathroom.

“Yo’ silly ass.” He moved into the kitchen with his phone to his ear.

“Good morning, baby,” his mother greeted. He heard her moving around, probably deciding on what to cook for dinner later.

“Good morning, Ma. I have a surprise for you.”

“Is it to apologize for yesterday? You know we don’t play that.”

He lowered his head. “I’m sorry, and I’ll apologize to Dad later when we come by.”

“I don’t want you to apologize if you feel you were right for what you said. I would like you to apologize for walking out. You know we stick around and talk it out. You just never say what’s on your mind.”

He had last night. He just didn’t stick around to hear what his father had to say. “Yeah, I know.”

“Now that we have that out of the way, did you say we? Are you bringing my daughter-in-law over?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m bringing Kacie by. She—” The shriek that his mother let out pierced his ears.

“Oh God, CJ. I can’t wait to meet her. What does she like to eat? Is she vegetarian or some’ like that? She sounds all mystical when you talk about her. They the type that don’t eat meat. I can go to the store and get something she might like.”

He fought off laughter as he responded to his mom. “She eats meat, Ma. How about you make a simple lunch spread? We’re coming over to ride bikes on the trail, so we don’t need anything heavy.”

“Aww. Well, I know exactly what to do now since you told me what you have planned. What time are y’all coming over here?”

“Give us about two hours, so between eleven and twelve.”

“Let me go get ready.” She hung up in his ear, and Caleb couldn’t do anything but laugh. She hadn’t even said bye.

He had talked to his mother about Kacie. He told her how sweet she was, how spiritual she was, how she spoke life into him, and how they kept meeting despite his troubles.

Last night really put things in perspective. Whenever he was angry, he liked to be alone, but he had sought Kacie out. He had done that one other time with an ex, and she acted like it bothered her to sit silently with him for a second. He broke up with her right away and started keeping more of his feelings to himself, but Kacie was bringing out a side of him he thought had died.

“You called your mom?” Kacie placed a soft kiss on his back in passing as she continued to the refrigerator and pulled out some cranberry-grape juice. “You want some breakfast?”

“Keep it light, and I talked to my mom. She’s going to make us lunch.”

“What’s light to you? You’re a big ole man that needs feeding.” She bent over in the fridge, and he came behind her, knowing exactly what he wanted to eat, and he verbalized that to her.

“Don’t start nothing you can’t finish.”

“I can definitely finish this.” He nibbled at her neck. Her simple acts of kindness last night had him ready to nail her to the wall.

“We don’t have time.”

“I make time for what I want, and right now, I want you.” The words weren’t even out of his mouth good when his phone rang.

It was his mother.

He was second guessing if taking Kacie to his parents’ house was a good idea.

Kacie must have seen the frustration on his face. She pulled his head down and pecked his lips. “Later.”

He pressed his lips against hers, then slid her some tongue, stealing a proper kiss. “I’m going to be ready to collect.” He kissed her one last time before he answered the phone, heading down the hallway to get ready.

* * *

“I LIKE THIS SONG. Let me find out you have a little taste in music.” Caleb pressed the button to turn up the sound of Maxwell’s “Sumthin’ Sumthin’.”

“Music is life. I’m an artist, so music goes hand in hand with this shit.” She laughed. “What’s your favorite song?”

He thought over his answer as he maneuvered through curves of the countryside. “See, if we was around my boys, I would have to say some hard shit, like a song by Tupac, Biggie, Jay Z, Lil Wayne, or I could take the lyrical route and say Kanye West, Nas, J-Cole, or Fabulous.”

“But since you’re only with me, I want the real answer.”

“It would have to be ‘Nothing Even Matters’ by Lauryn Hill. D’Angelo’s first verse is golden, and Ms. Lauryn Hill gave it to us real and raw, like always.”

“Yes! It’s a top tier song.”

“What’s your favorite song?”

“I don’t think I can choose a favorite song of all time because all my favorites just hit different for different reasons. What I will do is tell you the first song I ever heard that stuck with me. ‘Nobody’s Supposed to be Here’ by Deborah Cox. I will always sing that song at the top of my lungs. I remember hearing it so vividly. I was walking down the hall from my room into the living room. My mom was cleaning the kitchen, singing along. To this day, my cousin calls it my song. So, if I had a favorite song, that would be it, since it was the first song to win my heart.”

“I love that. My mom and Dad would dance to Earth, Wind, and Fire around the kitchen.”

“Are you okay with seeing your father today?” Kacie asked him.

“Yeah. I just needed to get that out of my system yesterday. I feel much better. I plan to talk to him later when he gets off work.”

She cupped the back of his head, sliding down to give his neck a good massage. “Alright.”

He looked at her with a smile. “Alright.”

Before long, they pulled into his parents’ driveway. He loved the acres of land their house sat on. One day, he planned to build his own house on his section of the land he had inherited. He lived in the city now to be closer to work, but nothing beat the calmness of the country.

Caleb barely brushed his knuckles over the door before it was snatched open.

“Oh my. Look at her! CJ, she is gorgeous, and all this long, curly hair. Can I touch it?”

Kacie giggled and nodded. His mother pulled at the springy curls in amazement. “Thank you. It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Jackson.”

“You just bring it on in. I want a hug.” His mother pulled her into her body, rocking her from side to side. “You smell

amazing.”

“It’s probably sunscreen.”

“Yeah, Ma. Kacie sprayed us down before we left. You’ll smell the same scent on me if you gave me some love.” He tried to pull his mother in for a hug, but she pushed him away.

“Move, CJ. Ain’t nobody worried about you.” She looked over Kacie with a smile. “What will it take to make you my daughter-in-law?”

Kacie laughed even harder, missing the fact that his mother was dead serious. “Ma, come on. You just met her.”

“And? I know a good woman when I see one.”

Caleb wrapped his arms around his mother’s shoulder. “Takes one to know one.” He kissed her cheek.

“Let them come in the house, Denise,” a deep voice called from behind them.

“I thought you would be at work?” Caleb asked his father as they moved into the house. Cannon was in charge of the casino now, but Barry Jackson went in faithfully like he punched a clock.

“Well, your mother said we were having a special guest, and I couldn’t miss this moment.” He took Kacie’s hands in his. “It’s nice to finally meet you. This son of mine has been keeping you under lock and key.”

“He’s usually in a rush to bring them hoochies around, driving me crazy with their stuck up attitudes, but you seem very pleasant and down to earth. You’re also the one he decided to keep away. I guess I’ll take that change in pattern as you being special. Well, I know you’re special because, like I said, you’re different from the others.” His mother squeezed her cheeks.

“Well I’m glad to meet the both of you.”

His father released her hands to put his arm around his wife as she talked. “I know you didn’t come here to see us, so I’ll let you two get to it. I packed up a nice little lunch so you guys could have a picnic.”

If he knew his mother like he knew he did, she had everything under the sun stuffed in her wicker basket.

“While she gets that situated, let’s talk for a second, CJ.”

“Sure.”

“Come on, Kacie. You can help me in the kitchen.”

Caleb brushed his lips over Kacie’s forehead before she followed his mother down the hall to the kitchen. “About last night...” Caleb started, but his father held his hand up to stop him.

“You were right. I don’t want to have a big moment about it, especially with your lady friend here. I just want to fix it.”

To say he was shocked was an understatement.

“Whatever you need me to do at the gas station, I’ll do it. Shit, if you want to sell it, you can do that too.”

“Why the change of heart?”

His father walked over to the bookcase where his mother kept their family photos. He picked up a picture of Caleb when he was twelve.

“You were different from Cannon growing up. He was rugged, rough by nature. I didn’t know how to adjust to my softer side to meet you halfway. I tried to toughen you up, but that didn’t work. It just got me fussed at by your mother.” They shared a laugh. “I thought I was helping by being distant, but I did more harm than good.”

He handed him the frame, and Caleb looked down at the person he hadn’t been able to connect to in a long time. Now, he connected with the person in the frame on a different level. One that was familiar but mature.

He returned the frame and picked up the one where he held a trophy. “We won this night. You were so proud. This was one of the best days of my life.”

“I want you to know I’ve never been ashamed of calling you my son. I’m proud of the man you became, despite my

negligence. Next to your mother, you, Cannon, and Carmen mean the world to me.”

Caleb wrapped his arms around his father. He knew his dad wasn't an emotional person. He wasn't expecting him to hug him back, but hard arms came around him.

His heart started to swell. At last...

“Alright.” His dad gave his back three firm pats before pulling away. “You got yourself one in there. She is even prettier in person. Y'all would have some good-looking kids. You need to marry her.”

“You don't think it's too soon to be talking about marriage?”

“Maybe, but listen to your old man. I know what I'm talking about. Your mother told me about all the things you said about Kacie. Women like that don't grow on trees. They're one of a kind.”

* * *

THEY'RE ONE OF A KIND...

His father's words still played in Caleb's head as they rode down the dirt path. Kacie was pedaling at his side as she looked around in amazement. He loved how she was simply astonished. There wasn't a hundred-dollar bill or black card in sight, and she was excited.

“This is amazing, Caleb. All this open space and fresh air... I could stay out here all day.”

“Our stop is coming up.” He nodded forward.

“Oh my...” She braked, pulling off the path. She placed the bike down and ran to the riverside. The gigantic oak tree shaded the area where she stood. It was a magnificent spot to picnic. He grabbed the basket his mother packed their lunch in and met Kacie under the tree.

Inside the basket was a blanket. He pulled it out and spread it over the thick, vibrant grass. When he was finished, she

joined him on the blanket, falling into his arms.

“We don’t have to stay out here long,” she said.

“We can stay as long as you want.” His thumb stroked her hairline as he spoke.

She nodded. “Your parents seem sweet. It had to be fun growing up around here.”

“After hearing about other’s childhood, I can say we had it good, and though sometimes I don’t sound like it, I’m grateful.”

She sat up and brushed her lips against his. “I’m grateful I met you.”

“Me too.”

She tweaked his nose. “Let’s eat.”

They dug into the spread, sampling the different types of sandwiches, crunching on chips, and feeding each other fruit. Once they were full, Kacie packed the basket while Caleb took off his shoes. When she saw what he was doing, she couldn’t fight off her smile. She moved off the blanket and kicked off her shoes.

Seated back to back with their feet planted in the grass, they conversed.

“What’s your biggest regret in life?” Kacie asked.

“Allowing myself to be used. I knew I was being taken advantage of. It was better than being alone,” he replied easily. There had been days where all he thought about was his regrets in life.

Being the middle child was hard. Cannon had their father, and Caleb had their mother until Carmen was born. Somewhere down the line, he got lost and felt invisible from time to time. So when he got older, he gave women money, and they gave him the attention he was so desperately seeking, whether good or bad.

“That’s a fair regret.”

“It seems so pointless now...” He wanted to continue, but he didn’t think it was the right time to pour his heart out to her. He was going to say, all the time he spent with other women who only wanted him for his status, money, and his looks meant nothing now that he had her. He almost wished he had waited for her. Well, in a way, he had waited his whole life for her.

“I would ask you, but I know you’ll say you don’t have regrets. Everything meant to be will be,” he quoted her favorite saying.

She chuckled, but it wasn’t hearty. It had more of a sarcastic undertone.

“Saying you have no regrets is what most people say to make others around them feel better. I’m full of regrets, Caleb. I could’ve avoided a lot of pain.”

He realized it was the first time he felt a change in her spirit. It was like a shift in the atmosphere. Even when she was in the hospital, her spirits had been high and her sweet aura still illuminated around them. “What’s that I feel?” He leaned more into her back, absorbing the discomfort.

“You feel the broken me that I try to hide deep inside.”

He faced her, but she kept her back to him, and he didn’t like that.

“You don’t have to hide it from me.” He moved in front of her. “Let me see you.” He grabbed her chin to lift her head. “Don’t hide from me.”

“I’m not doing it on purpose. It’s all I’ve known.”

“Try.” He wiped the trail of tears from her face. “I want to be there for you like you were there for me so many times before.”

It took her a few minutes, but she finally started talking.

“I’m tired of being tough, Caleb. I don’t want to be the strong black woman anymore. I want to be vulnerable, supported, and loved on. I want to be someone’s number one

priority. Just for a little while, I want the weight to be lifted off my shoulders.”

He pulled her to her feet, holding her forearms. “Let it out. Scream or whatever, but you have to let it out.” She had made the confession, but he could still feel the hold it had on her.

“I can’t. I’m scared.”

“I gave in to you last night and let you take care of me. Let me take care of you. You don’t have to be tough with me, Kacie. I got you. I’m big enough to carry your load and mine as well, as long as you’re by my side. Now, let it out. Scream. We’re in an open field. You’ll feel better when you let it go.”

She fell into his arms and let out an ear-piercing cry that rocked the world beneath his bare feet.

“That was it. You did amazing, baby. Don’t you feel free?”

She clung to him for dear life, though he held her securely in his arms. She called his name desperately.

“Shhh. I’m here. Don’t you know I’m a part of you now? So even when I’m not there physically and you think it’s you being strong, it’s me inside you, fighting those demons. You don’t have to be so strong anymore. I’m here.”

“What about when you leave me, and not just physically—mentally and emotionally?”

“I’m never leaving you, Kacie, and you’re never leaving me. You’re it for me. They’ll be no one who does what you do to me.”

“I need you.” She kissed him. Hard. He held her head and ate at her mouth. “Mmm.”

She needed his strength. He could feel it in the way she kissed him, the way she tugged at his shirt.

He walked to the blanket and sat down with her in his lap. He was about to rip her shirt down the middle until he remembered where they were. He couldn’t have her riding back nude, so he hurried and pulled her shirt over her head. He attacked her naked breasts, thankful she hadn’t worn a bra. He bit and sucked the bedded tips as she cried out in ecstasy.

“I love these.” He admired her tattooed breasts as he weighed them in his hands.

Fuck, he needed more of her, and damn it if he didn't feel like she needed more of him.

He laid her back, and she made sure he followed by pulling at his muscular shoulder. He kissed her passionately, sliding her some tongue.

She arched underneath him, but he pushed her back down as he trailed kisses down her stomach to the perfect pussy that he planned to write his name on.

“Caleb!”

“Scream my name. I'm about to write it all over my pussy.”

“Yours.” She moaned as he tugged at her shorts, exposing her bare flesh. He wasted no time placing kisses around her mound as she withered beneath him.

He teased her with the spelling over her bare folds before he latched to her clit. She humped against his face, holding his head deep between her lips.

“Ah, uh.” She rode the wave of her climax, drowning him in her sea.

He kept his pace, toying with the balls that pierced her clit as she tried to buck him off, but it wasn't happening. He wanted her all.

His hands reached up to her breasts. The rough pads of his fingers scraped over her sensitive nipples, causing her back to arch.

“C-ca. Baby, please. Ooh. Oh shit!”

There it was. Cream covered his face, and he left her with a final kiss on her swollen nub before coming up and wiping his face.

“Last night I felt you, closer than I ever felt you before, but now I need the tightest hold on my dick.” He pulled his shirt over his head while trembling fingers worked at his pants. He

slipped inside her, welcomed by gushy walls and warm honey. It was enough to have him gripping the blanket, fighting for control. "I'll never get enough of you."

"Never." She clawed at his back, fighting to bring him closer. "More." She needed him with an urgency he hadn't seen in her. Kacie had never opened up to him before like this, so she needed a special treatment that required him to be thorough.

Rough, nasty sex. "Harder."

He plowed into her, and she took him over and over. She scratched his back and bit into his shoulder with her third orgasm. The next one, he wanted to hear her scream like the first two.

Caleb pulled her with him as he sat down. His hands went beside him, ready for her to take control. "Ride this dick just how you like it."

She was done crying. The look on her face was vicious. He had broken down her walls, and now it was time for her to take control of her destiny.

"You like the way I ride?"

"Hell yeah." He slapped both ass cheeks.

Kacie rolled against him as she caressed herself. She took over expertly, taking him on a vigorous ride that had his toes curling.

"Look at me, Caleb. You make me feel so beautiful when you look at me."

He moved his eyes from watching him slide in and out her pussy to her face. "I see you, baby." He saw in her and through her. That was what made their bond so special.

Her face displayed signs of ecstasy. Her hair was free, blowing in the wind. His hands joined hers, trailing over her heated flesh, loving every inch of her. Beautiful brown skin, perky, full breasts bouncing, plump lips he could taste now from memory alone. She had closed her eyes, but he knew

those brown globes like the back of his hand. He hadn't lied. She was it for him.

Kacie held her breasts as she rocked on Caleb's dick. The caress of the air made her nipples painfully hard, sending signals to her clitoris. The bar pressed against it was sweet torture. She bit her lip, thinking about how easy it would be to flood him with one touch. Yet, she didn't move to take herself there. She loved straddling the line of coming and going, the feeling of contentment and not enough.

"You feel so good inside of me."

Feet planted on solid ground, Mother Earth guided her pace through the soles of her feet. She rolled her hips in fluid motions that had his hands going to her hips. He forced her closer as his back met the blanket, and she was now on her knees. She knew what he was doing, and she had no objections.

"Fuck, Caleb." She leaned over him, her breasts swinging in his face. He helped rock her hips forward, creating friction that had her raining down on him.

That climax should've taken her out, but it only fueled the fire. Back on her feet, she bounced wildly above him. She felt liberated—so damn free.

"Come on. Come on." He slapped her ass, heightening her experience.

"Yes." She threw her head back.

"Fuck! Get there, Kace!" The sun beamed on her face as she smiled. He never wanted to leave her behind.

"I'm there." She grabbed his neck, looking into his eyes. "Cum in me, Caleb." He held her by the hips and slammed her down on him. The sounds of their lovemaking made beautiful music they climaxed to together.

She fell to his chest, and he held her close. "I got you, Kacie. Forever."

* * *

“YOUR FAMILY’S LAND IS BEAUTIFUL.” Kacie’s sultry voice spoke over the smooth jazz that played in the background on the car ride back to her place.

“Thank you.” He lifted their joined hands and brushed his lips over her soft skin. “I’m glad you didn’t mind staying for an early dinner with my parents. I can tell they were infatuated with you.”

Throughout dinner, they talked about everything, from her family and upbringing to work and her future plans.

“They were very nice. Your mom won me over, though. She’s so lively. Her energy is unmatched.”

“She still thinks she’s twenty-one.” He laughed as he pulled into the driveway beside a silver pickup truck.

“The empty nesters are back?”

“No.” She took a deep breath. “Looks like a day of meeting the family. My dad is here.”

“Are you ready for me to meet your father?” he asked as he killed the engine.

She nodded slowly. “Yes, I am.”

The door opened. A hand reached in for her. She took it and climbed out of the car. Caleb followed suit and climbed out and came around to join the gathering.

“Baby girl! I was stopping by after work only to find out you weren’t here. I was typing a mean text message for you, but you know I take a while.”

Kacie giggled like a schoolgirl, releasing her father from the hug he had pulled her into. “Hey, Daddy. I was at dinner.” She stepped back until she was at Caleb’s side. He grabbed her hand and locked their fingers.

Her father didn’t miss the gesture. “And who is this, Kacie?”

“This is Caleb, Daddy.”

He extended his other hand to her father. “Caleb Jackson, sir.”

“Gregory.” He gave his hand a firm shake. “You know Barry Jackson?”

“He’s my father.”

Realization washed over Gregory Benjamin’s face. Caleb didn’t seem to be surprised by his next question. “What do you do for a living, son?”

“I’m the CEO of Jackson Station Inc. I own three local gas stations.”

“No other activities affiliated or outside of that?”

“Daddy,” Kacie scolded, but he ignored his daughter, waiting for an answer from Caleb.

“No. Since my brother and I have taken over things, we completed the transition that our father had started.”

“This is my baby girl.” Gregg pulled Kacie under his arm, and Caleb released her hand. “My *only* daughter. I would hate for anything to happen to her. I would hate for anything to happen to *you*. You get what I’m saying?”

“Daddy!”

“It’s fine, Kacie. If I had a daughter, this would be the same discussion I would have with the young man trying to win her heart.” He looked her father square in the eyes, like a real man would, and said, “You have my word. I’ll protect Kacie with my life.” And she knew he meant every word.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

“Now that we got that out of the way...” She frowned at her father, who had a pleased look on his face. “You want to come in, Daddy?”

“No. I was just stopping by to see you for a second. Make sure you stop by the house soon.” He moved back to his truck. “Bring him with you. Your mother would love to meet him.”

“That wasn’t so bad, huh?” asked Caleb when her father’s car disappeared into traffic.

“He doesn’t usually act like that,” Kacie said when they made it upstairs to her apartment. She moved around, turning on lights and the TV.

“I told you my father did some less than desirable things. He has a right to question that, but I promise you’re safe with me, Kacie.”

She walked over to him. Her delicate hands ran through his beard as she admired his face. “I never felt safer than when I’m with you.”

Fifteen



NO MORE SECOND CHANCES

WAKING with Kacie in his arms was the best feeling ever.

The revelations they had last night set the mood for the day. They were so relaxed, and everything around them was calm until phones vibrated with alarms, and noise from the outside world slipped in. He knew by the end of the day he would be drained. Today, he planned to embark on his newfound freedom.

Needing an extra moment of solace, Caleb led Kacie downstairs, where they walked around in the grass asking each other questions.

“Where’s one place you would go, but you think you never will?” asked Caleb.

“Oooh, that a good one. Um, Vancouver.”

“In Canada?”

“Yep. They have amazing views, and the art and music scene are jumping. I know my dad would enjoy that, too. What about you?”

“Can you believe I’ve been a few places around the world, but I actually would love to visit further south like Texas, Mississippi, or Louisiana and do those trail riding things. You know where they ride four-wheelers through the mud, the horses, bonfires, line dancing, and eat barbecue.” He patted his stomach, thinking about all the food he would consume if he had the chance.

“We can do that whenever you want. I have a cousin in Texas who does promotions for the trail rides. She is always trying to get me to come down.”

“Have you been to one?”

“A few. I love it each time.”

He pulled her into his arms. “That’s why you ride this dick so good.” He pecked her full lips.

“Don’t start. I’m too nervous.”

Not only was it a busy day for him, but for Kacie as well. She had a few clients since the fallout with the influencer, but none as big as the one she had to prepare for tonight.

“Let me handle that for you.” He pulled at the straps of her top.

“No.” She pushed him away. “Don’t you have work you have to do?”

“Yep, right here.” He hoisted her up and carried her to the bathroom, where he made love to her against the shower wall. They cleaned themselves, and Caleb carried her to bed, where he buried himself deep inside of her once more.

When exhaustion claimed their bodies, only one of them could sleep. Caleb crawled out of bed and went to shower again. He had to make a stop at one store for inventory, and about the time he finished, it would be time for his meeting.

Caleb dressed business casual so he could go straight from the newest gas station to the oldest gas station.

Ready, with only one thing to do, he moved to the bed, kissing Kacie on the forehead.

“I love you, Kacie.”

Her eyes fluttered open, and she stared at him longingly. She parted her lips, but he cut her off by pressing his lips against hers. He gave her one last peck before pulling back. “I’ll see you later.” He collected his things and moved out of the door.

* * *

CALEB LOOKED at his watch when there was a knock on his office door. "Come in."

Avery entered with a broad smile, but it disappeared when he saw Cannon sitting on the couch.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. Caleb, have you come to a decision?"

Avery knew how Cannon felt about selling the property, so he made sure to throw shade.

"I have." Caleb extended his hand to the chair in front of his desk. "Have a seat."

Avery decided on the chair farthest away from Cannon and was tilted in his direction so he could have a better eye on him. The man was smart. His brother was very unpredictable.

"I looked over your proposal, and it looks very promising. There are a few things I'm having a problem with, though."

"Which are?"

"Take a look at this for me." Caleb dropped a folder on his desk in front of Avery. He picked up the folder and thumbed through the paperwork. Both Caleb and Cannon watched his reaction closely to confirm what they already knew.

"What's that, Avery?"

"Land deed." He tossed the folder on the desk, defeated. He already knew where this was going. He had tried to be shady with him, but Caleb was far from stupid.

"And what name is on that deed?"

Avery sat back in the chair, locking his hands together, resting them in his lap. "Christen Jackson."

"You see, the problem I have with this new gas station you're trying to offer me is I won't get the land that it comes on, and also, the equipment would be leased to me as well."

He moved around the room with slow strides. “Cannon, do you know a Christen Jackson?”

“Well, he’s our grandfather, Caleb.”

“I take it you knew that, Avery. Was that why you were having such a hard time meeting with me? Your grandfather didn’t have any qualms about low balling our grandfather and taking over his land?”

“That still doesn’t change the nature of how you received the land back. Your father got my father into so much shit, I’m still digging us out of debt. Drugs, drunken nights! This is the only way—”

“Your grandfather practically stole the land from our grandfather, and you think we have sympathy for you because the way our grandfather and father decided to get back what was rightfully theirs?” Cannon shouted.

“Listen, Caleb—”

“No, you listen. Even with you knowing this wasn’t your land, you still didn’t offer to allow me to lease the land to you, but you offer me a gas station where everything will be leased to me. You delivered me shit in a gift box. You wanted everything, and I was about to give it to you if it wasn’t for an accident.”

He smiled, his thoughts going to Kacie, but he returned quickly, ready to be rid of Avery once and for all. “Me, my land, my gas station are not for sale.”

“So that’s it?”

“That’s it,” Caleb confirmed.

“I let my father down.”

“No, he let himself down. He got drunk off imported liquor. He was high off of drugs and lost the gas station and the land it sat on in an illegal card game. Him, not you. You don’t have to pay for your father’s mistakes. Those are his burdens to bear.” He gave the man advice he wished someone would have given him. “What you can do is learn from his

mistake and do things differently. I'm sure you will receive a better outcome, but this is not it."

"Goodbye, Avery." Cannon stood to his feet.

There was nothing more to be said. Avery left without another word, leaving Caleb alone with his brother.

He sighed heavily then turned to Cannon. "Take a walk with me."

* * *

KACIE WAS NERVOUS.

Even after Caleb fucked her into a coma, she still woke up with a stomach full of butterflies. She had taken on a few projects, but none were as big as Dom's would have been. But there were always second chances, and she had received one by the name of Ginger. With the things she wanted, Kacie wouldn't have to split the money with a company, so it would be additional income she could add to her budget for her project to help new creators.

"Kacie, are you ready to go?" Marco asked as he stepped into her apartment.

"Let's check and make sure we have everything." She had a clipboard in her hand and the key to the storage unit out back that she kept her supplies in. Everything she needed for the project had been separated and pulled forward already.

"You've checked twice already, and whatever we don't have tonight, we can bring in the morning. Why are you so nervous?"

She bit her nails. "What if she backs out?"

He frowned. "She won't. Why would she? She has the best photographer and set designer coming to bless her."

"I know, but—"

"There is no buts." He grabbed her chin. "Everything is not personal. Act like you have learned something from me."

He grabbed their things and pulled her from the apartment. They packed the things they needed in his truck. Marco closed the door then went and got behind the wheel.

“So, she’s going to meet us there to open the building?” he asked her as she buckled herself in.

“Yes. She just texted and said she was leaving her hotel, so we should get there around the same time.”

When they arrived at the place, Kacie was surprised to see the building they were supposed to meet at was a two-story garage. It was a lot bigger than she was expecting, but she liked it. The space looked well kept, so if the inside looked anything like the outside, she was in for a treat.

“Wow.” Marco whistled.

“Right. I’m thinking I should have gotten a team.” The set she wanted was simple, but the items she wanted as props were expensive.

“Come on. It looks like she’s already here.” Marco pointed out the blue car parked on the side of the building. “What’s her name again?”

“Ginger,” Kacie replied.

“Is she?” Marco asked as he grabbed two bags from the back.

“Is she what?” She closed the door behind him after she grabbed two bags of her own to throw over her shoulder.

“A ginger.”

She laughed. “Not unless she hides it. She did, however, have a picture of her with fire engine red hair, and it was fantastic. You’re going to love her.”

Kacie knocked on the door. It opened to a massive showroom floor. “Hey, it’s Kacie from Silver Sets.” She and Marco stepped in, but soon as the door closed, her feet came to a stop. “What are you doing here?”

“I want to talk.” Alanah had a smug smile on her face as she stepped into the center of the room from the shadows of

the room. “Get rid of your sidekick. This is between me and you.”

Marco frowned, but she nodded for him to leave, but not before trying to signal him as she passed him her things.

“Is this about Caleb?” Her eyes widened at Marco when she said Caleb’s name, hoping he would get the hint to call him. He was one of her emergency contacts.

“Goodbye.” Alanah was rushing Marco out of the door. He went hesitantly, not wanting to leave her alone. But she wanted him to go. She needed Caleb. Oh God, how she needed him.

Kacie moved cautiously. “You went all out.” She looked over Alanah, trying to grasp her body language. She seemed cool for now, but she knew there had to be a reason she wanted her alone.

“I mean, really went all out. Fake profile...” She started to number off things they did with each other. “We’ve been going back and forth, discussing ideas. You made the full payment —”

“Thank Caleb for that.” She gloated as if it was something to be proud of. Had she forgotten he gave her that money to get rid of her? “He’s such a great guy.” Alanah moved in circles around her.

“The best,” Kacie agreed while keeping her eyes on every move the other woman made.

“Dick is immaculate, too. There are two things that Caleb knows how to do well, and that’s spoil you and fuck you.”

Alanah wanted to knock Kacie off her square, but she wasn’t having that. She forced herself not to react. That was the Caleb Alanah had but the one she had was more than just his wallet and good dick. The only thing Kacie pulled for the conversation was all the reasons Alanah didn’t deserve Caleb.

She hated the thought that Caleb used to fuck the woman in front of her.

She is beautiful, but damn, Caleb! Apparently, she is crazy as well.

“Is that what this is about?” asked Kacie.

“Not necessarily, but Caleb is mine. So why don’t you just go on about your business. Take the money and go. You’re not wanted.”

Definitely crazy.

“By who? Caleb? That’s strange, because he wasn’t saying that this morning or last night. Matter of fact, he told his parents he didn’t know what his life was like before me. Yeah, he took me to his parents’ house, and we rode through the property. Have you ever been?”

Alanah frowned.

“I’m not going anywhere. Caleb deserves someone who will love him past his pain. Did you know he was hurting, Alanah? Did you even care? I did, and you know what I did to help? I did the fucking work because that’s what you do when you love someone.” Tears formed in her eyes.

Kacie got emotional whenever it came to Caleb and his misfortunes. She would trade her life if that meant he got to live the life he deserved.

“So, no. I’m not leaving. Caleb is mine.”

“That’s not going to work for me.” Alanah reached behind her back and retrieved a gun.

* * *

“I’M PROUD OF YOU.”

Cannon slapped a firm hand over Caleb’s shoulder as they strolled through the open field behind the gas station.

“You and Dad could’ve just told me.”

He shook his head. “Dad said you had to figure it out for yourself. He said you’re too much like Mom.”

They both had to laugh because it was true.

“Thanks for having my back today.”

“Always.”

They walked a little longer before Cannon couldn't take the silence. He turned to Caleb. “Something else on your mind?”

He rubbed at the back of his neck. “I told Kacie I loved her. I don't know what made me say it.” He knew what made him say it, but he wasn't going to tell his brother that.

“She say it back?”

“I kissed her right after I said it. I was scared she wouldn't say it back.”

Cannon recoiled. “What the hell were you scared for? That girl—”

“Wait, this is her calling.”

“Caleb!”

“Marco?” He looked back at his phone to make sure he saw Kacie's name before putting it back to his ear. “Everything okay?”

“No. Some chick name Allie, Alanah, Elania, something, but she got Kacie held up in some warehouse. We thought we were meeting someone named Ginger. I don't know what's going on or what to do. She told me to get out, and Kacie asked me to leave, but I think she was trying to get me to call you. What should I do?”

“What!” Caleb took off toward the store with Cannon on his heels. “I need my keys.”

“I have my keys. I'll drive. Where are we going?” His brother pulled him toward his car.

Caleb snatched the phone from his ear to check the location of Kacie's phone. He rattled off the address and confirmed it with Marco.

“Yeah, that’s it. I think. You need to hurry and get here. I don’t know what’s going on, but Kacie didn’t look too happy to be left alone with her.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“What should I do? Do I need to go back in there?”

Alanah wanted his attention, so he wasn’t worried about her doing anything to Kacie, but he wanted to make sure Marco was good in case she had someone around to take care of him.

“No. Get in the truck and lock the doors, and Marco, be aware of your surroundings. If you hear or see anything suspicious, call me back.”

“Okay.”

Caleb could hear the locks on the truck go into place before he hung the phone up.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” He slammed his fist against the dashboard as Cannon raced toward the location he plugged into his phone.

“What’s going on?”

“Alanah has Kacie held up in some garage. I don’t know what she’s up to, but she better not touch a hair on her head.”

“She won’t get away with this.” Cannon tried to comfort him the best way he knew how.

Caleb rubbed down the bridge of his nose and sat back against the seat. The nice side of him was gone. *Say hello to the dark side.*

* * *

“DO you think that’ll change what I said?” Kacie looked into her face as they circled each other.

“Stop it.” Alanah snarled.

“Stop what? Telling you the truth?” She eased closer to her, despite her fear of the weapon in her hand.

The silver chrome reflected off the light. It was an impressive piece—manly though. Surely, it didn’t belong to her, but she was the one that held it. She was the one threatening to take her life over a man that didn’t want her, one who she hadn’t fought for.

“I DON'T WANT to do this, Kacie.” The gun shook in her hand. “So just disappear. Take your money, get in your car, and just *goooo!*”

“I can’t just disappear, Alanah. I know you like to think Caleb is yours, but he’s not going to let me go that easily.”

“He will.” She growled. “Everyone is replaceable to him.”

She shook her head slowly. “He won’t. He’ll come looking for me. He knows where I live, where my parents live. He knows the people I work with. He won’t stop until he finds me and figure out what went wrong.”

She pointed the gun at her chest. “I’m willing to take that risk.”

“I’m inside of him and him in me. We’re soul mates.”

Alanah looked down sadly, and Kacie saw the opportunity and reached for the gun.

“Stop, Kacie. Let it go!” They wrestled for the gun before a shot rang in their ears, and Alanah’s face was stuck. She looked down at the blood splattered on her shirt. She dropped to the floor with Kacie’s weak body. The only sound after that was the gun hitting the floor.

Alanah looked at the oozing hole in Kacie’s stomach in horror. She grabbed the gun and scurried away, trailing blood with her.

“Oh God!” She tried to wipe her hands, but blood was everywhere she touched. “What have I done?”

* * *

CANNON TURNED off his headlights as they pulled into the lot of the garage. Marco wasted no time jumping from the truck, racing to the car. Caleb was thankful nothing had happened to him.

“It’s been quiet, too quiet,” Marco said as Caleb opened his door.

Cannon reached in the glove compartment for his gun.

“Give it to me.” Caleb took it from him. “This is my mess to clean up.”

A gunshot sounded out. The three men scurried toward the entrance, hoping they weren’t too late.

Caleb burst into the warehouse first, the gun drawn, taking in the scene before him.

“Oh God!” Marco pushed past him. Cannon was right behind him as they raced to the body on the floor.

“She shot her!” Marco cried.

Caleb was stuck. He couldn’t get his feet to move. He couldn’t get his brain to understand what he was seeing.

“CJ!” Alanah ran to him, gripping his arms. He looked down at where she held him, and blood stained his skin. “I didn’t mean to, but you can fix this. I know you can. You’re always there for me, and you always make sure I’m okay.”

Caleb rushed her, slamming her back against the wall so hard he thought he heard the plaster crack. It pained him to put his hands on a woman, but the body of the woman he loved lay on the floor, causing him to act out of character.

He pointed the gun at Alanah’s chest. “Is she alive?” Caleb asked. “Is she breathing?” he yelled when no one answered him fast enough. He wasn’t a killer, but he would catch his first body if they said the wrong answer.

“She’s breathing,” Marco confirmed. “But she doesn’t look good. She doesn’t look good,” he mumbled.

“Shit.” Cannon cursed as he pulled his phone from his pocket, dialing 911.

“Kacie, how do you feel?” Marco asked.

He didn’t know if her voice was low or if it was the rage coursing through his body, blocking his hearing. Caleb’s hand gripped Alanah’s neck. She struggled to breathe under the pressure, but so was Kacie.

“CJ, don’t do anything now. I’ve already called nine-one-one, but believe, she’s going to get hers!” Cannon spat in her direction. “We need to take care of Kacie.” He moved to help Marco, leaving Caleb to choose what was more important: fucking with Alanah or being by Kacie’s side. The answer was easy to them but complex for Caleb. He hadn’t kept his promise. He had let Kacie down, and now she might die from his carelessness.

“C—” Alanah tried to speak his name. He squeezed her cheeks, preventing her from speaking further. He raised the gun, resting it between her lips.

“I tried to warn you, Alanah. Didn’t I?” He didn’t like guns, but he knew his way around one, thanks to his father and brother. His finger caressed the trigger, itching to apply pressure, but something held him back. The aura in the air was uncomfortable as fuck, but he forced his self to stay focus on his task.

“I—I—” She sobbed. Tears leaked from her eyes, but he had zero sympathy for her.

“Caleb. Come over here.”

He ignored Marco, staring into Alanah’s fearful eyes.

“We have to stop the bleeding.” Cannon pulled his shirt over his head. “CJ!”

Cannon calling his name sounded more like ringing in his ears. Caleb was in so much pain, knowing he hadn’t kept his

promise to Kacie. He vowed to watch over her, protect her, and he had failed.

“Caleb.” He tensed under the voice that not only called out to him, but his soul as well. He was so fucking scared to turn around.

“Kacie.” His eyes watered as he kept them trained on Alanah.

“Come to me, Caleb.”

He shook his head as the tears slipped from his eyes. “I have to take care of this.” He blinked his tears away and pressed the gun firmer into her mouth.

“Come to me.”

“I can’t. I promised to take care of you. I promised to let nothing happen to you. I promised I would carry the load. That comes with a price. I have to man up.”

“Not like this. T-t-the man I know and I-love is man enough to walk away.”

“We can’t wait anymore. You have to lie back so we can keep your blood in you,” Cannon told Kacie. In other words, she had to let them take care of her before she bled out.

“Come to me, Caleb. Hold my hand.” She held her hand out as they laid her back.

He gripped Alanah by the collar of her shirt and pulled her toward Kacie.

“No.” She cried, dragging her feet. “I can’t look at her.” She cuffed her hand over her mouth.

Caleb snatched her to him by her shirt. “You were woman enough to pull a gun on her and shoot. Be woman enough to deal with the consequences.” He threw her at Kacie’s feet. “Stay.”

Marco held his bag open and nodded for Caleb to place the gun inside. “Go ahead.” He did, then dropped to his knees by Kacie’s head.

Cannon pressed his shirt to her bleeding gut. She winced. “Sorry, princess. We’re almost finished.”

“Caleb.” Kacie raised, shaking hands to his face when he was at her side. He brought them to his face and took a deep inhale. This was his woman, and she couldn’t leave him.

“Marco, give me your shirt. CJ, place yours under her head.”

Cannon balled up Marco’s shirt and put it against her back. He looked at the blood on his hands, then at Alanah.

“She’s good?” Caleb asked after he placed his shirt under her head.

Cannon’s nod was delayed. “I’ve done everything I know how to do.” She just had to make it until help arrived.

“You hear that, baby? Cannon fixed you up good enough. You just have to hold on until help arrives.” He clamped her hand in his.

“I’ll go see if I see help coming.” Marco stood to his feet and secured his bag on his back. He stared a hole in Alanah.

“She’s not going anywhere. Jail or death is her only two options. She can cooperate and wait for the law or try to run and meet her maker,” Cannon said.

Marco nodded and moved out the door.

“I never thought I would be shot.” Kacie peered down at her stomach. “I’m getting a little cold.”

Cannon reached for her right hand, cuffing it between his.

“Shhhh, try not to talk. Help is coming, Kacie. You have to hold on.” Caleb used his other hand to stroke her hairline lazily.

“I was waiting on you.” She smiled weakly at him. “I knew you were coming.”

“You have to stay with me.” It felt like fucking déjà vu.

“You have to ask me questions.”

He squeezed her hand, fighting back tears. “What’s your favorite color?”

“You know my favorite color,” she whispered.

“I want you to tell me.”

“Black. What’s your favorite color?” Her lips curved.

“You know my favorite color.”

“Black.” She coughed up blood, and Cannon used the back of his hand to wipe her mouth.

“Ask me something you haven’t asked me before.” She stared into his eyes, but it wasn’t her stare. The look in her eyes was distant. He leaned down, resting his forehead against hers.

“Do you love me, Kacie?”

“With my whole heart,” she whispered weakly.

Caleb nodded. With blurry eyes, he searched for help. Any minute he was waiting for the door to fly open. He was looking for someone to bring the horrible nightmare to an end. “Where’s the fucking ambulance?”

“I’m so sorry, Caleb.” Alanah was crying. He couldn’t even hate her. The fear was so overwhelming. “I was just trying to scare her off.”

“I need you to shut up!” He continued looking around aimlessly. He looked to his brother. His jaw was clenched as he fought back tears. It was the one time Cannon couldn’t help him.

“God, I need you,” he cried out.

“I hear the sirens.” Cannon stood to his feet.

“You listen to me, Kacie.” Caleb turned her head toward him. “Living without you isn’t an option.”

“What was the first question you asked me when you met me?”

“What?” He frowned. “I don’t know.”

“You know.”

“I asked if you were alright, and then I probably asked for your name.”

“That’s right, baby.” She relaxed, closing her eyes.

“Don’t do that, baby. Keep your eyes open for me.” She looked at him, and he cuffed her face. “When you said your whole name, I knew I would never forget it.”

“I’ll never forget that you were the best part of that day.”

Her eyes closed, her hand going limp in his.

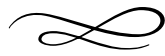
“Kace? Kacie!” He looked at his brother, then back at her.

“She’s losing a lot of damn blood.” Cannon rummaged through the garage for anything to replace the shirts that was soaked in her blood.

Alanah leaned up to see her, then she began to cry.

“Cannon, something is wrong...”

Sixteen



FOR LIFE

“IS SHE...?” Caleb looked at his brother.

Cannon checked her pulse. “No. She’s still breathing but unconscious.”

Caleb felt his brother watching to see what his next move would be. He didn’t have one. He was just going to sit beside Kacie and be her comfort like she had done him so many times.

“You remember when you fell out of that tree in our backyard when you were fourteen?”

He shook his head thinking about how he wanted to prove his toughness. “I smacked the shit out of my head and broke my damn arm.”

“You were unconscious.”

“Yeah.”

“Remember you told us you could hear Mom fussing at you to get up.”

“Yeah. She said if I didn’t get up, she was going to beat me conscious if I didn’t wake up.” Caleb shook his head.

“But you woke up.” He snorted. “She was so scared, like you are now, but you could hear her voice, even when no one thought you could.” He looked down at Kacie. “She can hear you.”

Leaning over, putting his lips close to her ear, Caleb whispered what was on his mind. “You don’t get to die on me.”

You hear me? You don't get to fill my head and heart with hope and then just leave. Not like this!" he stressed. "You can't leave me after I found the love I always wanted."

She gave no signs that she heard him, but she was still breathing, and that was good enough for him.

"It was never supposed to be like this."

Caleb's and Cannon's heads snapped in the direction of the voice. Alanah had slid back to where she had been by the wall. She held the gun in her hand, and he cursed, regretting putting his gun in Marco's bag.

"What are you doing, Alanah? You've caused enough trouble. Think about what you're doing." Cannon tried to talk some sense into her.

She sat, looking at Kacie with a distant look in her eyes. "When I took Reggie's gun, I didn't think it was loaded. Now, I know it is." She shook her head. "How can I live with myself knowing I killed someone?"

"Shut the fuck up! She's not dead." Caleb couldn't give a damn about the weapon in her hand.

She put the gun to her head. "But I should be."

"Alanah!" Cannon yelled as she pulled the trigger.

The click sound had tears running down her face. She tried again, but nothing happened. The eerie silence was like nails on a chalkboard. No one moved—stuck in a world of what ifs.

"Police!" They ran in, guns pointed at Alanah. They took the gun from her and forced her on her belly, where they cuffed her. Pulling her up, the police led her from the building, reading her rights to her as she cried hysterically. The paramedics were let inside when the scene was secured.

Caleb only let Kacie's hand go when she was loaded into the ambulance. When she was settled in, he was back by her side.

"It's okay, baby. I'm here. I'm never leaving you." He held her hand to his lips, letting his tears fall freely.

“Sorry. I need her hand for a minute.”

Caleb moved out of the way so they could work on her. He sat back and prayed harder than he ever prayed before.

His eyes were closed tight.

“You’re supposed to take me trail riding.” Behind his lids were vivid pictures of him and Kacie in the dirty south.

“We have to go to Vancouver and walk across that damn bridge you Google twice a month. You picked out the perfect hotel and even looked at homes there because you were afraid you wouldn’t want to leave.” He chuckled at the memories of seeing her laid across his bed on her laptop, checking into relocating. He wanted more of that. More memories. More love.

The paramedic rejoined their hands, causing him to open his eyes. He looked down at Kacie’s angelic face.

“Come back to me, Kacie. What will I do if my heart is not here?”

Her hand tightened around his, and he threw his head back, feeling the tiniest bit of relief.

“Seems like you have a fighter on your hands. We’re going to do all we can. She’s not the only one fighting for her life.”

With Kacie squeezing his hand and the kind words of the young woman, Kacie would come back from this. She was a fighter—his fighter. His love. His forever.

* * *

KACIE LAY STIFFLY, afraid to open her eyes. She didn’t want to be dead. A part of her knew she wasn’t. The pain that radiated from her abdomen was a sure sign. Still, she kept her eyes closed for another few precious seconds.

Slowly, her lids parted. She took in the sterile room of the hospital. Tears gathered in her eyes when she saw Caleb in the chair next to her bed. It reminded her so much of the first time she woke to him in the similar position.

“Caleb.” She reached out to touch his hand. “Caleb.”

He jumped, his eyes bloodshot as they moved around, trying to figure out his location. When his eyes finally landed on her, it seemed to ease him, but only a little. He was still bothered; she could tell by his tense shoulders.

“Hey.” She said the only thing that came to mind. She was holding back tears as she felt his brokenness she had caused.

“Hey.” He leaned up in the chair, taking her hand and resting it against his face. He inhaled her. She knew he was fighting back tears. “They said you were okay, but until you woke up...” He shook his head as his words trailed off.

“I’m okay.” She rubbed her hand over his head.

“Everyone is here. I should go get the doctor, and they’ll probably start letting them come back and see you.”

“Okay.” The tears she was trying to hold back came tumbling down.

The first stop Caleb made was at the nurse’s station to inform them Kacie was awake. The next stop was in the private waiting room the hospital let them use.

With the event that went on, the police had a lot of questioning going on. With them being Jacksons, they were being extra *diligent* to make sure they didn’t have a hand in what happened. The police may have been asses, but the hospital staff was very accommodating.

“Kacie’s awake,” he announced when he pulled the door open, and everyone looked to him for answers.

“Oh, thank God! When can I see my baby?” Kacie’s mother, Wynn, jumped up, and her father, Gregory, wrapped his arm over her shoulder, waiting on his answer.

“I just let the nurse know she was awake. She paged her doctor, and he should be down soon to look over her. You two should go.”

Wynn wasted no time heading out the door. “Thank you.” Gregory looked into his eyes when the words left his lips. He

then patted his shoulder twice before following his wife out of the door.

“Gia.” Caleb kneeled in front of her. “She made it.” Her knee bounced in a steady rhyme. She was crying, worried about her friend, but there was no need to worry anymore. “Gia.” He clamped his hands over her knees. “She’s going to be okay. You can go home now.”

He wasn’t prepared for when she dropped into his arms. Her boyfriend, Jalil, rubbed her back as she cried on Caleb’s shoulders.

“Thank you. Thank you. For then and for now.” Gia cried.

He nodded in understanding. Both times, there was no other place he’d rather been than by Kacie’s side.

“Take her home,” he said to Jalil when he pulled away, letting the other man take his spot in her arms.

Jalil nodded and pulled Gia from the room. Marco stood. He seemed to still be in a daze. “Do you need a ride home?”

“No. I’ll take an Uber to my truck.” He rubbed at his face. The police had given him the okay to pick up his truck, but like everyone else, he had been stuck thinking about Kacie, hoping she pulled through.

“I’ll drop you off with your truck.” Cannon came over to his brother, putting his hand on his shoulder. “You alright, baby boy?”

“I’m good. I want to thank y’all for sticking around.”

“We wouldn’t have it any other way. She’s family.” Cannon turned to Marco. “Ready?”

He nodded. “Caleb, can you call me if anything changes?” Marco asked.

“Will do. Take care of yourself.” They shook hands.

“And you take care of my girl. I’ll visit as soon as they allow others in.”

“Please do. I know she’ll love that.” Caleb forced a smile.

When Cannon and Marco left, it only left him and his parents, who sat on the opposite sides of the room. He plopped down on the couch and released a slow, deep breath.

“I’m going to go get us some coffee.” His father placed a kiss on his wife’s head before he left the room. It was like he knew Caleb wanted—no, needed his mother.

“I’m glad Kacie is okay.” She started simple, but it was more to come. His mother always went about comforting him with ease.

He stayed silent, shifting uncomfortably in his spot. The lump in his throat forbade words from leaving his mouth.

“Carmen’s at the house.” She eased down on the couch beside him. “She came all the way from school to check on her big brother.”

Caleb’s jaw clenched. His mother’s voice was tied to his heartstrings. Each word pulled at them.

“She wanted to make sure you were alright.” She put her arm behind his back. “Are you alright?”

“I thought she had died,” he choked out. “God, her hand slipping from my hand stopped my heart. Then Cannon stepped in... I don’t know what I would’ve done if she had died.” He fell into his mother’s arms, and she wrapped him in the tightest embrace. Her small frame took as much of his enormous body into hers as she could.

“You were so strong yesterday and today. You deserve a moment.” Her words danced around him in a protective barrier, replacing negative thought with her positive thinking. She rocked her baby until he was content.

Caleb settled down then went across the hall to the bathroom and splashed water on his face. When he went back to the conference room, his father had returned with three cups of coffee. He wasn’t much of a coffee drinker, but it had been a long twenty-four hours.

“Come home with us. Just for a little while. Take a shower, eat some food, and get some sleep,” his mother encouraged.

“I know you want to stay, but give her some time with her parents, then you come back later, and they can go home and get some rest. How does that sound?”

“Okay.”

He said a quick goodbye to Kacie. She was already falling back asleep when he entered the room. He said his goodbyes to the Benjamins with a promise to return and relieve them in the morning.

The ride to his parents’ house was quicker than normal, but he hadn’t been paying attention; his thoughts were only on the woman he left in a hospital bed.

Showered and changed, he went downstairs where his mother cooked fried pork chops, mashed potatoes, green beans, and rolls. His father had left, taking a plate to Kacie’s parents.

Caleb started. “I’ll be right back.” Denise had a worried look on her face, so he added, “I just want to get some air, walk off this food.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“Stay here and wait for Dad to get back. I won’t be gone for long.” He grabbed the flashlight and moved out the door.

He walked down the path he and Kacie rode just the other day. He didn’t make it to their spot, but he found a suitable space when he couldn’t walk any farther. He removed his shoes and stood tall, closing his eyes. He rested his hand on his chest, focusing within, listening to his own heartbeat.

“Do you feel me, Kacie?”

* * *

“MS. BENJAMIN, I want you to stay out of my hospital.” Everyone laughed at Dr. Danny’s words. She had joined Kacie’s doctor when they were getting ready to discharge her.

After weeks of recovery, it was time for Kacie to go home.

During her recovery period, Kacie had fallen more and more in love with Caleb. Every day for a little over three weeks, he was there helping her in and out of bed. He helped her down the hall on the mandatory walks. He even endured the diet with her while in her presence.

“If things go my way, you won’t see me here ever again.” With assistance, Kacie was in the wheelchair, ready to roll out.

“I’m going to hold you to that.” Dr. Danny and Dr. McMillan wished her well then left her in the hands of Nurse Ashely, who became attached to Kacie and was sad to see her go.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yes!”

* * *

KACIE WAS SO ready to get home. It took her a minute to see they were going in the opposite direction of home. “Where are we going?”

“Your parents’ house. I talked to them, and we all agreed it was a good idea you stay with them for a while. Your mom is home all the time. You’ll have someone to look after you here.”

“Oh, okay.” Something was off with him. She could feel it. Even at the hospital, he had been too quiet. She thought he would be more excited that she was coming home, but everything was an adjustment, so she didn’t press the issue.

When they arrived, her father came and helped her into the house while Caleb got her things. Her mom had set up her old room with linens, and her bathroom was stocked with all her necessities.

Her mom and dad fixed lunch while Caleb helped her get settled. She had showered at the hospital, so he slipped an oversized shirt over her head, and he helped her into bed.

“You okay?” she asked him as he started unloading her bag, tossing dirty clothes into the hamper.

“Yeah, I’m fine. How are you?”

She frowned at his plain tone. “As good as I can be.”

Once the clothes were taken care of, he looked at her and asked, “Is there anything else you want me to do before I leave?”

“You’re leaving?” She sat up with a wince, and he rushed to her side.

“Take it easy, Kace.”

She pushed his hands away. “Don’t touch me until you tell me what’s wrong with you. I know when something is bothering you.”

He dropped his hands to his side. “It’s nothing. I wasn’t going to be gone long.”

“It’s something, and you’re not leaving until you tell me.” Technically, he could leave, and there wasn’t much she could do about it, but she still stood on her words. “Now, talk.”

“You want me to talk and tell you what’s on my mind?”

“Yes.”

He started to open his mouth, but he snapped it shut. “This is not the time for that,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Tell me, no, you don’t want to talk about it, and I’ll leave it alone.” She wasn’t being fair, but she couldn’t stand seeing him full of discomfort. It hurt her more than it did him.

“I almost got you killed!” he blurted out. “Your blood was on my hands, Kacie. Literally!”

“There it is. Get it out.” She nodded.

“I thought you were going to die, right there in my arms. You’re around here laughing and shit while I’m torn up on the inside. I haven’t found shit funny in almost a month.”

“Come here.”

“No.” He turned his back to her.

“You want me to get out of bed to come to you? I will.” She pushed the covers back.

Immediately, he came and covered her back up before sitting on the edge of the bed.

She grabbed his face with both hands and pulled him down to her, their noses touching.

“What would my life be like without you in it? You came in and gave my life meaning, and just like that, it was almost taken away,” Caleb said.

“You would take what you learned from me and apply it to your life and move on.”

He pulled back. “I couldn’t.”

“You could.” She grabbed his hand and brought it to her heart. “It’s beating. I’m here and I’m yours.”

“It still doesn’t change the fact of what happened that day.”

“Breathe, Caleb,” she coached.

He took in a breath and her words.

“There you go.” Caleb slid down the bed and rested his head in her lap as she rubbed her hand over his head. “It happened, but you know what else happened? You happened. You came just like I knew you would, and you were by my side just like I knew you would be.”

“Yes, I got shot, but I also got surgery that fixed me right on up. Yes, I have bad days, but I have you and my family to remind me of the good days.” She stared off as she continued to rub his head. “One thing about the sun, it’ll shine again.”

“How’d you get so knowledgeable?”

“Life.” She forced herself not to react to the words that were about to leave her mouth. If he felt her true feelings, there would be no way he would listen to her. “Don’t get mad when I say this.”

He sat up. “What?”

“Subconsciously, you brought me here because you need a break from me, and that’s okay.”

He frowned. “You’re wrong. When I said I was leaving, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I’m not wrong. Why else would you bring me here, Caleb? You would’ve taken me to your house and cared for me, babied me, but I know this is hard for you to process.”

“No.”

“Yes,” she stressed. She knew he was going to fight this, but it was for his own good.

He scowled. “You don’t get to tell me how I feel. Stop trying to get in my head, Kacie!”

She shook her head. “I’m in your heart.”

That broke him down. It got him to see what she already knew. “You’re safe here.”

“I’m safe with you, too. You have to believe that, though.”

He bit his fist then placed it under his chin. “Why did it have to be you?”

“Why not me?”

“Stop it, Kacie! Just stop with the mind games.” He pushed off the bed, then began pacing. “It’s like you want to push me away.”

He sighed, looking at everything but her.

“We can talk every day in the morning before work and when you get home, but don’t come here, Caleb, until you’re ready.” The sternness in her voice softened. “Until you’re really ready.”

He came to stand over her, looking down at her face. She tried to read his face, but he held a blank expression. She was surprised when his head lowered, and she felt his lips on hers.

On a sigh, he pulled back, staring into her eyes with acceptance. They both knew this was the right thing to do for the sake of their relationship.

“Go. I’ll be fine. Go.” She fiddled with the covers on the bed, anything to avoid his gaze so she wouldn’t cry.

“I’ll be back. I always come back. You know this is a forever thang.”

“I know,” she whispered.

He nodded. “As long as you know.”

Kacie watched him go, and she begged her tears to stay at bay.

It seemed like only seconds passed by when her mother stood in the doorway.

“Caleb’s gone?”

“Yeah.” She sniffed. “He’ll be back, though.” She nodded her head as tears rolled down her cheek. “Caleb always comes back.” Not being able to hold her emotions in any longer, she looked to her mother for comfort. “Is it crazy that I miss him already?”

Her mom came in, and Kacie wrapped her arms around her neck. She said she didn’t want to be strong, but she would also be strong for him when needed. Even though it was hard letting him go, she had to. But what comforted her was she knew love would bring him back home.

Seventeen



FOR LOVE

“THIS IS SO ROMANTIC, CJ.” Caleb’s sister, Carmen, was overwhelmed with excitement to help him surprise Kacie. “I can’t wait to meet the woman who has you so twisted in love.”

Caleb smiled at her as she spread the roses between the lined path of candles and stones leading to the hallway.

“Does twisted in love mean whipped?” Cannon came and tossed the remaining candles in the bag Caleb had packed with all the items he had needed for tonight’s setup.

“Shut up, Cannon. I’ll be glad when some woman steals your heart. I hope she takes your ass for a wild ride before giving into you,” Carmen sassed.

“Long as she rides it good, they’ll be no problems.”

Caleb laughed as Carmen sucked her teeth. “Long as you know, you’re never getting married.”

He put her in the headlock, and Caleb had to break them up.

“Will the two of you help me finish so we won’t be late?”

“We’re changing here, right?” Carmen asked.

“Yes. Mom and Dad will meet us there.”

“I’ll go get our bags out of the car.” Cannon went out the door, and Carmen came to stand beside him as he looked around in amazement. He hoped Kacie liked it.

“Tonight’s a big night, CJ. Are you nervous?”

“No.” Surprisingly, he wasn’t. The week he and Kacie spent apart only strengthened his love for her. He was ready for the next step.

* * *

KACIE GROANED as the doorbell chimed throughout the house. Her parents were gone, so it left her to drag herself from her room to get the door.

“I’m coming!” she yelled when the person laid on the bell. When she made it to the door, she was going to tear into them.

“I said I’m coming!” She unlocked the door and jerked it open. “Who the hell is ringing—”

“What you gon’ do about it?” Gregg jumped out of his hiding spot, wrapping his arms around her.

“Oh my God. What are you doing here?” She embraced her brother tight. It had been too long since she saw him.

“I had to check on my baby girl. I’m here for two weeks.”

“Oh Lord.” She playfully huffed as she pulled away from him.

“That’s right. I’m going to be getting on your nerves for old times’ sake. Now, go get dressed. I want to take you out to dinner.”

“I don’t know if I feel like going out.” Besides the fact that she was on a strict diet, she was missing Caleb too much. She didn’t feel like being around a lot of people.

“Come on now. When have you turned down food?”

Deciding she could go out with her brother since it had been a while, she agreed. “Alright, but you better be glad I can’t eat too much. I would run that tab up tonight.”

“That’s the only reason I invited you. You have never been afraid to put food away.” He laughed. “Now, go ahead. I know it’s been a long time since you’ve been out. So take your time

and get real pretty. While you do that, I'm going to call Aniya to tell her I made it."

"Okay!" Kacie was excited her brother was home. He lived west of North Carolina and was busy with work, so it wasn't often she got to see him.

Like Gregg had suggested, she took her time getting ready. After her shower, she searched in her old closet, hoping she could still fit the clothes in there.

She found a salmon colored long sleeve shirt she tucked into dark, high-waisted jeans. She paired her outfit with chestnut-colored chunky heels.

She returned to the bathroom and ran a few products through her strands to bring out her curls, giving her the wash-and-go look. She used her diffuser to dry her hair completely then picked at her roots to give her hair volume. In the mirror, she admired her fluffy curls and laid edges.

"Cause we love some big hair." She smiled at her reflection.

Kacie did her makeup, going all out with lashes, blush, contour, highlight, and matte lipstick. Though she wore a full face, she still looked natural with the warm tones of the neutral colors she used.

She checked over herself one last time before grabbing her purse and meeting Gregg in the living room.

In the car, they talked about him and the family most of the ride until he shifted the conversation to her.

"Dad said he met someone named Caleb at your house. Who's Caleb, Kacie?"

She couldn't stop the goofy smile that spread across her face.

Though she hadn't seen him in a week, her feelings remained the same, which resulted in her missing him something terrible.

She planned to text him at dinner and ask him to come over. Hopefully, with one look at her, he would whisk her off

to his house and do damage to her insides. Well, not literally. Her insides were still recovering from previous damage.

Kacie rolled her eyes, thinking about the way things had gone down that day. She knew she was supposed to forgive and forget, but she had wished awful shit on Alanah while she was recovering in the hospital.

She still remembered hearing her crying at her feet as she fought for her life. *Crazy bitch.*

Nevertheless, she was thankful to be alive and satisfied Alanah would spend many years behind bars.

“Kacie! I said who’s Caleb?” Gregg snapped his fingers in front of her face.

Before she could answer, the lights and the people gathered on the side of the road caught her attention. “I wonder what’s going on over there?”

“You’re nosy. Don’t try to get out of answering my question.”

“Whatever.” She laughed but stopped when she felt the car slowing down. Gregg turned into a neighborhood, and she was confused. “We’re eating at someone’s house?” She frowned.

Before he could answer, she saw a group of people waiting in the small parking lot of the community. She squinted her eyes because she thought she saw Caleb.

“What’s going on?” she asked her brother.

“You’ll see.” He smiled.

The car stopped in front of the group, and she had indeed seen Caleb, and he was holding a candle in front of him. He opened the door for her and helped her out of the car. She only had eyes for him at the moment. She felt like she could breathe easier; a huge weight lifted off her chest.

“I missed you.” She leaned up and kissed him. It hurt a little, but it went away the minute her lips touched his.

“I missed you too. You look nice.”

She was crying as she dusted at the imaginary lint on his dress shirt. “I thought I was going to dinner.”

He gave her a wicked smile as he wiped away her tears with his thumb. “Not yet, love.”

She knew he was up to something. “What’s going on, Caleb? And who are all these people?”

He shrugged, passing his candle to Gregg, who moved in front of them. “Come with me.” Caleb took her hand and led her toward the street where their family and friends stood, and they were holding candles too.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I’ve missed you so much. Have you fallen out of love with me? I shouldn’t have suggested we take a break,” she chatted as he dragged her behind him.

“Shhh.” He put her in front of the sign facing him, and their family and friends stood behind him, looking at them with giant smiles.

“Hey, y’all.” She waved at them before looking back at Caleb. “Cal—”

“I could never fall out of love with you, Kacie. I’ve never been more in love with you than right now. Under the stars and moon, you’re glowing, not just on the outside, but on the inside as well. You’ve been my shining light since I’ve met you.” He cleared his throat. “Turn around and read the sign.”

Kacie didn’t remember a sign being there before, so she whipped around and began reading the words.

“Adopt a highway,” she read aloud. “Kacie... J-Jackson Highway.”

“I know this isn’t the most romantic place, but I couldn’t think of a better place to ask you to be my wife than the place we first met.”

She was speechless.

Caleb got down on one knee. “Now, you can’t say no because it’s already on the sign.” Everyone laughed. “But I’ll still ask. Kacie Renee Benjamin, will you put the best in my

best friend? Can we share secrets and chocolate?” He chuckled. “Can you be my lover for a lifetime? Say you’ll be Mrs. Kacie Jackson.”

She fell to her knees and sealed their fate with a soul-tying kiss. In that moment, no one existed but him and her. She was glad to be back in the arms of the man she loved, and she couldn’t wait to spend the rest of her life with him.

* * *

WHEN CALEB HAD OPENED the car door and pulled Kacie out, he immediately regretted not seeing her.

Now, sitting beside her at dinner, he felt relieved. He was happy that she was happy.

Tonight, he had taken the first step in making Kacie his wife, and now she was conversing with his sister while he chopped it up with her brother, both of them building bonds with each other’s family.

It was a good day to be alive, celebrating life and love. Alanah had almost taken away a friend, a daughter, and a wife, but that didn’t happen, and in that, they fellowshipped.

Later that night, after the goodbyes and promises to talk later, Caleb placed her in his car and drove her to the surprise he couldn’t wait for her to see.

“I can’t take any more surprises, Caleb. It’s already been an amazing night. Nothing can top being your future wife.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but I just have one more thing. You know I can’t help but spoil you.”

“I can think of a few ways for you to spoil me.”

“I promise to take care of that, but first...” He pointed to get her attention on the building. “What does the sign say?” he asked as he pulled into the parking lot of a strip mall.

Silver Sets, Photography and Set Building.

When Kacie saw her company's name across the building, she screamed, letting her voice rip through the night.

“No you didn't get me a studio!” She got out of the car before he was even parked and ran to the door. She would be hurting something serious later, but the entire night was worth it.

She opened the door, and Marco was seated in one of the waiting chairs. “It's about time you got here.”

She looked around the space, amazed. Rose petals, candles, and soft music whispered in the background. The area was spacious, and everything she would need was already in place. She was blown away by their thoughtfulness. “Who did this?”

“Your man went all out, but everyone was happy he asked us to play a part in this surprise. He's definitely a keeper.” He stepped aside. “Come take a look at this.”

She approached the thin box he had been standing in front of. “What's this?” she asked Marco.

“Open it and see,” Caleb said from behind her.

She pulled at the wrapping paper, then pulled at the folds of the box to reveal a photo of her and Caleb from the rainy day they had their own personal photo shoot.

“You'll see more of you and Marco's work as you walk around, but this one is special. I looked at it every day since you sent it to me so many months ago. It was the first time I held a camera. The first picture we took together. The first time I knew I had feelings for you.” Caleb wrapped his arms around her. She kissed him passionately, getting lost in their world before the clearing of a throat brought them back to earth.

She turned to Marco. “You knew!” she accused.

“Great minds think alike, but Caleb was a few steps ahead of you. He asked me the same day of the shoot if I could turn a few pictures into canvases.”

“I had no idea what I was going to do with them at the time, but I knew it would be something special,” Caleb said.

“What am I going to do with you?” Kacie asked.

“Love me.” He helped her prop the picture against the counter. “We look good together,” he whispered in her ear. “I can’t wait for you to see the one placed above the headboard at home.”

“My house or yours?”

“Mine that will soon become ours.” He kissed her before turning to Marco. “Thank you, man.” Caleb extended his hand.

“No problem. I’m going to get out of here and let Kacie explore her space,” he said to her. “I know you’re going to do great things here.” He wished them the best and said good night as he headed for the door. “Oh, and one more thing...”

She looked back at him.

“I think I need a partner. My clientele is growing, and I’m trying to expand and delegate. Do you know any bad ass photographers and set designers that would be interested?”

She jumped into Marco’s arms, and he swung her around.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, baby girl.” He breathed out, holding her tight. “How does it feel to become?”

“Good. I feel fulfilled.” She became teary-eyed. “Of course I’ll be your partner.”

He pulled away, wiping her tears away. “Finish healing up, get this place how you like it, then give me a call when you’re ready to jump in. I’ll be waiting for you.”

“I will.” When Marco left, she moved back to Caleb. “Isn’t today a great day?”

“Best day. Let me show you around.”

She was in awe. Each room had a unique theme. Marco definitely had a hand in helping decorate. She was impressed

with every area of the space, but the last room he showed her was the best.

“Is that a mirror on the ceiling?”

She moved to the bed, and above was her reflection. “Oh my God! I need my camera. I can’t wait to get someone under this.”

“Funny, I had the same idea.” He pushed her on the bed and crawled on top of her, keeping his weight off of her.

Any thought she had about a shoot rushed from her mind as she enjoyed Caleb’s lips on hers. She missed his kiss, his touch.

She missed him.

“Caleb.” She called his name with an urgency that he didn’t seem to reciprocate. He took his time mating her mouth. His thumb rubbed over her stiff hard nipples as she pushed more of her breasts into his hand. She pushed into the erection that sat snugly between her legs.

“You need to heal, baby.” Caleb broke away from the kiss.

“You can heal me. I know you can.”

He chuckled, rolling to her side. “Baby, I don’t want to see you back in the hospital.”

“Okay, okay.” She snuggled into his side. “It’s good just being back in your arms. I’m sorry I forced you away.”

“It’s cool, baby.” He rubbed her arm.

“No, it’s not. You were right about me being in your head, trying to tell you how you felt. I had no right. Your feelings are valid, but I ignored them because I thought I knew what was best for you.”

“Kacie, you were right.” He interlocked their fingers. “You know me. I needed that time away.” He nodded. “I have a therapist. My mom agreed I should’ve been had one. I went through a drastic weight loss at a young age. I had my daddy issues, women problems, and the whole Alanah thing was just icing on the cake. You did right pushing me away. It made me

seek the help I needed. I can't allow you to be my only outlet. I have to know myself outside of you and our relationship." He put her hand to his heart.

"I've been singing more, going on bike rides, and exercising. Not the aggressive stuff, just something to loosen me up and keep me active." He laughed. "I've even been doing yoga. Maybe you can join me."

"I would love to." She looked up at him. "I don't deserve you."

"Lies." He kissed her forehead.

"Look at this place. I need to do something for you." She sat up and placed her finger to her lips, thinking. "Okay, you can choose the location of our honeymoon and name our firstborn."

"Are you pregnant?" He snapped up, horrified. "The baby would've been small. Too small to detect when you were shot. If—"

"I'm not pregnant, Caleb." She laughed.

He sighed.

"Are you disappointed?"

"No, relieved, baby. I just was thinking about a way I can break into prison to strangle Alanah. I'm still mad about how she tried to take the easy way out."

She cackled. Caleb told her about Alanah's suicide attempt. The only thing Kacie could do at the time was shake her head. Now, she could laugh about it.

"Please, papa." She rubbed away his frown lines. "Listen, I want more time alone with you before kids come into the picture."

"I agree. I always wanted kids, but I never thought I would find the right woman to have them with. Every woman isn't mother material."

"That's the truth. So, do you have any names in mind?"

“Boy or girl, I would like Harper. You can pick the middle name when we find out the gender.”

She rested her head on his shoulder, and he laid them back on the bed. “I love Harper.”

“And I love you,” he confessed.

“Can I say it back now?”

He laughed. She knew he had remembered kissing her because he was afraid she wouldn't say it back. “Yes, you can say it back.”

“I loved you then, and I love you now.”

Eighteen



FOREVER

Two years later

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

“COME ON, Caleb. Why are you moving so slow?” Kacie asked her husband as she put on the finishing touches of her makeup.

“I thought this was supposed to be a vacation. When I pictured this trip, I envisioned spending one day exploring and the other four locked in the room, ravishing my wife.”

Kacie laughed as she listened to him fuss while he got dressed.

The couple spent a year falling more in love with each other before finally tying the knot.

With Kacie’s blessing, Caleb booked a magnificent venue for their wedding and a wonderful hotel for their honeymoon in Texas. Enchanting views and glamorous decor was their background as they said “I do” in a room full of family and closest friends.

With a lot of things going on with their businesses, it was more convenient for them to stay in the states. So they went to Texas with the promises of going somewhere spectacular for their first anniversary.

With them staying local for their honeymoon, it allowed Caleb to take part in his first trail ride. Their honeymoon photo album held glorious memories and pictures of them covered in

mud, participating in line dancing, and stuffing their faces with the best barbeque in the land.

After the trail ride, they spent the following days hiding in the hotel, getting massages, playing games, and hanging out by the fire pit. There was where they roasted marshmallows over filthy conversations about their plans for later once they made it back to the room. When night fell, Kacie talked him into sleeping outside under the stars.

Now it was their one-year anniversary, and they were celebrating in the place she never thought she would visit. That was what Caleb did for her, turned her dreams into realities.

He wasn't onboard when she asked if their parents could come along. Eventually, he gave in, but not without stipulations that she was only too happy to oblige. After all, she did have a plan to accomplish.

Today had been their first full day, and they toured the Capilano Suspension Bridge Park. Kacie and her mom had been winded while the men kept a steady pace. The star was Denise, who she called Ma. She led the pack in each activity, fussing for everyone to keep up with her. Tomorrow they had other activities planned, and Kacie knew she couldn't hold off on her secret any longer.

"Shouldn't the family dinner be on the last day?" Caleb griped.

"We'll do that too, but tonight I wanted everyone together. Why are you being such a grouch?"

He sighed as he sat back from tying his shoes. "I'm sorry. I've just been exhausted lately."

He was falling ill to a medical mystery.

She smiled, walking over to stand between his spread legs. "You can rest easy tonight, papa." She kissed his cheek, and he looked up at her funny. "What?"

"I'm usually the one with surprises. Why do I feel you have something up your sleeve?" He lifted a brow.

“Because I do.” She pecked his lips and tried to move away, but he trapped her, snapping his legs shut and grabbing her hips.

“Where you going?” He stood. “We have a few minutes. I can get it out of you.” He wrapped his arms around her waist, running his tongue up and down her neck.

“Oh, no you don’t.” It felt so good being in his arms, his lips on her body, but she had to stay focused.

Kacie pushed at his arms, wiggling out of his grasp. “We have to be early. You know my parents are always fifteen minutes early, so we need to be heading down to the restaurant now.” She grabbed her purse, camera bag, and the gift bags.

He took them from her, and she made him promise not to peek in them.

“I won’t look,” he grumbled.

Caleb pouted all the way to the elevator before she had enough.

“You’re acting like a big baby,” she said as the doors closed behind them.

“I want to be inside of you.” He pulled her in front of him and whispered in her ear. They were on the elevator alone, but he knew his lips being so close to her spot would make her submit, but not this time. At least she hoped not.

“It’s only been two days.”

“Two days is too long.”

She sighed playfully and pulled out of his arms. She moved to the elevator doors, making sure she was ready for her exit.

“What are you doing?”

Kacie’s hands went under her dress.

“Giving you something that will shut you up.”

She stepped out of her underwear and tossed them to him. He caught them effortlessly. He put them to his nose and

inhaled, breathing in her scent.

Right on time, the bell sounded, and the doors of the elevator spread for her to slip away.

“You’re playing a real dangerous game,” he called out from behind her. She could feel him towering over her, but he kept space between them. The gap he had between them was teasing, heightening the sexual tension between them.

“I like the games we play.” She looked over her shoulder.

He didn’t speak, but his smirk had her tunnel clenching. After tonight, she promised herself not to surprise Caleb. He was always a step ahead of her, and anything he didn’t know, he had the necessary tools to pull it out of her.

As they were escorted to the private room for dinner, Kacie took notice of his silence. She was going to say something to him until they bumped into his parents, and they walked into the room together.

“WHAT DO you have in your mouth?” Caleb’s mother asked as she pulled away from their hug.

Caleb only smiled, looking down at Kacie.

“Kacie, what does this boy have in his mouth?”

“I don’t know, Ma.” She snatched the linen napkin from the table, holding it to his mouth. He released her panties, and she stuffed them and the napkin in her bag.

“It was just some candy I was trying to savor,” he said with a straight face.

“You’re going to spoil your dinner.” Denise frowned.

“That was just the appetizer.”

“Pay him no mind.” Kacie pushed him toward their table. He pulled out her chair then moved to his chair after placing the bags close to the edge of the table. “Sit down before you embarrass me.” Kacie laughed.

“I said you were playing a dangerous game—my game. Just accept your defeat in seduction.”

“So I can’t seduce you?”

“Oh, you can.” He gripped her thigh, using his thumb to stroke her soft skin close to her warm center. “Just with the little things, but I’m better at it, baby.”

She shivered, proving his point. She pushed his hand away before grabbing her glass of water.

“Sorry we’re late. We overslept,” Kacie’s dad announced as they came into the room.

It was only a few minutes after their scheduled time, but Kacie’s parents didn’t play about being on time.

“It’s fine, Daddy. We just sat down.”

“Why are there three tables?” Wynn asked. “Ooh, what’s in the bags?” She reached for one of them, but Kacie swatted her hand away.

“It’s my surprise for later tonight. Just sit down, Mommy.” Kacie got up and placed a bag on each table before going back to her seat. “We’ll enjoy dinner first, and then we’ll get into what’s in the bags.”

“Oh, I like surprises,” Gregory said as he helped Wynn into her chair, and he sat beside her.

“Can we have a hint?” his father, Barry, asked.

“Y’all leave my woman alone. She’s not giving away any hints. She’s been real secretive about this. She wouldn’t even tell me.”

“You’re trying to tell me the Jackson charm didn’t work on her?” Barry asked.

“Nah, Dad. This has to be a big secret.”

There was a knock on the door by the servers. Kacie looked relieved to see them so they could change the topic. He would for now, but there was no denying he was curious to what his baby had been hiding from him.

After the drinks and food arrived, they had shared an amazing dinner with great conversation. It was a shame all he could think about was getting Kacie out of the dress she wore. Even after two glasses of wine and a steak, he could still taste her on his tongue.

“Before we have dessert, can I have everyone’s attention, please?” She had her camera around her neck and that sexy smile on her face.

Caleb wondered what Kacie had up her sleeve as she moved from their table to stand before them.

He had traded his wine for whiskey that he sipped slowly, looking over his wife. *My lady is so damn sexy.*

The liquor encouraged his dirty thoughts. Knowing she was free balling had him growing in his pants. He groaned at the thought of eating her out in the elevator, fucking her against the door of their room before slipping the key inside, and taking her to the bed where she would ride him until he emptied his seed into her.

He cleared his throat.

It was a good thing the tablecloth was covering him. He had forgotten their parents were in the room until her dad spoke.

“We know it’s y’all anniversary, but stop looking at my daughter like that while I’m sitting right here.” Gregory scowled.

“Like what?” Caleb asked innocently, but he was anything but innocent. He was sure the desire to have Kacie was written all over his face.

“Leave him alone, Gregory. He’s admiring my baby. She looks so pretty. Plus, I want some more grandkids,” Wynn said.

His mom leaned over, slapping his arm with her napkin. She had a big smile on her face, trying to hold back her laughter. “Stop,” she mouthed.

“Thank you, Mommy.” Kacie cleared her throat to get everyone’s attention again. “In front of everyone is a gift from me. Originally, this trip was planned with me in mind, but I wanted to share it with all of you.

“I knew my father would love the live music, and I knew Ma,” she looked at his mother, “would be down for anything.” Everyone laughed. “Caleb, open yours first, and when he has his open, everyone else can open theirs.”

“Open it now?” he asked.

Kacie nodded. She looked nervous as he started to pull out the tissue.

His hand bumped into something hard, and he pulled out a frame with an ultrasound picture in the middle. Engraved on the frame were words that had his heart beating rapidly.

“Caleb?”

He read over the words again.

Hello, my name is Harper. I can't wait to meet you, Daddy!

Her mother leaned over, trying to be nosy. “No, wait. Is that what I think it is?” Wynn tore into the bag, and his parents followed suit.

In their parents’ bag was the same frame and the words below read, *Will you be my grandparents?*

“Ahhhh!”

Everyone was excited and jumping with joy except Caleb. He couldn’t move. He read the words a thousand times.

Kacie broke away from the two sets of parents and stood in front of him.

“Are you happy? You don’t think it’s too soon, do you?” She took him by the chin and lifted his head so she could search his face.

He stood, causing her head to fall back to stare at him. “You just told me I’m going to be a father. I’m the happiest man in the world.” He picked her up and spun her around.

The cheers started back up, and Caleb felt contentment like he'd never felt. He wanted to go back out on the bridge and scream from there, to let the world know he was going to be a father.

* * *

WHEN CALEB and Kacie made it back to the room, it was on. He ravished her in missionary, never taking his eyes off her. He forced her to stare back, needing to see her soul while he made love to her like only he could.

When they were spent, Caleb moved them to the shower, where he cleaned them up. After that, Kacie wanted to soak in the tub, which led to another love-making session.

Now she laid against his chest, the water chilling around them. "That was amazing, Caleb," she mumbled.

He kissed the side of her face. "Let's get out of here so I can put you to bed."

Caleb took his time taking care of his woman. He moisturized her body, paying extra attention to her stomach, breasts, and thighs, places she may become self-conscious about if the warrior marks also known as stretch marks started to show.

"I got you." He whispered the words over her belly.

When she was extra smooth and smelling like cocoa butter, he slipped his shirt over her head and placed her in bed.

He went back to clean up the bathroom, then put lotion on his body before he pulled on a pair of boxers. He crawled into bed behind Kacie. She fit perfectly in his arms, feeling so good against his body.

Rain poured, lightning lit the sky, and thunder boomed in the distance. It was the perfect way to end their night.

Caleb shifted when a thought came to his mind. "When did you get off birth control? I had been begging you for a while."

"I got off the first time you asked."

He was appalled. “And you didn’t tell me?”

She flipped around. “You would’ve found out, eventually,” she joked. “Who knew you would be the one having the pregnancy symptoms?”

He paused. “So you’re the reason I’m low on energy and can’t eat chocolate cake?” Just the thought of it made him queasy.

“Not me. Harper.” She brought his hand to her stomach, and he caressed her there. “You’re okay with this?”

“I’m more than okay with it.”

“Mmm.” She closed her eyes, relaxing against him. “I can get used to this.”

“Oh, you like belly massages already.”

“Mm hmm.”

“You’re going to have to take these out.” He toyed with the piercings in her navel.

“Yeah, I know. It’ll be okay,” she said in a low voice.

“Don’t fall asleep. You have to stay with me.” He used his famous words on her.

“You have to ask me questions.”

He laughed. “You want a boy or a girl?”

“I want a girl. I’m sure you want a boy.”

“I want a beautiful baby girl that looks like her mother. I want one to spoil, to take to daddy daughter dances, and to take to kick boxing class to beat little knuckleheaded boys’ asses.”

She laughed, and it brought pure joy to his soul.

“You love me, Kacie?” he asked once she settled down.

“With my whole heart.” She brushed her fingers over his chest.

“You never ask if I love you.”

Kacie opened her eyes. She propped up on one elbow to look down at him. “I don’t need as much reassurance as you do, and that’s okay. I don’t mind showing and reminding you how much I love everything about you.”

He nodded before pulling her to his body. She turned in his arms, resting her back against his front. He knew she would be asleep soon. This was her favorite position to fall asleep in.

“Also, I feel it, Caleb.” She started again. “I’ve always felt it. That’s how I know I’m safe in your arms, and our baby will be just as secure. I love you, Caleb.”

On the regular, Kacie thanked him for saving her life, but she had saved his. She let him know it was okay to love and be loved. Yeah, he needed a little reassurance some days, but he knew, with time, he would grow out of it.

The love she surrounded him with felt unrealistic at times, but as time passed and they grew more in love, he knew reassurance would be far from his mind.

“You’re mine, forever.” It was a reminder he gave her often.

“That’s what I wanted. Forever.” She snuggled into him and soon fell asleep to his slow strokes over her back. His hand came around and cuffed her stomach, loving that their baby was nestled there. He couldn’t wait to watch her stomach grow with his child.

Never in a million years did he think he would father a child a year after marrying the woman who was made just for him.

As sleep started to claim him, he thought about forever with Kacie. He thought about how he was happy he found love *accidentally*.

The End.

Afterword

Thank you for reading *Accidentally in Love with You!* I hope you enjoyed reading Caleb and Kacie's story as much as I enjoyed writing it. I hope these guys captured your heart with their kind words and ways. I think there will always be a special place in my heart for these two. If you felt touched by this story please consider leaving an awesome review. Also, feel free to contact me, using the information below to tell me how much you enjoyed this or my previous stories. I love hearing from you guys. Until next time!

Kaye Lovett

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