

A man with short dark hair and a light beard, wearing a black leather jacket, is playing a drum set in a club. The background is dark with blue lighting and silhouettes of people with their arms raised. The title 'ALL THE THINGS' is overlaid in white, with 'Things' in a blue script font.

ALL THE

Things

BOOK FOUR IN THE *Rocked in Love* SERIES

JESSICA MARLOWE

All the Things

ROCKED IN LOVE

BOOK FOUR

JESSICA MARLOWE

lyric
PRESS

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Exclusive Offer

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For Peanut.

Content Warning

This story deals with past childhood traumas, discussions on past addiction, learning to live sober, mental health, a neurodivergent MC living with dyslexia, the historical passing of a MC's sibling by sudden infant death syndrome mentioned in conversation, loss of parents, and references to 9/11.

Chapter One

AS HE STOOD AT THE TOP OF THE LONG AND WINDING staircase, awareness shot through Buzz Stewart like he'd been struck by Cupid's arrow. It brushed over his skin.

Over his heart.

Over his soul.

When she turned toward him, his breath caught. She was making a last-minute adjustment to the bride's dress. His heart thudded in his chest, and he loosened the bow tie. The heat singeing his skin had nothing to do with the extreme July temperature. The most intense attraction he'd ever felt in his twenty-nine years stole his breath.

From Emily's and Nicki's descriptions, the woman every atom of his being acknowledged was their wedding dress designer, Kelly Hoffmann. And she was even more beautiful than they'd said.

"How's that?" Kelly's voice was clear and melodic, and a shiver of desire pulsed in his dick.

He'd been aware of his friends' attempted matchmaking. He'd met Emily's editor, and Nicki had introduced him to her cousin, but Buzz didn't need to be setup. He was the drummer for Stone Highway and never lacked female company if he wanted it. He just didn't want it these days. He'd been sober nearly two years, but he wasn't ready for a relationship. He had to keep his focus on the only things that mattered: living sober, not letting his bandmates and family down again, and the fans.

It wasn't just her beauty that intrigued him.

Even though there were people around, she was locked in her own world, making sure the gown was perfection. He understood that on a visceral level. When he was playing drums, everything else faded away but him and his bandmates. It was only during song breaks that his conscious mind would become aware of their fans. He didn't envy Jack as front man because he'd hate having to banter with the audience, but Jack was a natural at it.

"See someone you like?" Emily whispered.

Buzz didn't bother to hide his grin. He glanced at Emily. "I assume this is the Kelly I've been hearing so much about?"

Nicki was at his other shoulder. "She is a stunning brunette. She designed Sheryl's spectacular gown in a rush job for Em."

He couldn't see Nicki's face, but he knew she waggled her brows. *Why fight it?* "She is." An image of Devil Nicki and Angel Emily on his shoulders drew a chuckle.

Emily poked Nicki. "She's single, lives in Brooklyn, owns her own bridal boutique featuring her designs, and recently, she's branched out into custom gowns. Oh, and she has three cats."

Everyone knew he loved animals. Buzz grinned. Apparently, they'd given up subtle. "What? No blood type?"

Nicki grinned. "Medical records come in next week."

Buzz's brows shot up.

Emily poked Nicki again. "She's kidding. We aren't that intrusive." Her face scrunched. "Okay, maybe we went a little over the line. But we wouldn't even be having this conversation if your interest wasn't so crystal clear. I shouldn't really say this because of how we met Jack and Curt, but many of the girls you meet on tour are only looking to bang a rock star." Emily smiled. "We've gotten to know each other since I joined Jack on tour, and I know you're not the kind of guy who's looking to screw as many girls as possible."

He choked out a scoff.

“Em’s not saying you don’t like sex. Who doesn’t? But you guys are all cut from the relationship cloth. And we wouldn’t have interfered at all if we didn’t see signs that you’re maybe ready for more than a one-night stand. It doesn’t have to be serious.”

“I guess I’ve been giving off mixed signals.” He was the last single member of Stone Highway. With his history, there was no point in getting married. “I’m really happy for Jack and Curt, but I’m not ready. I need to focus on staying sober and healthy. I don’t have the bandwidth for anything more.” Maybe he was a little jealous his best friends had found their soul mates. Who’d want to take him on with all his baggage?

He wasn’t secure enough in his sobriety for even a casual relationship. When he’d left rehab, his counselor had explained the difference between being clean and living sober. Clean meant he no longer used drugs or alcohol, and his body was free of altering substances. Living sober was a process where he had to change his thinking, behaviors, and attitudes. He’d learned to accept drugs hadn’t been the problem; his choices were. He spent a good part of every day working on his mindset.

Emily cleared her throat. “Well, if you change your mind, Kelly’s got her own life that’s super busy. She’s a strong woman, which is a requirement for any girlfriend of a rock star. Having her own business and success means she doesn’t need your money, and she works all the time, so she won’t bust your balls for being away on tour. We did a little background.” Emily looked down. “I hope you realize what a catch you are. You’re a great guy. It’s bad enough having one brother who can’t see his own value.”

Buzz was touched Em considered him a brother. Emily and Vince weren’t connected by DNA. They were bonded by something much, much stronger. Vince wasn’t Buzz’s official sponsor, but since their two bands were in the middle of a co-headlining summer tour, he and Vince talked daily. Since he’d been clean and sober for eleven years and they were in the same business, his input was invaluable to Buzz’s recovery.

He pulled them into a hug. “You guys are the best things to ever happen to my best friends.” That they’d been watching out for him meant everything. Jack and Curt were very lucky men, and they damn well knew it.

“Want me to introduce you?” Nicki’s brows waggled again.

Emily swatted Nicki. “Don’t mind her. She’s got wedding fever.”

Kelly stood. “You’re all set.” She hugged Sheryl, fluffed the skirt of the wedding gown, and hurried toward them.

“Kelly, why don’t you stay?” Emily asked as Kelly attempted to pass.

“Excuse me.” Kelly smiled and glanced up at Buzz as he stepped aside. “Thank you.”

The automatic smile wasn’t for him, but the smoldering heat in her intense brown eyes definitely was.

Awareness shot through him again, and it was reflected on Kelly’s beautiful face. A small gasp slipped between her slightly parted red lips.

The heat that had been simmering exploded through his body.

She took another few steps and faced them as if Emily’s words just registered. “Thank you, but I can’t. I have four custom appointments, and I’m running late as it is.”

Her black button-down blouse and trousers couldn’t hide the lush curves of her Rubenesque figure. She was maybe five foot three. Even with her high heels, the top of her head barely reached his chin. His dick pulsed with acknowledgment. Other than lipstick and mascara, she wore no makeup. The flush on her cheeks hadn’t been there a minute ago. Her loose ponytail allowed strands of hair to escape that floated around her face. Even the slight dark circles under her eyes didn’t detract from her beauty.

He wanted her. Her scent was warm and spicy with a hint of floral. He wanted to tangle his fingers in her soft, silken

hair. To taste her skin. To feel her tighten around his cock as he thrust deep.

Clasping his hands at groin level, Buzz rocked back on his heels. She didn't seem the type to sneak off for a quickie or to go in for one night, so he willed his dick to back off.

She had the most beautiful liquid chocolate eyes. They pulled him in and warmed him through. Damn. Maybe he could convince her to give him a night.

Kelly started down the steps but stopped and turned. "Oh, Nicki, that reminds me. I have the updated sketches of your four gowns." She pulled a pad out of her oversized black bag. Flipping through the pages, she sighed. "Damn it. Wrong pad."

Nicki smiled. "That's okay. We've been so busy planning Eddie and Sheryl's vow renewal that I've done nothing with mine. I'll check my calendar and call you." She winked at Buzz.

Emily rolled her eyes. "Kelly, I really appreciate you coming here to make sure everything was perfect for Sheryl's dress." Along with Vince, Eddie and Sheryl were Emily's found family.

When Kelly smiled, Buzz's heart skipped. *Damn. No way to make a discreet adjustment.*

"Well, I don't normally make house calls, but throwing a wedding for Eddie and Sheryl because they'd never had one was so sweet I couldn't have refused even if I'd wanted to." She chuckled. "I'm surprised Nicki didn't give it away."

Buzz smiled. It didn't take long for people to figure out Nicki was terrible at keeping secrets. He angled his body away and pulled the end of his bow tie until it was uneven. "Kelly, do you have a sec to help me? I can't get this right." He tapped a finger on the tie.

"Oh, Kelly, how rude of me. This is Buzz, Stone Highway's drummer. Buzz, Kelly." Nicki's voice dripped with suggestion.

The girl got points for not giving up. Her smirk was a mile wide. Buzz stifled a sigh. Fun yes, relationship no. But that wouldn't stop Nicki.

“Sure.” Kelly walked up the stairs, her heels clicking with every step. “Wow, all the men in this house are so damn tall.” She chuckled. “Makes me feel even shorter than I am. Why don't we go over there?” She pointed to the end of the hallway where a bench sat under an oversized window.

Her brown eyes held interest, and Buzz's body tightened. Sexual chemistry, check. “I really appreciate this.”

“Not at all.” Kelly smiled. “Even though I had all her measurements, Sheryl never tried on the dress, and there's always an alteration or two.” She scoffed. “Sorry. I'm sure you don't care about that.”

Buzz grinned and sat on the bench. His eyes were level with her ample tits. “I think it's great you're so passionate about your work. Nicki and Em told me you designed the dress. It looks absolutely stunning on Sheryl.”

“Well, the most important thing for any item of clothing is the cut. If you stick to the cut that works best for your body type, you'll look good.” She finished tying the bow tie and stepped back.

Buzz stood and turned. “Is this tux a good cut for me?” He'd given his measurements to Emily, and the tux fit great.

A look of satisfaction crossed Kelly's face, and the gold flecks in her brown eyes sparkled. “They gave me pictures of you guys, and I suggested the best style for each of you.” She smiled.

The trilling of her phone broke the moment. Kelly stepped away and connected the call. “I'm leaving now.” She took a few steps.

The back view was as delightful as the front. She turned, and Buzz raised his gaze before she caught him ogling her fine ass. “It was nice to meet you.” She smiled and hurried to the staircase, waving to Emily and Nicki as she rushed down the stairs.

He strode to the railing and watched her until the door closed with a *click*. His mouth hung open, so he snapped it shut. He blinked a few times, but Kelly's beautiful eyes imprinted on his brain.

Nicki pushed him. "You need to get out there."

He glanced at her, and she nudged him again. He shook his head. Nicki was a petite hurricane. Nothing stopped her.

Emily and Nicki walked over to Sheryl. "Okay, we're almost ready to start, so it's time for mimosas," Nicki said. The three ladies disappeared into a room.

He went down the stairs. Whether she meant out to the wedding or out in the dating world, Buzz wasn't sure. He'd been burned so badly in the past maybe he'd never be able to trust enough again to fall in love. Part of him didn't even want to.

The familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in threatened to overwhelm him. He had friends and family he leaned on, but deep in his heart, he didn't believe he'd ever find a woman who'd be willing to take a guy with a semitruck filled with damage.

But right now, what he needed was to be all in on his sobriety. That had to come first, even before the band.

Without it, he'd lose everything.

Chapter Two

KELLY'S EYES SHOT OPEN, AND TEARS STREAMED DOWN HER cheeks. Her stomach hurt, her head pounded, and the bitter taste of vomit and stale alcohol covered her tongue.

"I'm ready to have kids." The nightmare still echoed in her brain. She scrunched her eyes shut, willing the awful memories away. Kelly groaned as she rolled over straight into Satan, who hissed, and her paw, nails bared, swiped Kelly's shoulder. "Ow. Damn cat. Go back to hell."

The air was heavy, and her bedroom was hot, so she kicked the covers off. Satan climbed onto her pillow, and Kelly felt her steel-blue eyes boring into her. Satan's tail swung lazily back and forth, hitting Kelly in the face. Satan did it on purpose.

The morning light seared through the seam in the closed curtains, attacking her retinas.

She'd adopted the snow-white cat before she'd realized her fur color was the only thing pure about her. She'd named her Sadie, but Satan was a better fit. She was convinced Satan was the devil's minion on earth.

Kelly rarely drank, and at twenty-eight, this was her first hangover. And her last. She tried sitting up, but it was a horrible idea.

Last night was a blur. Almost. Kelly groaned again. She'd never behaved so recklessly. The pillow dipped again as Chonkers and Squdgy joined Satan. Now three cats stared at her. Their impatience at their food being late was palpable, but

she didn't have the energy to move. She had no idea what time it was, and she wished she didn't have to care. But she had a business to run. The stomach flu had made the rounds of her staff last week, and Kelly had been forced to take two days off due to the never-ending vomit.

She still hadn't caught up on all her work. Kelly couldn't afford to miss another day. As a small business owner, she didn't have the luxury of sick time and vacation days.

She had two first appointments for custom gowns, a new accessory supplier to meet with, and a walk-through with the contractor on the third-floor renovations of the building she was now the sole tenant of. Her fiscal year end was coming up, and she wasn't even close to ready to meet with her accountant. She also needed to block out some time in her schedule to start interviewing new consultants, which reminded her she needed to review the copy her sister had put together for their new ad campaign.

If only hiring more people was the answer. Her business was growing, and that meant more people to oversee and be responsible for. Her to-do list never got any shorter, because for every one thing she did, three more got added. Her eyes stung. "Damn." She was never going to handle all that today. She turned on her side and drifted off.



"I'M READY TO HAVE KIDS." ENZO'S VOICE HELD HOPE.

Her heart ached. "I'm not."

"When do you think you will be?"

Never. Shocked by that realization, Kelly staggered to the bed and flopped down. "I...I don't know. There's just so much going on."

Enzo sighed. "Your life has always had 'so much going on.' And it always will. That's life. But I'm ready. Truth is, I've been ready for a long time. When we got married, I thought we'd have kids by now."

“You did?”

“Didn’t you?”

She scoffed. “No. If I’d gotten pregnant before we moved into our own place, Grams never would’ve let us leave. As it is, she guilted me into waiting until RJ was eighteen. And you never complained about moving into my grandparents’ house when we got married.”

“Why would I? I wanted to marry you as soon as possible, and I understood the duty you felt toward Jenny and RJ. I actually saw it as a warm-up to having our own kids. RJ’s the little brother I always wanted. Of course, I love Jenny, too, but I already have three older sisters.” He took her hand. “Look, I know you have a lot going on, and if you’re not ready right now, that’s okay. What about a year from now?”

“Nothing’s going to change in a year.”

“Sure, it will.

“But don’t you see? If we plan to conceive next year, all the progress my brand has made goes away because I’ll have to split my focus. I need to be all in on this.”

“Don’t you mean we’ll have to split our focus?”

He’d definitely be a hands-on dad. “Yes, of course, but as the mother, I’m the one who has to put my life on hold.”

“Honey, you’re your own boss. You make the rules. Bring baby Enzo to work with you.”

The sheer joy in his voice hurt her heart. All she saw was the burden. Anger flared. “I have to go.”

Enzo grabbed her arm. “Are you kidding me? We’re discussing our future, and you can’t spare the time to finish the conversation?”

“I’m not even sure I want any more kids!”

Enzo gasped. “Any more kids?” His face reddened, and anger warred with hurt in his eyes. “How long have you felt like this?”

“I...don’t know. What does it matter? I feel like this now.”



SHE STARTLED AWAKE. “UGH. STUPID NIGHTMARE.” A nightmare she’d actually lived. Her divorce from Enzo had been heartbreaking. Kelly reached for the bottle of water she kept on the nightstand, but it wasn’t there. “Satan, did you knock my water off?”

“*Mrow.*”

“Of course, you did. I forgot this is *your* home.”

“*Mrow.*”

After Enzo had called her yesterday, she’d been crushed, and her sister had insisted they go out to drown her sorrows. Since Jenny had joined Kelly Hoffmann Bridals, she’d been annoying Kelly to take time off, to do something besides work. But Kelly loved her work. Most of it. The designing. Kelly didn’t have time for fun. Not with all the things she had to do.

She’d call her assistant to reschedule her appointments. Kelly was in no shape to work her usual fourteen-hour day. The bespoke designs were supposed to be her break so she could focus on meeting brides and designing. She’d never imagined the market for custom dresses was so underserved. Requests for appointments had exploded after a fashion vlogger had raved about her one-of-a-kind gown. One of the best things to happen to her business had been the catalyst for one of the worst in her personal life.

And with her history, that was saying something.

She was drowning in a sea of her own making, and the one person she’d allowed herself to count on wasn’t hers anymore.

Tears welled, and Kelly couldn’t hold them back. She didn’t care it made her head throb even more because she’d rather focus on that pain than the one shredding her heart.

Chonkers and Squdgy, her two calicos, snuggled next to her. Satan remained unmoved, but she was very vocal, and this morning was no different. She definitely ruled over the other

cats. Whether her newest kitty, Mr. Darcy, a tuxedo kitten, would also bow to Satan remained to be seen. He was more interested in playing with the tassel on the corner of her bedspread. She reached out and stroked his black and white fur. He flopped on his back and grabbed her hand with his four white-footed paws, gently gnawing on her knuckle. His piranha-sharp kitten teeth stung, but she didn't care.

Her lips stuck to her teeth. A reminder went off on her phone. "Demon cat." Kelly rolled as slowly as possible to the edge of the bed. The water bottle was about a foot away. Sadie jumped onto the nightstand and sat. "You knocked it off. Fetch."

"Mrow."

Was it possible for a cat to meow sarcastically? Kelly grabbed the bottle and rolled on her back before her stomach could register the quick movement. She opened the drawer and felt around for her birth control pills. She used to leave them on the nightstand, but the last time Sadie had knocked them off, she'd played cat hockey, and it had taken Kelly twenty minutes before she'd found them under the sofa in the living room.

She popped a pill and washed it down with a few sips of water.

Last night had been a mistake. And Kelly hated making mistakes. She was too old to have done something so irresponsible. But it was done, and at least she'd gotten the relief she'd needed. She was single, and if she wanted sex, she should be able to have it without feeling ashamed.

"Kel, where are ya? It's late." The front door slammed shut.

"Crap." She loved her sister, but she was in no mood. They'd been out late drinking, and Kelly had no idea how her sister could sound so damn chipper. "Bedroom."

The door swung open. "Ah, here you are." Jenny, dressed for work and looking rested, plopped on the bed, and Kelly's stomach rolled, and the room spun.

Satan hissed at the intrusion.

“Oh, no.” Before Kelly sat up, Jenny thrust the wastebasket into her hands.

When she was done, her sister handed her a wet washcloth and her water. Jenny took the basket, and when she returned, she handed Kelly a steaming cup of takeout coffee. “Here.”

Kelly took a tentative sip. When it didn't come back up, she took another. “How can you look so good this morning?” They'd been drunk, but she'd made sure Jenny had used her InstaRide account to get home safely. At least they'd had the forethought to go to a bar on the other side of Brooklyn so news of her behavior wouldn't make it to their neighborhood. The Laurel Park section was a tight-knit, small-town community within the city.

“For one thing, I'm used to having fun, and while I drank too much last night, it's not the first time alcohol has been introduced into my system.”

“I've had alcohol before.”

“Yeah, a glass of wine on Thanksgiving and Christmas.”

“I'm too busy to be drinking all the time.” The last thing she needed was her little sister lecturing her.

“I think it's as much a hangover from having fun as the alcohol.”

Kelly ignored her. Satan growl-hissed. “Yeah, yeah, the evil kitty needs her food.”

“I've never heard a cat make that sound before.” Jenny stood. “Relax. I'll feed Satan before she eats Squdgy and Chonkers. Lie here and rest. You look like crap.” The four cats sprinted out of the bedroom.

Some people didn't give animals enough credit, but Kelly was sure her stubborn cats understood every word. Feeling pissed, Kelly flipped her sister off. Jenny's laugh echoed off the bedroom walls.

It was almost nine thirty. Even though the boutique didn't open until ten, she was in by six. When she'd dreamed of

becoming a fashion designer, she'd never imagined she'd spend more time on the business than actual designing. Since Jenny now headed the marketing and social media department, Kelly had hoped to devote more time to designing. So far, it hadn't worked out that way. There was always a fire to be put out, and Kelly was the only one with a hose.

But at least Jenny had come into her business. Kelly's hopes at having her brother also join had been crushed two years ago when he'd finally told her he had zero interest in being a CPA. He was going to the fire academy, and ever since that day, terror lived in her gut. She'd never survive another loss of family.

Jenny strode back into the bedroom. "Picked up breakfast." She held a bag from Cappomaggi Italian Bakery. Their family bakery had the best baked goods in the city, and people came from all five boroughs for their breads, pastries, and cakes. Enzo had finally convinced her grandparents they needed a line of gluten free and alternative grains. *Ugh*. The last person she wanted to think about was her ex-husband. He was the reason she was currently dying from a hangover.

Jenny opened the bag and took out two of their grandfather's famous chocolate biscotti.

Kelly groaned. "I can't eat those. The crunching sound..."

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Well, duh. That's why I got you this." She pulled a zeppole from the bag and handed it to Kelly.

Despite her unsettled stomach, Kelly's mouth watered. The pastry filled with honey and cream was her favorite. She took a small bite. It melted on her tongue, and she moaned. Her enjoyment lasted all of a second. Enzo had probably made it.

"Oh, I know that look." Jenny took a bite of biscotti.

Kelly sipped her coffee. "What look?"

Jenny sighed. "The 'guilty for taking a night off to feel shitty because my ex-husband's getting married and it really bothers me' look. You're entitled to be hurt. I know you thought you'd work it out with Enzo after he moved out."

Kelly scrunched her eyes closed. “I never thought he’d come back. He wanted kids, and I wasn’t ready.” She’d never told anyone she didn’t think she’d ever be except Enzo, the marriage counselor, and their priest. But she’d had a little hope they’d work it out. There were songs written about setting a loved one free and they’d come back. Or something like that. She didn’t really have time to listen to music.

Enzo had moved on with a girl who worked in the bakery, and when he’d called her yesterday to tell her he and Claudia were engaged, Kelly had been crushed all over again. She hated she’d had to be the one to end it, but he wouldn’t have left otherwise. He’d wanted to keep trying, but she loved him too much to keep him from something he wanted so badly.

She’d never make room for anyone else. Kelly had spent over a decade putting her family first, but her business was her baby, and no guy would ever want to be second in her life.

It wasn’t easy working in the bridal industry and not believing in fairy tales. She was front and center to the beginning of hundreds of happily ever afters. And until they’d split, she’d been living hers.

Jenny huffed. “I’ll always be younger than you, but I’m not a little kid anymore. When are you going to treat me like your sister instead of your child?”

Kelly had been thrust into the responsibility at so young an age it still felt like Jenny and RJ were her children.

Jenny poked her. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Sorry. Can’t help it. I helped you get ready for school, took you to the doctor, cleaned your scraped knees.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time.” Jenny shook her head.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Kelly poked her. “Not nothing. What?”

“You’ve always been there for us. When I think of my childhood, I remember you being there more than mom.”

September was coming up, and the familiar ache in her heart had already begun intensifying. Kelly had only been a child herself when their mother had been killed, but she remembered more of what their life was like before than Jenny did, and RJ had only been four. Tears burned her eyes. This hangover was making her weepy. She needed to be strong for them, and thinking about all the loss would only break her.

Jenny dabbed under her eyes. “It’s not that I’m not grateful to Grams and Pa, but she always pushed you.” Jenny sniffled. “Let’s change the subject.”

Kelly forced her shoulders to relax. “Agreed. But I don’t want to talk about Enzo either.”

Jenny grinned. “Okay, fair enough. How about that hottie you went home with? He couldn’t take his eyes or hands off you.” Jenny’s brows waggled. “So?”

Kelly groaned. She didn’t want to talk about that either. She’d never had a one-night stand until last night, and her cheeks heated. “You obviously know what happened.”

“Ah, details, please.”

Kelly shook her head. “No way.”

“Come on, I’d tell you. I *have* told you. That’s one of the things *sisters* do. They talk about guys they’ve slept with.”

Three years older felt like thirty. Kelly had never been able to have those conversations with Jenny because she’d only been twelve when Kelly had met Enzo. “Please stop. Suffice it to say I’m totally embarrassed by my behavior.”

Jenny scooted up and sat next to Kelly and smiled. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about, okay? You’ve worked hard your entire life. You got cheated out of your teenage years, and you’re making up for lost time. When you should’ve been enjoying yourself and being irresponsible, you had two bratty kids to take care of. You’re finally putting yourself first.” Jenny hugged her. “You’ve spent far too much time working and being an adult. You have no balance in your life. All work and no play isn’t good for you.” Jenny grinned.

“Besides, he was so fucking hot.” Jenny fanned herself.
“So...”

A slow smile spread, and Kelly nodded. He had dark eyes, a friendly smile, and a great body. Perfect in a suit and tie. If she hadn't been drunk, she'd have chickened out. Alcohol and his attention had raised her self-esteem until she'd felt sexy and alive for the first time since her marriage had crashed and burned. But she felt irresponsible. Kelly groaned. “I can't believe I did that.”

“I can't believe you're almost thirty and you finally did it.”

Kelly raised her brow. “I'm twenty-eight.”

“Yeah, but you've been almost thirty since we were kids.” Jenny looked down and shook her head. “You spent your youth taking care of us, and when it was my turn to take over, you postponed your dream so I could still be a kid because Grams guilted you into staying.” Jenny swiped a tear. “I know in my heart she means well and thinks everything she does is for her family, but Grams is a tyrant. I love her, but sometimes I don't like her very much.” Jenny handed her a bottle of aspirin. “Look, yesterday you found out Enzo's marrying a girl who works at the bakery. That would kick any girl in the nuts.”

In spite of herself, Kelly chuckled. “Girls don't have nuts. I don't remember you failing biology.”

“When it comes to life handing out trouble, everyone has nuts, and you just got kicked in yours.”

“There's more.” She'd lost the best man she'd ever meet. There'd never be another.

Jenny touched her hand. “What?”

Kelly swallowed the lump in her throat. “He's going to be a dad.”

Chapter Three

KELLY'S OFFICE PHONE HIT THE BASE WITH A *THUNK*. "DAMN it to hell." How had she let Nicki convince her to go to a bar tonight? Hadn't she learned her lesson? The other day, she'd ended up screwing a guy in his car. She still hadn't remembered his name.

Kelly couldn't fathom why Nicki insisted she come to Stone Highway's end-of-run party. Nicki wanted her to design a dress for one of the crew who was pregnant and engaged to Jack and Curt's guitar tech.

She'd spent ten minutes explaining it would be better if Viv came to the boutique for her measurements where they could talk in a quieter environment, but Nicki wouldn't be dissuaded. Between Nicki's custom gown purchases for herself and her bridal party and her social media posts, Kelly couldn't say no.

Maybe this was the distraction she needed because her mind kept replaying her conversation with Enzo and what should've been. They'd had an amicable divorce if two shattered hearts didn't count.

His heart had recovered, but Kelly's heart hadn't been whole even when they'd been happy. Their divorce had vaporized a few more pieces.

Her sister was constantly bugging her to get out there, but Jenny didn't understand as soon as a guy realized he'd never be her main focus he'd be gone. Men always said they wanted an independent woman, but that was a lie. Maybe they wanted

one who wouldn't depend on them, but they wanted one to depend on. To be there when they were done doing what they wanted. But as soon as a woman wanted that, she wasn't normal.

There was no point in looking for love. It cost too much, and Kelly no longer had the currency to spend.

Kelly forced her thoughts to the only thing that mattered. "I need to get going on the interviews for the new seamstresses."

"Talking to yourself again?" RJ stood in the doorway. He looked more and more like their dad. Of course, the navy FDNY T-shirt helped.

"I learned a long time ago talking to you was useless since you don't listen."

RJ sighed. "That's not true." He shook his head. "You're in a mood. I've been a firefighter for almost two years. When are you going to accept it?"

"I do, but I don't have to like it." RJ didn't need to hear again how fear lived in her gut. But at least he was still in Brooklyn.

He strode into her office and plopped in the silk upholstered chair opposite her glass-top desk. "Sis, I love you. There are no cameras or brides around. You don't have to fake shit with me. I know you worry, and I love you for it. This is what makes me happy, and I know you're trying to come to terms with it. I wasn't trying to give you shit over it."

Two years ago when he'd told her he was going to the fire academy instead of returning to college, she'd almost lost her mind. RJ and Jenny were the only family she had left. She had Grams and Pa, too, but they were in their eighties now. RJ looked older than almost twenty-two. But they all did. Losing their parents so young had aged them well beyond their years, but it had also strengthened their sibling bond in a way most people couldn't understand. She glanced at the last family photo on her desk. Her dad had never even dated after her

mom had been killed. He'd focused all his love and attention on them until he'd died, too.

Her throat tightened. The older she got, the worse and the earlier the dread of that horrible day loomed.

RJ stood and came to her. "Come here." He held his arms open.

Kelly hated crying, especially at work. It wasn't a good look for a bridal boutique that only saw happy tears. But her emotions were already running high. She leaned into her brother and hugged him tightly. The disappointment she'd felt at his not wanting to be a part of her business paled by the relief over his getting placed in Brooklyn FD. She wouldn't have handled it well if he'd moved to the city.

At six feet, her brother towered over her. Physical labor had broadened his arms and shoulders. She shouldn't have been surprised when he'd told her he wanted to follow in their dad's footsteps, but she'd been totally blindsided.

"It doesn't get any easier, does it?" RJ asked.

"No, little brother, it does not." Kelly wiped her eyes. "So, Ray Junior, what brings you here today? Need a dress?" He'd sworn her to secrecy that he'd been a model when she'd been at Fashion Institute of Technology and had to design children's clothing for one of her classes. Firefighters were ball busters, and they'd never let him live it down. But that didn't mean she wouldn't mess with him.

"Ugh, stop it." He chuckled her nose. "You know I prefer RJ."

"I do. And I'll refer you, yet again, to the *Big Sister Handbook*." Kelly gestured to the invisible book she always cited when she wanted to tease her brother and sister. "If you turn to page thirty-seven, section eight, subsection four, and I quote, 'It shall remain the big sister's utter duty to remind her younger siblings she is older and, therefore, wiser and better. Said younger siblings must pay appropriate homage to their big sister and obey everything she says *to the letter*.' Now, obey me."

RJ broke out in peals of laughter. He bowed. “Yes, oh great and mighty big sister. I shall obey.”

It was one of the many silly ways she’d created to help her brother cope with the loss of their mom. His fifth birthday had been only seven days after she’d died, and he hadn’t comprehended the situation. It had broken her heart trying to explain when she struggled to understand. So she’d invented the *Big Sister Handbook*. She’d made it goofy on purpose after the first line: “By order of Queen Mother Marie, RJ and Jenny will obey everything Kelly tells them to do. As the oldest, she is tasked with being the boss of you.”

Even though she’d only been eleven, as soon as she’d said it, she’d known her mom would’ve wanted her to take care of and always look out for her little sister and brother.

And she always would.

“Now, what brings the littlest Hoffmann to see me today, hmm?”

When his laughter died away, he’d changed his mind. *Shit*. She always encouraged them to talk to her about anything, much the way a parent would. Whatever RJ had come to tell her wasn’t good, and just once, she’d like to yell at him as a sister instead of discussing like a calm parent. “Sit.” She poured him a glass of water. “You know you came here to tell me something I’m not going to like. It’s always better to just say it. So, out with it.”

RJ wouldn’t make eye contact.

Oh shit, this is worse than bad. Please not that. Kelly sat and grabbed her water glass. Luckily, the crystal withstood her grip. She picked up the phone and dialed Jenny. A gulp of cool water did nothing to douse the heat rising.

“Hey, boss lady, what’s up?”

Kelly’s throat tensed. “In here, now.”

RJ sat forward. “Why’d you do that?”

“Do you really want to have to say what you came here to say twice?”

“Damn it, Kel, do you ever just think of yourself?” He stood and paced the length of her office. “You don’t have to make everything easier on us.”

She raised her chin to meet his dark-blue eyes. “The last time I thought only about myself, my marriage ended.”

“Oh, Kel, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

She nodded. “Yeah, you did. But as the *Big Sister Handbook* clearly states, ‘As the oldest, it’s my responsibility to make things easier for you whenever I possibly can.’ Actually, that’s in the section on being a ‘good’ big sister. The bad big sister section I’ve never read.” Her parents had always said she was a good big sister, and Kelly wanted to keep it that way. Even if her heart was already breaking.

RJ shook his head, and his eyes misted. “The best big sister ever.”

She didn’t know about that because she certainly hadn’t reacted well the last time, and they hadn’t spoken for a month. She did try to learn from her mistakes. Jenny and RJ were all she had besides Satan, Chonkers, Squdgy, and Mr. Darcy. But they were cats, and Kelly was fairly certain they only allowed her to live so she could serve them.

Jenny burst through the doorway. “Ah, fuck, what now?”

Kelly sighed. “Do you have to say the f-word?”

Jenny shrugged. “What? It’s a valid word.”

“Jen, Jen, Jen...you never did learn.” Kelly shook her head. “Remember what happened the first time you said it in front of Grams and Pa?”

Jenny snorted. “Ah, yeah, I’ll never forget. Gramzilla washed my mouth out with a bar of soap. Yuck. Thanks for that. I can still taste it.”

Being forced to move to Brooklyn from the only home they’d ever known on Long Island, new school mid-year, no friends, and most of their stuff still back at their home until arrangements to have them moved were made, had been too much for twelve-year-old Jenny. She’d acted out terribly,

getting in fights, swearing, refusing to eat. And after the soap incident, Kelly had one more job added to her plate: running interference for her brother and sister. After their mom's death, Grams' heart had hardened, and she wasn't used to Jenny behaving that way. None of them had been used to all the things that they'd had to learn to live with.

And now, she'd be doing it again. "Jenny, close the door."

The *click* of the door had Kelly's nerves near snapping. Jenny slumped into the chair next to RJ. "Oh, no, you two aren't going to stop talking to each other again, are you?" She fanned herself. "I finally lost the last five pounds from all the stress eating."

She and Jenny had inherited their naturally plump figures from Grams and Mom. Since they were both short, a few pounds either way made a huge difference.

Kelly sat forward and reached across the desk to grip her sister's hand. "I promise you"—she crossed her heart twice—"I won't ever let it happen again. We have to stick together."

"Okay, I'm gonna man up here." RJ took their hands. "There's an opening at Ten House, and I put in for a transfer."

Kelly swallowed the lump in her throat, but before she could tell him it was okay, his eyes locked on hers.

"I got accepted. I really didn't think they'd take me yet since I'm still a rookie. But the chief asked if I was Ray Hoffmann's son."

Kelly's jaw dropped open. Their grandfather and their dad had been firefighters at Ten House. RJ gripped her hand tightly, and Jenny's hand closed tighter. Tears filled Kelly's eyes. She wanted to scream, but Jenny was about to lose it, so Kelly needed to keep it together.

His eyes held an apology. RJ shouldn't have to apologize for following his dream. Jenny looked to her, and Kelly did what she had to to keep her family together. She let her brother off the hook. "Mom and Dad would be so proud of you." It wasn't what her brother wanted to hear, but it was the best she could do because she wouldn't lie to him.

Lies destroyed.

But sometimes, so did the truth.

RJ nodded. “You always say the right thing.” He tugged Jenny up and pulled Kelly around the desk, and the three of them hugged.

Ten House had been rebuilt after the severe damage it had sustained on 9/11. It stood across from what used to be the World Trade Center, but for people in and around New York, it was simply the Twin Towers. Their dad had transferred to a fire station on Long Island after her parents had married.

Kelly’s intercom buzzed, and her assistant said, “Milan’s on the phone.”

RJ and Jenny tried to pull back, but Kelly didn’t let them. She reached over and hit the intercom. “Not now.”

“When should I tell them you’ll get back to them?”

Kelly was about a minute from a complete breakdown. “Not now,” she barked and disconnected. It was her responsibility to be strong for them. She pulled back and wiped her tears. “I’m surprised you can still get your arms around us. Jen, you look amazing. But I found the weight you lost.”

RJ kissed the top of their heads. “What’re you talking about? You’re both amazingly beautiful the way you are.”

“Ha!” she and Jenny blurted.

Jenny swatted him. “You’re the lucky one. You got Dad’s lean frame, height, and stunning blue eyes.”

Kelly and Jenny had accepted their shape was their shape. Jenny had had plenty of boyfriends who appreciated her just as she was, and Enzo had loved Kelly’s curves and always told her how sexy she was.

RJ shrugged. “Not all guys like skinny model types. I’ve seen...”

Jenny quirked a brow. “Seen what?”

Kelly tried to hide her smile. Jenny enjoyed making RJ a little uncomfortable to teach him lessons.

RJ looked to Kelly, but she shook her head. “You have to learn how to handle her, or she’ll never let up.”

He cleared his throat. “Uh...well... Shit.” He scrunched his face. “I don’t know what word to use so I don’t get kicked in the balls. I don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings, but how am I supposed to know?”

Jenny cackled but placed her hand on his. “No one does. Words are a chaotic mess right now. A word that’s cool with me and Kel might get you kicked in the nuts by someone else.”

“What am I supposed to do then?”

Jenny shrugged. “Kel?”

“I’m not sure there’s one right answer, so you could try what I do with brides. If you inadvertently offended someone, be genuinely sorry when you apologize. Most people will accept it, but some, no matter how sorry you are, are intent on being offended and won’t accept your apology.”

Jenny and RJ leaned in.

“What do you do then?” Jenny asked.

“You walk away. Sometimes you have to live with the knowledge that you’re a good person who made a mistake that won’t be forgiven. Never engage on the showroom floor.”

“What word do you like?” RJ asked.

“Plump.” Kelly said.

“Okay, I’ve seen plump women I’m attracted to who look like you guys.”

Jenny poked his arm. “Sick.”

“Ew, not like that. I’m just saying I’m attracted to a woman who has some meat on her bones. Mom was certainly Dad’s type.” He lowered his voice. “He was kind of a player before they met, but one look at her, and he knew his bachelor days were over.”

“First of all, he was not a player. Who told you that?” Ray Hoffmann had been a family man through and through. He was at every school event any of them had without fail. Until he couldn’t. He certainly hadn’t been a womanizer.

“Pa told me when he and Enzo sat me down for the man talk.”

“Man talk?” Jenny asked.

There had been some holes she couldn’t fill. “Yeah, you know the talk I had with you about sex and periods and vaginas and boys?”

RJ scrunched his eyes closed. “Don’t say that word.”

Jenny’s lips pulled in. “What word? Va-gin-a?”

RJ covered his ears. “Don’t be gross. You’re my sisters.”

“Vagina, vagina, vagina,” Jenny said singsongy.

Kelly shook her head. “You never learn. You know as soon as she knows you don’t like something she’s gonna say it over and over.” Her brows pulled together. “Why would Pa tell you that? How would he even know?” Their parents had met at a deli down the street from Ten House. Mom had just gotten a job at the Twin Towers, but she’d still lived in Brooklyn with their half-brother Frankie and Grams and Pa.

“Because when he went to Pa to ask for Mom’s hand, he told Pa he’d never thought he’d marry. He’d been very content being a bachelor. Being a firefighter and ten years older, Gramzilla wasn’t pleased about the age gap or his danger-seeking job. She worried he’d be killed, and Mom would be left to fend for herself and her children. Since Mom’s first husband turned out to be a total loser, you can’t really blame them for being concerned.”

“Yeah, the total loser Grams insisted Mom marry because she’d gotten pregnant,” Jenny said.

Ray Hoffmann had adopted Frankie, but after their mom died, Frankie had reconnected with his biological father, and Frankie hadn’t come home much until, eventually, he’d broken

all contact with them. “I still don’t understand why Pa would ever tell you that.”

RJ looked away.

“Hey, I thought you were manning up today. Out with it.”

“You know I love you, right?”

The air in the room thinned, and sweat beaded on Kelly’s nape. The tiny hairs stood up. “But?”

RJ took a slow breath. “But you had a tendency to make him out to be perfect. I mean he was a great father, and I love him, but no man’s perfect. I began to feel like I’d never be able to live up to how you portrayed him. When I got suspended for fighting when I was ten, Enzo kept bugging me about it. So I told him if I couldn’t live up to my dad there was no point in trying.”

Heat rushed Kelly’s face as her eyes filled with tears. “I’m sorry, I didn’t... I never meant to make you feel like that. I worried because you were little when Mom died and only nine when Dad... I didn’t want you to forget them. I wanted you to have good memories.”

RJ shushed her and pulled Kelly into his arms. Jenny joined them, which made her cry harder. “I’m sorry.” *I’m a total mess. Mom and Dad would be so disappointed in me.*

“Hey, you have nothing to be sorry for. You were an amazing mom to us. I don’t blame you for idolizing Dad. I’m sure we all did, right, Jenny?”

“Totally.” Jenny rested her cheek on Kelly’s back. “My friend Sophie’s mom went completely off the rails after her dad died. She drank and Sophie ended up having to move to Kentucky with her grandparents. Dad kept it together, loved us even more, and spent as much time with us as he could.” She sniffled. “Remember when I wanted to take ballet lessons and I wanted him to wear a tutu?”

“Yeah. He let me paint his nails when I did mine. And he never took it off before going to the firehouse.” Kelly’s breath shuddered in and out. She loved those memories. “He always let me pick out the color.”

Jenny handed them tissues. Kelly flopped on the couch.

RJ sat next to her. “What’s the second thing?”

Kelly dabbed her eyes. “Huh? Oh, yeah. You only think of us as plump because we’re your sisters and you love us. If you saw us on the street, you’d think we were fat.”

Jenny nodded.

“I would not.”

“Would, too.”

“Nuh-uh.”

She and Jenny grinned at each other and said, “Uh-huh.”

RJ threw the balled-up tissue at them.

“Take some sisterly advice, baby bro,” Jenny said. “Never, ever, refer to a plump woman as having meat on her bones if you want to keep your boy bits.”

“Noted.” RJ stood. “I gotta go let my captain know I’m leaving.” He stopped when he got to the door and turned to his sisters. “You’re the best sisters in the whole world. I wouldn’t be the man I am today if it hadn’t been for you.”

Kelly stared at her closed office door long after they’d left. Her insides rived high tide. She’d do her best to support RJ, but she couldn’t deny it made her sick to her stomach.

The last thing she needed was to go to a party tonight. Nicki was one of her best customers, and they’d also gotten quite friendly, at least as friendly as Kelly’s work schedule allowed time for friendship. She’d do what she always did. She’d suck it up.

But she wouldn’t stay long.

She’d meet the bride, take some notes, and get the hell out of there.

Chapter Four

BUZZ, JACK, CURT, AND ELLIOT WALKED INTO QUIVERS. They'd rented out the bar for their end-of-run party to thank their crew for their hard work and so they could celebrate Viv and Holden's engagement as a family before they all went home for the four-week break.

The party was well underway, but they'd had some business to discuss with Eric Levinson who they now co-owned the famous Rock House with. All the upgrades and renos were nearly completed, and Stone Highway would be the grand reopening act before they went back on tour in September. There was no better way to honor Sid, Eric's dad, who'd given them their first big break and mentored them.

Nicki, Emily, Siobhan, Viv, and a brunette were settled at one of the few large round tables. Holden stood behind his fiancée with his arms around her and his hands resting on her belly. Past the bar, Val and Beth Pearlow, their drum and bass techs, were deep in conversation with their tour manager Brian. A new crew member had been harassing Val. He'd been a great pyrotechnic guy, but they'd fired his ass the second Val had come to them. Stone Highway didn't tolerate that shit in their crew. They'd put the word out he was bad news to the other bands who had female crew members. Even though he'd passed the background check Jeff had done, after they'd fired him, another woman had come forward, so this hadn't been an isolated incident.

They prided themselves on ensuring, to the best of their ability, all their crew members had a safe and healthy

environment to work in. There was no room for any kind of hate, intolerance, or harassment in their family.

Buzz almost swallowed his tongue when the brunette turned and it was Kelly.

Nicki. A stray dog with a meaty bone had nothing on Nicki when she got a plan in her head. He wasn't looking for anything serious, but he couldn't deny his attraction to Kelly. He'd thought of her plenty since they'd met. Even had a dream or two. He knew next to nothing about her, but he felt a definite connection in addition to the intense sexual attraction, which he'd only experienced with his ex-girlfriend Sally, who'd been his only serious girlfriend.

Curt and Jack flanked him.

"Oh, look, Kelleee," Curt said, drawing out her name.

Jack threw him a 'sorry, dude' look. "Em promised she'd stop trying to fix you up, but even she has no control over Nicki."

Curt snorted. "No one does."

Elliot pushed them farther into the bar. "Enough of this wallflower shit. Guys, this is a fucking party." He went to the bar and slapped his hand on it three times. "Barkeep, drinks." He cruised over to his wife and kissed Siobhan full on the lips. Siobhan swatted him and whispered something in his ear. He made a pouty face then smiled.

The three of them laughed. Elliot only acted all goofy like this when Siobhan was pregnant. Jason was eight months old, and this tour would be done in December. Even though they hadn't made an announcement and Siobhan wasn't showing, the guys just knew.

After grabbing drinks off the tray, Elliot strode back and handed Buzz a ginger ale and Jack and Curt bottled beer. "To my best friends. Now that we all got our shit together, only good things to come."

They clinked glass to bottle. "I'll drink to that," Buzz said.

The three of them went to their ladies. Buzz took a deep breath and forced himself to relax. He was okay with being in a bar. The smell of beer didn't ignite any urges, but if it had, he'd go to a meeting. When he'd first gotten out of rehab, he'd gone to at least one meeting a day, and many days he'd go two or three times. Buzz relaxed and relished his progress. He'd never thought he'd get to a place where he wouldn't go every day. He was down to four or five days a week, and he was proud of his recovery. He'd call Vince later and tell him.

The dull ache in his knee wasn't easing. He'd spend a good part of their break getting alternative therapies because he wouldn't take any prescription drugs.

He had too much to lose, and he fucking knew it.

Emily leaned in and said something, and Kelly snort-laughed water out her nose. Even though the volume in the bar was just under full-on rowdy, her laughter cut through it. What was it about the unrestrained laughter of this woman that went straight to his dick?

Shit. He was in trouble here if he was analyzing a stranger's laughter. He'd like to go back to Curt's Greenwich Village apartment where he'd be crashing on their break. Curt always stayed at Nicki's townhouse, so he'd listed his apartment. Curt would be donating most of the furniture, but the six-foot acrylic dick filled with rubbers, which had been Elliot's idea of a joke on Jack, had a new home in Nicki's office. She said it inspired her.

He'd been staying at his parents' house in Pine Hill during most of the tour breaks, but Stephanie had moved back after she'd gotten separated, and she was increasingly pissy with him. He couldn't deal with it right now. The stress on his mental and physical health of over a year and a half of touring had worn him out.

He'd never been so tired before.

He got to make music for a living and was blessed, but his early life hadn't been easy, and he tried not to dwell on it. But the deeper he got into therapy, the more he understood how much all the sickness and fear from his childhood had

contributed to his addiction. He'd believed he'd gotten hooked because of the pain in his knee after he'd fucked it up skiing, which being a drummer only exacerbated. In hindsight, he should've either gotten them a replacement drummer until he'd fully healed or they should've postponed. But he'd had the same dilemma before the start of this tour. He'd gone into rehab, and the guys had wanted to postpone the tour, but so many people depended on them Buzz hadn't wanted to let them down.

It was understandable that his NA sponsor and his therapist insisted he needed to make himself the priority and people would understand, but only Vince understood why he couldn't. It wasn't just the fans; although without them, they wouldn't have a career, but their crew had mortgages, car payments, and spouses and kids to provide for. And if they'd postponed, a lot of them would've been in financial trouble. It was one of the reasons they kept their crew on the payroll even during breaks. They were a tight bunch. A well-oiled machine. And Buzz wouldn't be the wrench in it again.

Nicki ran over and grabbed him. "Come hang with us."

He threw her a stern look, which she ignored as she tugged him toward their table. "Look, a space right next to Kelly opened up."

Space was a generous term.

Nicki nudged Curt, and he kissed her on the lips and shifted over.

"Hey," Buzz said.

Kelly smiled and took a sip of water. Nicki tilted her chin at him. Em narrowed her eyes at Nicki.

"What?" Nicki asked with a huge grin.

What she lacked in subtlety, she more than made up for with a generous heart. She wasn't a romance writer by accident. Em said Nicki loved love. And because she was blissfully happy with Curt, she wanted everyone to be as happy.

"What?" Emily repeated, exasperated.

Kelly shifted. “Why do I get the feeling you’re talking about me even though no one’s saying anything?”

“La, la, la.” Undeterred, Nicki grinned at Kelly. “You remember Buzz from Eddie and Sheryl’s wedding?” And in case Buzz didn’t get the hint, Nicki added a wink.

Buzz shared a look with Emily. With a long, pained sigh, Em shook her head. “I believe the word you’re looking for is incorrigible.”

Buzz nodded. “Yup, that’s the word.”

Kelly looked around the table. “I don’t get it. What’d I miss?”

When Buzz didn’t say anything to Kelly, Nicki pointed across the room. “Oh, look, it’s Val and Beth all by their lonesomes. We should go keep them company.” She grabbed Curt’s sleeve, clearly expecting everyone to follow.

When they didn’t, she turned to Emily and gestured for her to follow. Em shook her head, and Jack and Elliot burst out laughing. Siobhan grinned and looked away. Viv and Holden smiled and made a hasty exit. A hushed silence fell over the bar.

Nicki crossed her arms and tapped her foot loudly.

Emily shook her head.

Buzz grinned. They were looking out for him, and he couldn’t even muster another stern look to lob at Nicki. Emily and Jack had had a rough beginning, but since they’d gotten engaged, Nicki insisted her matchmaking abilities were above reproach.

He was sitting so close to Kelly his attraction to her flared. No reason not to indulge if she was amenable to the idea. He nodded to Emily. “It’s okay.”

Nicki rolled her eyes. “Of course, it’s okay. You two are perfect for each other.”

“Who two?” Kelly asked. Her mouth fell open when everyone except Buzz followed Nicki across the bar. “Oh,

man, I am so dumb.” Her head dropped into her hands. “This is why she insisted I come tonight?”

“Yeah. When she gets an idea in her head...” Buzz waited for Kelly to decide if she was staying or going. Her dark-brown hair was thick and wavy and shimmered from the overhead lighting. It fell over her shoulders, covering the sides of her face. Her makeup was expertly applied to enhance her natural beauty. Buzz closed his eyes, and an image of her full, red lips closing over his cock sent blood pounding to his groin. He cleared his throat but not his mind. “She means well. I know she didn’t mean to upset you.”

Kelly lifted her head and sighed. “Ugh, I am so stupid.”

“Why?”

“Because I knew her insistence I meet the bride in a bar was a ruse, but I had no idea it was for a fix up. My sister mentioned in front of Nicki that I needed to get out more, and I thought Nicki was trying to be my friend.” Kelly groaned. “It’s not you. I’m sorry. I’m just not looking for a relationship.”

Perfect. His dick lengthened in agreement. “Neither am I.” He took a sip of ginger ale. “Nicki and Emily think very highly of you. Even if her plotting doesn’t work out the way she expects, she considers you a friend.”

Kelly’s deep-chocolate eyes sparkled. Her black lashes cast shadows on her cheeks when she looked down. “How do you know?”

“Because she wouldn’t do this for someone she didn’t care about.” *Yeah, she’s interested.* His heart pounded. “If you knew it was a...fib, why come?”

“Money.” Kelly shook herself. “Sorry, that sounded really bad. But Nicki’s buying four custom wedding gowns, not to mention her twenty bridesmaid dresses, and mother and grandmother of the bride and groom dresses. Since Nicki’s post on social media about her experience here, I’m booked for first appointments for custom dresses until next June.” She shook her head. “I think it’s actually July now. I’m grateful

and didn't feel like I could keep saying no. And because of those bookings, I was able to move the timetable up on my expansion. I took over the lease for the whole building, and when the construction's done, I'll be able to double the number of seamstresses and consultants. Then I can move on to the next phase of my plan."

Buzz wasn't a planner himself. He'd been sickly for too many years as a child to look too far ahead. "What's the next phase?"

She slid him a rueful smile. "You don't have to do that."

His brows drew together. "Do what?"

Kelly sipped her water. "Be nice and pretend you care about bridal wear."

"What makes you think I'm nice?"

Her head tilted to the side. She looked past him to where Jack and Curt stood and pointed. "Because they are two of the most down-to-earth, genuine, ridiculously nice men I have ever met. Emily and Nicki speak highly of you." She grinned. "No matter how outrageous Nicki gets, Curt just supports and loves her even more. They're complete opposites, and it shouldn't work, but it does. On the other hand, Jack and Emily are so much alike. I've never met two people so completely on the same page or more empathetic."

Buzz grinned.

"What?"

He shrugged. "That's what love is, isn't it?"

"Go on."

It usually took him longer to feel comfortable around people. With most of the girls he slept with, conversation wasn't a requirement. Which suited him just fine. "After you've been around the block a few times, you realize when the perfect person comes into your life, maybe you have to give up everything you *thought* you wanted and accept the one in front of you for who they are. None of us are perfect, but finding the perfect mate isn't about perfection, but about

understanding what you really need.” Buzz pulled back. The last thing he needed was for her to fall for him. *Right, she’s not looking for anything long-term.* He wanted her. A regular hookup while he was home was just what he needed.

Nothing more.

“I didn’t peg you as a romantic.”

“I’m not. I have a front seat to three incredible romances. Being on the road together doesn’t afford a ton of privacy.”

“I couldn’t imagine living like that.” Kelly took another sip, and a melancholy expression appeared. “Or maybe I could. Not like rock stars but traveling the world for inspiration. I always wanted to travel, but with family obligations and my boutique...” Melancholy turned to full-on sadness.

Nicki and Em really liked her, and it hadn’t been off-handed posts. They’d been so impressed with Kelly and her designs they’d used whatever rock star girlfriend celebrity they had to make the world aware of her talent. They understood people couldn’t buy what they didn’t know about, and even though they had a publisher, they still did a lot of marketing. Word of mouth was the most powerful influencer.

“I try to be a nice guy for what it’s worth. Although everyone’s the asshole in someone’s story.” Sally had told him so when she’d dumped him. He’d only tried to help her, and she’d been partying long before they’d met, but somehow, she blamed him for everything. “But I wasn’t trying to be nice. Emily and Nicki really like you, and they’re marrying my best friends. We’re all really close. Besides”—he sat up—“unlike the stereotypical rock star, I don’t only wear jeans and T-shirts. I was thinking of buying a tux, since I’ll be in two weddings.” Nicki and Em had said since their bridesmaids would be wearing different dress styles there was no reason Jack’s and Curt’s groomsmen couldn’t do the same as long as the tuxes were black. He didn’t really like wearing clothes other dudes had worn. He’d always been leery of how well, if at all, rented tuxes were cleaned in between rentals. He stifled a shudder

just thinking about it. A throwback fear from his childhood when he'd been allergic to so many things.

Joy replaced Kelly's sadness.

Buzz leaned in because it was getting louder. "What?"

"Nothing."

Buzz shook his head. "No, not nothing, and by the look of it, something rather spectacular."

Kelly's mouth fell open, and a small smile spread. "You can't possibly know that." Whenever she shifted, the overhead light shimmered off the highlights in her hair. She wore a red silk cap-sleeved blouse, a black fitted skirt, and red heels.

He didn't think she was trying to flirt with him, but subconsciously she was. And he liked it. "Wanna bet?"

Her eyes narrowed, but she still smiled. "What do I get if I win?"

"Me."

Kelly choked on air. "What?"

He leaned closer still. Her scent filled his senses. "You had another idea to expand your business, and I think I can help."

She was sizing him up, and because Kelly was a fashion designer, it wouldn't be a stretch to assume she'd check out his body type strictly by habit and not just with lustful thoughts. He only cared about the lust.

Her eyes widened. "How do you know that?"

"Because a long, long time ago, in a land called New York City, a club owner told us if we wanted to make it as musicians, which he said we had the talent to do, the sooner we started treating it like the business it was, the better off we'd be. So we started thinking of Stone Highway as a small business. And damn, the amount of work we put into it would've completely overshadowed the music if we all hadn't done our share. Jack was head of marketing, so he dealt with the club and bar owners. Elliot hates dealing with people, so that would've been a terrible fit, and Curt's too nice. One sob

story and our take of the bar would've been cut by half. I'm not charming like Jack, so I designed our merch, Elliot handled the deposits and expenses, and Curt handled social media. We all did our share of getting our demo into as many people's hands as possible." He shuddered. "We pay people to do all that necessary crap now, but Sid said we needed to know all this stuff ourselves so we'd know if someone was screwing us."

"My grandfather gave me the same advice when I was opening my own place." A somber sigh escaped.

"We even drew up a business plan."

"Really?"

Buzz shifted to get his wallet and pulled out a piece of folded paper. "Here."

Kelly's brows dipped, but she took it and opened it. "What's this?"

He grinned. "Our business plan. As you'll see, we had rather lofty ambitions for a bunch of dumb twenty-year-olds." Buzz cleared his throat. "Open bank account for band. Make money. Deposit money. Repeat until we rule the world."

The laughter that burst from her was glorious. His body concurred, and he shifted to try to ease the strain. Didn't work.

A server stopped and asked if he'd like a real drink. "No, thanks. I don't drink."

Kelly's brows shot up. "A rock star who doesn't drink? Is that allowed?" She chuckled.

Buzz beat down his anger. Em had said Kelly worked all the time, so it wasn't impossible she didn't know his past, so he relaxed. Groupies didn't give a fuck if a musician was an alcoholic or headlong into heroin. Not that they allowed that shit backstage because a dirty little secret in the industry was groupies had to fuck their way backstage for a chance to meet some bands. And they weren't cool with that.

"I was kidding." Bright red slashes marred her high cheekbones. "I didn't mean to offend you."

Buzz waved her off. “None taken. I’m in recovery.”

Kelly slapped her forehead. “Oh duh. Buzz isn’t your real first name, is it?”

He raised a brow. “No, it isn’t.” He scoffed. “You think my friends call me Buzz because I was an addict?”

Kelly put her hands up. “No.” She sighed. “Okay, yes. I’m sorry, but what else could it be?”

Buzz stood.

“Please don’t leave. I’m having a nice time with you. I didn’t mean to ruin it.” She looked down. “I only dated one guy my whole life, and after we...” She swallowed hard, and her eyes misted. “I’m not very good in social situations.”

Buzz sat. She wasn’t being rude; she was just awkward. And that was a feeling he understood. “I’ve had the nickname Buzz since I was five.” He smiled. “Jack gave it to me.”

Kelly visibly relaxed. “I didn’t know you’ve been friends for so long.”

“Yup. Been friends since we were four. Jack was really my first friend ever. I owe him everything.” Buzz wouldn’t have survived if he hadn’t met Jack. Even as a kid, Jack had been filled with empathy and compassion.

An intense look of understanding filled Kelly’s eyes. Maybe she didn’t make friends easily either. Although she seemed outgoing. Buzz was a total introvert. He was happiest behind his kit, writing music, being in nature, going to museums, or listening to audiobooks. Stephanie used to read his favorite books into an old tape recorder so he could listen whenever he wanted. She’d never complained or made him feel less.

There was no way to tell the story without going into more of his history than he’d like. The world didn’t need to know about his childhood. Buzz couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this stupid and awkward. He could do superficial, but deep stuff like this was more than he was prepared for.

Kelly patted his hand. "It's okay. I get it. Not drug related. You're kind of shy, and I get that."

"Not shy." *Anymore.* "Quiet." *And private.*

She half-smiled, and her brows pulled in. "They're not the same thing?"

He shook his head. Taking a sip of ginger ale, he stalled. "Not at all. Shy implies fear." He'd had enough fear as a kid. "I don't ramble on. But I can hold a conversation." He didn't feel fear in social situations, but he also didn't feel the need to fill the silence. Or talk a lot. "You don't seem shy."

She shrugged. "At work, I'm fine, but it's been a long time since I've...socialized." She leaned in, and Buzz got a whiff of her perfume. Spicy not sweet. "If my brother and sister were here, you'd see. They're the outgoing ones."

"Older?"

Kelly shook her head.

"Oh." What else could he say? He got the feeling there was deep personal shit attached to that, but he wouldn't pry because he didn't like being pried open. "Well, I'm having a very nice time." He needed to steer the conversation back to her. "So, if I win the bet, I get to help you."

She sat back. "Why would you want to help me? You don't even know me."

"But I'd like to get to know you."

"I thought I made it clear I don't have time for a relationship."

"You did. I'm not looking for anything like that either. Just a little *fun*." He waggled his brows. "I'm very attracted to you."

"You are?" A deep blush spread from her neck to her ears. "But I'm not usually the type you go for."

"How do you know what type I go for, hmm? I think you're beautiful and very sexy, and I'd like to spend some time with you. I'm home for four weeks. We could be friends

with benefits.” He smiled to reassure her. “Nothing serious can happen in four weeks.”



KELLY HAD NO INTENTION OF EVER REPEATING HER ONE-NIGHT stand mistake, but four weeks of on-call sex was an entirely different story. Buzz was very handsome, he had a great body, and he wasn't cocky. He was clean-cut and intelligent. And he said she was beautiful and sexy. And the way he was eyeing her warmed her through and set her low belly humming with need.

Of course, she'd remembered Buzz. Mostly how he'd looked amazing in a tux, and when she'd tied his bow tie, how when their gazes met, she'd felt like he could see her soul. Tonight, he was rocking jeans and a T-shirt. Just like every other guy in the place. But unlike the other guys, he looked like walking sex. Broad shoulders stretched the cotton of his blue T-shirt, accentuating every muscle in his arms and chest. It hung loose above his narrow waist and hips, and his jeans hugged his strong thighs.

Her eyes were repeatedly drawn to the hunter-case pocket watch tattoo on his right inner forearm. It wasn't just the exquisite detailing from the intricate pattern on the outer cover to the links on the chain that wound around his arm. The hands were at 11:37, and Kelly felt in her bones it was significant to him. He also had the letters "SH" in a fancy script on his left wrist.

She exhaled the breath she was holding. She had to remember to blink. And try not to sigh like a teenager on her first hormone rush.

The plans for a line of custom tuxes were years down the line, but with a body like his to work with, this opportunity was too good to pass up. But it was a terrible idea to mix business with pleasure. She really should choose one or the other. That would be the best business decision. But her body wanted what it wanted. *No*. She needed to stay focused on her

business. That was hers, and she wouldn't allow her baser needs to dictate to her. She was an adult.

She was in control.

“Maybe you should hear my idea first.” The way his gaze stroked her was making it hard for her to stick to business before pleasure. So what if business left no time for pleasure? There'd be plenty of time for that later. Jenny's words bounced around her brain. *All work and no play...* But he'd only be around for four weeks, so the automatic end date was a plus. She'd get her fill and then refocus all her energies where they belonged.

This was better. She'd still get to work and have 'vacation time' with Buzz.

“You want to design custom tuxes.”

“How did you know that?” Excitement uncoiled throughout her body until she tingled. Creating something from nothing always hit her like that. The urge to start putting ideas on paper was overwhelming. The custom gowns were a huge expansion, and even though she already had the supply chain, connections, and brand in place, there were going to be bumps in the road she hadn't yet encountered. *Gotta go slow.*

“Seems obvious to me that would be the next big step.”

“Why?”

“Because Em and Nicki said you're one of the smartest people they've ever met. You'd won a design competition when you were twenty and had the winning gown sold by Clineman Bridal.”

“You know Clineman's?”

Buzz rolled his eyes. “They have a TV show, and brides come from all over the world to get their wedding gowns there. My mom got her dress there, and when my sister got married, she wanted to continue the tradition. They were still in Brooklyn when my mom went, but the showroom in Manhattan is really something to see.”

“You've been there?”

“Yeah.” He grinned. “My pain-in-the-butt sister wanted me there, and apparently there’s some unwritten rule if you don’t give the bride everything she wants she has the legal right to eat you alive.”

The affection in his voice did funny things to her insides. She’d described her siblings that way all the time to their faces. “You don’t get along with your sister?”

He smiled.

She’d never seen such a sexy smile, and the laughter in his eyes and his deep chuckle were punch two and three that almost had her slipping off the barstool. Enzo had made her weak in the knees. Buzz was making her weak everywhere.

Buzz turned at a crashing sound, his hand covering hers. The warmth of him seeped into her empty soul, and a burst of his intensely male scent made her dizzy.

A tray of empty glasses lay shattered on the floor.

He turned back with concern. “You okay? Did any glass hit you?”

She’d been hit all right but not by mere glass. “I don’t think so. No, I’m okay.”

Buzz’s Adam’s apple bobbed as his body relaxed. “Sorry.” He blinked slowly. “You asked about my sister.” He nodded. “We’re actually very close. She’s six years older, but she never thought of me as a pest.” Sadness clouded his dark-brown eyes. “I put them through hell when I was younger...” He blinked and shook himself.

An emotion she couldn’t place flashed in Buzz’s eyes, and something in his tone tugged at her heart.

“I have a younger sister and brother.” There was no need to go into further detail. If he was serious about casual, it wasn’t necessary. The banter was nice. There was no way she’d sleep with him tonight. Tomorrow was another story. “There’d be several fittings...”

“I’m happy to help, really. It’ll give me something to focus on in the outside world. I really believe in supporting local

businesses, so I'll force myself." The twinkle in his eyes made her pulse trip then pound.

The wonderful neighborhood where she lived was getting smaller and smaller. At one time, mom and pop shops dominated everywhere, but the brick-and-mortar stores couldn't compete with the online world. Rents in Brooklyn kept going up, and that alone forced many businesses to fold. Throw in the ease of ordering from their couches, and people no longer supported their local businesses the way they had been. It was one of the reasons she'd been able to take over the lease for the entire building. It had been the last toy store in the area. She'd taken RJ to it so he could pick out his birthday present the year they'd moved in with their grandparents.

He'd wanted their dad back, but no one had the power to give him that.

"What hotel will you be staying in?"

He shook his head. "I'm crashing at Curt's place in the Village."

"I'm in Laurel Park."

"Yeah, I know. Only a ten-minute subway ride."

"You're familiar with the area?"

"Somewhat. Our first apartment was in Brooklyn."

"All four of you shared an apartment?"

"Had to. It was the only way we could afford to live in the city."

"I'm not aware of any places with four bedrooms."

"There aren't any. We looked. Wouldn't have mattered. Even with the four of us working day jobs, between the rent and parking and insurance for our van, it was the best we could do. And we had to save up to book studio time."

When she and Enzo had been looking for their apartment, they'd been lucky to get one with two bedrooms so she could have a design room. It was one of the reasons she'd kept it after Enzo moved out. She hadn't wanted to move again either.

“Wasn’t it a little...cramped? You’re all big guys, and only one bathroom...”

Buzz laughed. “Yeah. We fought the entire first month, but we soon realized we needed to figure it out or we’d break up and lose our friendship. In hindsight, it was great training for what was to come. Once we figured out a sleep schedule, realized sometimes bathroom privacy wasn’t an option, and agreed not to bring girls back to the apartment, everything else was small stuff.”

The volume in the bar increased, so Kelly leaned in. His brown irises were rimmed in black, and his warm, spicy scent heated her skin. “Sleep schedule?”

Buzz sipped his ginger ale. “Yup. We had two twin beds in the bedroom and a queen-sized pull-out couch. We’d rotate every week on wash day. Two guys in the living room moved into the bedroom and vice versa.”

“Why would one of you bring a girl into the apartment?”

“Sex.”

Kelly smirked. “Yeah, I’m not that dense. What I meant was isn’t that kind of rude?”

“Yes, yes it was. Elliot had been with Siobhan since high school, and as the drummer, I was third choice. Jack and Curt were the studs. But once we let them know it wasn’t cool, they found other places to go.” Buzz grinned. “Not bad for a bunch of nineteen-year-olds. We learned not to let stuff fester. Had a few blowups those first few years, but we always worked it out. An invaluable skill once we started touring.”

She’d hated the few times she’d had to referee Jenny and RJ. It made her feel old. Kelly had thought when they’d moved in her grandparents would take over, but they hadn’t. Her grandmother had insisted she be the one to be in charge of them. She’d never understood why, and sometimes she still resented Grams for making her be the bad guy. Pa left for the bakery at four a.m. and never got home until at least six p.m.

Buzz grinned. “Now back to my modeling for you. I want you to know if you need to draw me nude, I’m fine with it.”

Her mouth fell open and her eyes widened. “There’s nothing like that.”

“Oh, too bad. I was going to suggest if you needed to sketch me naked you could be naked too. Then we’d be even.” His eyes glistened. “I’m also okay if you need to measure... things.” His left brow quirked, and his grin revealed a dimple.

“What?” Kelly’s mouth fell open.

Buzz leaned in so close his warm breath teased her ear. “Quiet, not shy. Remember?”

The low timber of his voice had blood pulsing through her veins, heating her from head to toe. He wanted her. *Her*. And he certainly wasn’t shy. She couldn’t imagine Buzz being any girl’s third choice. The sexual attraction was so strong Kelly doubted she’d last the night if she didn’t pull back. But she didn’t want to. She wanted to take him back to his place and... No. *No*. She wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. Before No Name, Enzo had been the only guy she’d ever had sex with. Part of the problem was, she hadn’t just lost her husband but her best friend, too. Whenever they saw each other, they were still friendly, but it wasn’t the same. She’d shared everything with him, and the loss of that connection was almost as bad as the loss of her parents. She’d never get that close to another man. She now had three holes in her heart that would never close.

She couldn’t afford another.

She’d have no heart left.

Buzz wasn’t pressuring her in the least, just making his interest clear. Crystal clear. With a cherry on top. And whipped cream. *Abort this line of thinking. There will be no whipped cream.* Must be Nicki’s influence. Her personality was so outrageous Kelly never would’ve suspected Nicki wrote sweet romance and Emily wrote spicy. Jenny had purchased their books, and she was pestering Kelly to read them, too. She didn’t have time to read for fun. She had at least five business books on her e-reader she hadn’t read yet.

Buzz touched her cheek with his finger. “Hey, you okay?”

“Sorry. Totally spaced out on you.” She sat back, putting some much-needed distance between them. She was definitely going to sleep with him, if she hadn’t scared him off. But not tonight. Her self-respect wouldn’t allow it.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to come on so strong. I thought we were having a nice time.”

His concern touched her. “You didn’t, and we are. I sometimes get lost in my thoughts thinking about business stuff.”

Buzz relaxed back. He brushed his hand over his brow. “Whew, glad I didn’t misread what’s going on here.” He placed his hand on hers. “Just so you know, my offer to help stands either way.”

Buzz was a really good guy. And he deserved honesty from her. “Look, I’m...” *I’m sexually attracted to you. Ugh, sounds so stupid.* She felt like an awkward teenager with her first crush. She took a breath and slowly exhaled. His gaze pinned her. “I’m attracted to you, too, but I’m not going to sleep with you. Tonight, that is. And if you’re okay with that, then great.” She exhaled when his smile reached his eyes.

“I didn’t expect you to.” His thumb stroked over her palm. “Doesn’t mean I won’t dream we did.”

The glimmer in his eyes sent a rush of heat between her thighs. She’d never experienced this all-consuming chemistry before. She’d been attracted to her one-night guy, but compared to what she was feeling now, that attraction had been a blip. And with Enzo, they’d been teenagers, and they’d eased slowly into physical contact. But if Kelly wasn’t careful, she’d attack Buzz in front of everyone and beg him to take her. *Whew.* Or maybe she’d take him. She inched back, hoping to calm her pulsing body. *I’ll be lucky if I make it to midnight. Oh, then it’ll be tomorrow, and it will no longer be the night we met...*

Buzz leaned in and touched his forehead to hers.

Heat spread from her core, and her clit throbbed.

“You’re safe with me. We’re not going to sleep together tonight, because even though your body’s ready, your brain isn’t. We don’t have to rush this. In fact, anticipation will make it sweeter. And even though tomorrow starts in an hour, we’re not counting that.”

“How could you possibly know I’d been thinking that?”

He scooted closer. “Being quiet, I’ve learned a lot by listening, and I’m pretty good at reading people.”

“Oh.”

His smile made her body ache for his touch.

“And you whispered ‘after midnight.’ Made my dick hard. Harder.”

A soft gasp left her lips.

Buzz groaned. “Mmm, didn’t peg you as the kind of girl who likes dirty talk.”

She let out a quick breath. “Neither did I, but…” Enzo had never talked dirty during sex. He’d said sweet, beautiful, wonderful things, and she’d always responded to that. But this was turning her on.

“You like it?”

So many sensations flooded her body she could only nod.

Buzz shifted. His thumb still stroked her palm. “Damn. That’s hot.”

“What is?”

“A sweet girl who wants dirty talk.” His Adam’s apple bobbed. “Gotta be in my top two sex fantasies.”

Kelly couldn’t comprehend her being any way that would put her on a rock star’s sex fantasy list. “Like every sex fantasy you ever had hasn’t already come true.”

Buzz shook his head. “Not even close.” His eyes glazed over in lust.

Was he having one right now? In public? Starring her? Impossible. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope.” His hand disappeared below the table, and he made an adjustment. “Can I be blunt?”

She nodded.

“I’ve never lacked for female company when I’m not in a relationship. I’ve only had one serious girlfriend.” His eyes darkened with sadness. “And she...totally crushed me. I thought she was the one, but her one didn’t turn out to be me. For me, some things are best indulged inside a relationship. One-nighters are fun, but I don’t go spilling my heart and soul, and I certainly don’t share sex fantasies. Too personal.” He sighed. “And for the last few months, I haven’t been interested enough to ask a girl back to my hotel.” He exhaled an openmouthed breath. “Until I saw you.”

Kelly scoffed.

Buzz nodded and smiled. “It’s true.”

Her pulse triple-timed it. “But you shared one with me.”

He picked up her hand and kissed the sensitive skin of her wrist. “Four weeks isn’t one night. That’s friends with benefits.”

Damn, damn, damn. One small kiss, with no tongue even, had her lady bits swelling. She wanted to feel his mouth on every inch of her. She wished she hadn’t opened her big mouth about not sleeping with him tonight. It wouldn’t be another one-night stand. And right now, she really, really wanted to be his friend. Benefits couldn’t start soon enough. Having all of Buzz’s considerable attention aimed at her made her feel special. He’d been with many women, and it should bother her, but it didn’t, because right now, she was the only one he wanted. He’d committed to the next four weeks.

But had he?

Kelly cleared her throat. She needed a few breaths before she was confident she’d speak without babbling. Or begging him to fuck her. “Listen, um, I need to, ah, get some clarification here. I don’t want to sound dumb, but...” Looking into his eyes was making it hard to think straight. She’d had a

point to make, but her brains were utterly scrambled. When his full lips curved into a smile, her heart beat double-time.

“We’d be exclusive, of course.”

“How—” She had to stop asking him how he knew what she was going to say before she said it. She was usually secure and confident. Maybe less so since the divorce.

“You have very expressive, beautiful eyes. I don’t want you to have any regrets, so you should take a couple of days to think about it. But for me, I’m in, and it’ll only be you.” He crossed his heart.

Before she could pull her hand away, because she didn’t really want to, Buzz sat back, leaving her personal space, and Kelly swore the air chilled. She’d been basking in the heat flaring between them, and she’d forgotten they were in a bar full of his family and friends. Heat crept up her neck as she tried to casually look around without looking like she was. She didn’t know whether to be relieved or humiliated everyone had moved as far from their table as the space inside the bar allowed.

She jumped when Buzz touched her shoulder.

“Hey, relax. They’re giving us a little privacy. No one’s judging.”

From across the bar, she read Nicki’s lips as she said “I told you so” to Emily. Her satisfied grin sent another wave of heat shooting up Kelly’s neck and face. Emily stepped in front of Nicki to block her gloating.

Kelly had nothing to be embarrassed about. They hadn’t done anything. Well, she was probably drooling, but that was Buzz’s fault. Looking at him made her mouth water. And other parts throb and water. Even her palms were sweating. She was behaving like a teenager. Her five-year marriage hadn’t prepared Kelly for the red-hot lust in a rock star’s eyes. It drew her in and made her forget other people existed.

And for the next four weeks, he’d be all hers.

Chapter Five

BUZZ PEDALED HARD FOR THE LAST FEW MILES. IT WAS HOT AS fuck, but he preferred to get his exercise outside whenever possible. Being in nature always calmed him. He'd wanted to offer to take Kelly home last night, but he'd thought better of it. She'd gotten quiet after realizing everyone had given them privacy. He hoped she wouldn't change her mind because he was looking forward to spending time with a woman who wasn't like a sister to him.

When he got back to Curt's place, he took a quick shower. They'd agreed to meet for coffee at two, but as Buzz was about to leave, she called to cancel because she wasn't able to get away. Buzz offered to bring the coffee to her. She'd been surprised but hadn't told him to screw off and take a hint, so at one fifty-five, he pushed open the heavy glass door of Kelly Hoffmann Bridals.

A pretty redhead sat behind a solid high-top white reception desk. She had a phone wedged between her ear and shoulder as she typed on a computer. Crystal chandeliers cast soft lighting, offsetting all the white fabric, and a hint of vanilla was in the air. There were several seating areas all occupied by families waiting on their brides-to-be.

When she glanced up at him, her eyes widened, and the phone slipped to the desk. She grabbed it and finished the call. A blush spread over her high cheekbones. "May I help you?"

He smiled. "I have an appointment with Kelly."

She picked up the phone and dialed. "Buzz's here."

Not that he didn't get recognized, but Jack was the front man. Everyone knew the singer. The redhead wanted to say something, but she hesitated.

"You're a Stone Highway fan," he said with a smile. Some days he still couldn't believe how lucky he was.

Nodding vehemently, she pulled the billowy long sleeve of her black blouse up to her elbow. On the inside of her forearm, in a fancy script woven around a red heart, it read: Stone Highway saved my life.

It wasn't the first time a fan had expressed that sentiment, but it was the first time he'd seen it permanently inked on skin. He was always humbled by their fans. It was another reminder of why he had to be all in on his recovery because people turned to music in times of crisis. And the ones who managed to survive credited music for helping them get through their darkest hours.

She glanced around and stood, leaning over the top of the reception desk. "I've met Jack and Curt, and they're two of the nicest guys." She smiled fondly. "But my dad's a drummer, and my earliest memory is being on his lap behind the kit." A tear rolled down her cheek. "When I was twenty, I needed a liver transplant. I was on the donor list, but I was declining fast. One day, I posted in the Stone Highway official fan forum I might not be around much longer and I wanted to say goodbye, but they wouldn't let me go. I didn't want anyone feeling sorry for me because I could do that well enough. They got it out of me, and over a dozen fans went to New York Presbyterian Hospital to get tested. When there wasn't a match, more went, and"—she crossed herself—"we found one. Buzzfanatic37. Just...if it weren't for you, I wouldn't be here today."

Buzz put the coffee down and opened his arms. She came around the desk and hugged him. "Wow. That's amazing." This beautiful girl just needed to express her feelings. He was awash with gratitude for the best fans on the planet. The lengths they'd gone to, to help a virtual stranger, amazed him. He'd never forget her. He wiped his hand across his eyes. "Offering a picture seems silly in comparison."

Her eyes lit up. "I'd love that." She grabbed her phone, and Buzz held it up high and snapped a few pictures of them. "Thank you for sharing your story. You made my week."

Her desk phone beeped, and she rushed around to answer it. "Kelly's ready for you." She waved, and Buzz followed her through the showroom to a hallway with large framed sketches of wedding dresses. She stopped at the last door on the right.

Buzz poked his head in. Kelly was leaning against the front of her glass-top desk on her cell. She looked upset, but her voice was calm. Too calm. She held up her finger.

Buzz stayed in the hallway, but he heard her.

"RJ, I'd be lying if I said I was happy about it." She bit her lip. "But if this is what you want, then you have to take it." Her lips pulled in. "And I'll support your decision." Her face scrunched, and she rubbed her forehead.

Her dark hair was back in a high, sleek ponytail. Her black blouse and knee-length black skirt were offset by a bubblegum-pink belt and matching heels. Damn, she was beautiful. He stepped back and leaned against the wall but still heard her.

"Yeah, I'll go with you to talk to Grams. She's not gonna be happy about it. You know there's gonna be yelling and out-loud praying to God." A sad smile crossed her red lips. "You know trying to do an end run around dealing with her is going to backfire. Pa's still recovering from his bypass surgery, but you can't use that as an excuse to not tell them. They're gonna find out, and if it doesn't come from you, there'll be hell to pay. And you know I mean literal hell. I heard Gramzilla destroyed an entire town in Italy before they came over."

Male laughter burst through the phone.

"I'll talk to you later." Kelly tapped the phone and laid it on her desk with a pained sigh. She shook her head, inhaled and exhaled deeply, then waved him in.

"Your baby brother?"

Kelly nodded. "How'd you know?"

“My sister uses that same tone with me. She’s older and never lets me forget it.”

“What tone is that exactly?”

“Don’t get pissy.”

Kelly’s lips quirked. “I’m not. Okay, I am. I’m really sensitive when it comes to my family.” A fake smile tilted her lips. “What tone?”

Buzz wished he hadn’t said anything. The less they got to know each other, the better. Except for sexually. He wanted to know everything about how to pleasure her. What made her pant, cry out in ecstasy, beg for release. Scream. He needed to clean up his thinking while they were in her office. He could lie, but he didn’t like to. But he also didn’t want to get into details of his childhood. So he went with a different part of the truth. “My sister always enjoyed being the boss of me. I was like a living doll she got to play with. It must be a big-sister tone universal to older sisters.”

Her head tilted, but she let it drop. “Is that for me?” She pointed to the coffee holder.

“Sure is. Man of my word.”

She walked to the couch and sat with her knees and feet together. So dainty. The sway of her hips sent blood rushing south. He handed her a coffee and took a sip of his.

She was sitting in the middle of the couch, and while there was room on either side of her, he opted for one of the upholstered chairs. He didn’t want her to feel boxed in.

Kelly placed her coffee on the cherrywood table. Clearing her throat, she said, “There’s one thing you need to understand before we discuss the terms of our arrangement. My brother and sister will always come first. If they need me, I’ll be there. No matter what.”

“Of course. But do you have to make it sound like a legal contract?”

She crossed one shapely leg over the other. “Well, I think if we’re going to do this, we should be very clear about the

details.”

“Oh, okay. So first, I’d like to kiss you, deeply. Then move down your neck with little nips—”

She put her hand up. “Not *those* details.” But she smiled and chuckled.

“Oh, right. Terms first then fun.” He leaned in. “And I guarantee it’ll be *fun* and *satisfying*.”

When her eyes dropped to his crotch, his dick stirred. A half smile crossed her full lips, and their eyes met. He hadn’t been the only one left unsatisfied last night. A cold shower and jerking off hadn’t eased the ache to have her. He glanced around her office and stopped at the desk. He smiled and returned his gaze to her.

“Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

She leaned in. “We are *not* having *sex* on my desk.”

“Why not?”

She huffed. “Because this is where I work. We have to keep business and pleasure separated.”

Buzz imagined her naked and under him on the couch. Leaning in, voice low, he said, “How exactly are you going to do that if you have to sketch me nude?”

She scrunched her face and vaulted up and over to her office door. She peered into the hallway and closed the door, leaning against it. “Stop that.” But she was smiling, and her eyes said she didn’t really want him to stop. “There will be no nude sketching.”

He made a sad face. “Too bad.” She was right about getting the terms set before they went any further. But his dick didn’t care about any of that. He wanted to strip her naked and make her scream his name. He wanted to taste every inch of her. He wanted to feel her squeeze every drop of cum from his pulsing cock. With great effort, he turned his mind to the topic at hand. “Okay. No sex in office. Family first. Anything else?”

His body hummed with anticipation of kissing her. But he suspected it wouldn't be allowed in the office either. He understood. This was her place of business, and she needed to keep a certain amount of respect from her staff. He sat up and told his dick to stand down.

Her eyes smoldered with lust for him, which sent more blood south, causing more tension on the fly of his shorts. Shifting, he cleared his throat. Yeah, sexual chemistry by the boatload. And a woman who was as passionate about her dreams as Buzz was about his? For whatever reason, that amped up the sexual chemistry. She looked incredibly beautiful, and he had every intention of letting her set the pace, so he'd put up with the torture of wanting her until she was ready. He forced his gaze around the room. He simply couldn't concentrate while taking in her beauty. It didn't help that her signals were off the charts. Her face was flushed in that utterly glorious way women got when they were aroused, and her breathing was heavy. Her ample tits were rising and falling, and his gaze kept sliding to her breasts.

He wanted to hear her soft gasps as she begged for release.

Looking around the room wasn't helping because every flat surface, or wall, became a possible target, and if he couldn't get his mind off sex, they'd never get the formalities out of the way so he could have her.

“Have you changed your mind?”

His gaze snapped back to her, and he shook his head. Taking a deep breath, he fixed his eyes on hers. “Not in the least. But I want you. And I'm caring less and less about embarrassing you in your place of business, so let's get this conversation going.”

Her mouth fell open, and bright red stains slashed over her high cheekbones. “Not shy,” she whispered.

“Not in the least.”

“You don't seem all that quiet either. I mean, we talked for hours at the bar, and you're doing a lot of talking now.”

“I’m totally an actions speak louder kinda guy. But you said no hanky-panky in the office. Doesn’t mean I won’t fantasize about it.” He smiled. “As for quiet, I’m in between Jack and Elliot on the scale of talkative to silent.”

“You have a scale?”

He nodded. “Ever since we were kids, Jack always had an easygoing way about him. It’s not like he rattles on, but he’s super friendly, always the one to break the ice.” He glanced away. “I’ve always been a little jealous of how easy it was for him to be around people. I’ve tried to be like that, but I’m just not. Around people I’m comfortable with, I guess I’m as talkative as the next dude.”

“And you’re comfortable around me? We hardly know each other.”

He grinned. “I know a lot more than you think. Nicki, in case you missed it, can talk nonstop when she’s interested in a topic. And I’ve learned more about weddings than I ever thought possible. And they like you.”

“And that’s good enough for you? I could be a real bitch to work for.”

“Sure, you could be, but you’re not. Nicki mentioned most of your staff has worked for you for years. Money will only keep people in a job for so long if their boss is a dick. Emily’s an exceptionally good judge of character because...reasons.” Buzz looked down. “You’ve got their stamp of approval.”

“They’re looking for a girlfriend for you?”

He shook his head. “I told Em I’m not ready, and she understood, but Nicki isn’t known for taking no for an answer. I’m sure she’s already written an ending where we’re running through a breezy field of wildflowers in flowing white clothes into each other’s arms, or something equally dramatic, and pledging undying love to each other.”

“You don’t believe in love?”

“Once bitten...” He wanted off this topic, but maybe it was better she understood now that his sobriety required all his effort. It had taken him a few conversations with Vince before

he'd understood fully even the band had to take a back seat. What woman would want to ride in the trunk? This would end badly if she fell for him, so brutal honesty was the way to go. He couldn't even imagine a time when he wouldn't have to put all his energy into his mental health. Nothing like therapy to make a guy realize how truly fucked up he was.

“The truth is, I need to focus on my sobriety and my health. The band comes second, and everything else a distant third.” He scoffed. “At some point in every working musician's career, they have to have an honest conversation with their significant other that they'll always come second to the band at times. It's horrible, but that's the way it is.” Even though Siobhan and Jason now traveled with them, and Nicki and Emily being writers could do their writing from anywhere, Buzz never expected he'd be so lucky. He was a recovering addict, and he always would be.

A wife and kids weren't in the cards for him.

He wouldn't saddle them with his shit.



KELLY WAS FINDING IT HARD TO CONCENTRATE BECAUSE BUZZ was devouring her with his eyes. She sat back on the couch and crossed her legs to try to ease the throbbing. He wore a loose-fitting, white T-shirt with a faded Stone Highway logo, olive cargo shorts, and black flip-flops. He looked incredibly sexy.

Buzz glanced away.

The silence stretched on.

“Are you okay?”

When his eyes met hers, the pain there stole her breath. It wouldn't be a stretch to assume he'd had a bad childhood. It was a common thread for a lot of musicians. Abuse, neglect, abandonment... Kelly understood the latter. Her parents hadn't left on purpose, but she felt abandoned. Buzz was laid-back,

her total opposite. She was stressed all the time. Every decision she made would affect her employees.

He blinked a few times and smiled. “Yeah, I’m good. It’s always a little tough to adjust to off-tour life.”

It seemed reasonable enough, and it was just as well he didn’t expand further. The last thing she needed was him getting too close.

She just wanted sex.

“Well, I’m glad you’re the one who said it because I’m in the same boat. I have a lot of people who depend on me, and my family and business will always come first.”

Buzz’s easy grin returned. “I get it. I really do.” He shifted off the chair and onto the couch next to her. His body heat enveloped her, and his hand rested on hers. He smelled like outdoors.

That small touch had her tingling all over. “Get what?”

“What it takes to survive in a creative industry. All you have to sacrifice. Non-creatives have no understanding of the work of art. We were built to create, but we have to learn how to market ourselves, how to run a business, how to do a million other things just to get a chance at success. And you’ve accomplished it all on your own.”

Blood pounded in her ears. “I had help.”

“Of course, family *can be* supportive, but I meant that, being in the band, it was a group effort. We each have our strengths and weaknesses. Like Jack being the mayor. He’s great at it. Elliot and I would rather be covered in honey and tied naked to an anthill than have to deal with people.” Buzz shifted closer. “And we had each other to go through the process with.”

“Process?”

“Creativity. Art, music, writing, design. They’re all tough businesses. It’s not sitting around all day creating new music or wonderful dress designs. And we give up a lot. Time with our families, broken relationships because the stress of being

apart is too much. Unless Jack can't sing, he doesn't get sick days. And if I can be propped up behind the drums, I'm going to play no matter how much knee pain I have."

She glanced at his knee. He had a few small incision scars.

"You started your own business at twenty-five. That's amazing. People don't realize how much work it is to start a business from scratch. You have to do everything yourself. And I'd guess for you that also meant cleaning. Paying bills, sourcing materials, it's all time-consuming. Especially in the beginning, there really isn't time for anything else. After a while, it eases some, but you still have to be all in because half measures will net you nothing. We have a crew who depend on us."

Kelly's belly tingled. No one had ever understood that before. Not even Enzo because he'd worked hard, but he'd gone into a thriving business. Even before she'd opened the doors, every task, no matter how small or hard or how much she hated it, fell to her.

Buzz scoffed. "And once you've had some success, the pressure gets even worse. You're only as good as your last record or book or dress design. And with each subsequent success, that feeling grows more intense. And it's so easy to get pigeonholed into a genre. We've always been hard rock, but from our first album, we've always included a softer ballad and something bordering on metal because our creativity spanned the entire spectrum of music. The guy who gave us our first big break, Sid, told us we had to train our fans, and the more variety on each album, the better. But that's hard to do with a record company because, the reality is, they're looking for singles not an album as a whole cohesive being. That's something we still have to deal with for every record. And we're lucky because we've had success since our first album, so the label's willing to give us more leeway, but we still have to fight for certain songs to get on the album."

"But you have them to do all the marketing and stuff. I was *so* glad to hand that off to my sister."

“Yes and no. I mean, as an artist, you’re always expected to do some of the heavy lifting. We have a crap ton of press junkets leading up to the release of a new record and the start of the next tour. And even on tour, we do mini gigs at radio stations with interviews and charity events if we can schedule them during the day or on off days. Even Em and Nicki. Their publisher does some marketing, but they have a lot of writers to promote, so marketing dollars are spread thin, and they expect writers to do a lot themselves. Nicki’s active on social media because that’s where a lot of readers are, and she’s a natural at it, but that’s so far out of Em’s wheelhouse. She was a copywriter, so she runs ads on social media platforms for her books. She has a private reader group outside of social media in a forum she runs, because she’s not willing to share her personal life where anyone can see it. We’re lucky because we’ve been able to hire good people to take a lot of stuff off our plate. But our crew is like a family, and if we fuck up, it affects them.” Pain flashed in his eyes.

“I totally understand.” It was one of her biggest fears. Tingling turned to full-on lust. She’d never met anyone who understood how much non-creative work was needed to succeed in creative industries. It was like having five full-time jobs but only one came naturally, the creative part, and that fun part occupied less and less of her time. The pressure to always top her last effort. Stress killed her creativity. And the last two years had been off the charts stressful. She was grateful for her success, but now she had others to consider, and if her business tanked, it wouldn’t just be her out of a job.

They hadn’t even kissed yet, but she’d never been more sexually attracted to a man.

Enzo had done his best to understand, but sometimes real understanding could only be achieved by someone in the same position. And while Buzz was a musician and she was a designer, he understood things she never realized she’d needed someone to understand.

She placed her hand on his knee. “Will we have to adjust how we do things?”

Buzz grinned and covered her hand with his. “I had a skiing accident four years ago. Dislocated it and tore the meniscus and ACL. But”—he wagged his brows, and his lips curved into a wolfish grin— “as long as we’re on a soft surface, it won’t be an issue.”

“But you still have pain?”

He shrugged. “Drumming is a full-body workout. I had to make some major changes to my technique, but even with that, the wear and tear on my right knee takes a toll. The injury is fully healed, but it’s a weak spot.”

Kelly gave up all effort to keep her distance because they were in her office, and she shifted until their knees touched. “Four weeks only.” She leaned in and tilted her head.

Eyes dazed, he whispered, “Four weeks only.” Buzz smiled, angled his head, and waited.

Kelly leaned in, and their lips touched. Heat flooded her system, her blood pounded through her veins, and when his tongue touched the seam of her lips, she opened to him. He moaned and shifted closer, and she melted into him. He smelled of soap and shaving cream and a warm summer day. His arms went around her, urging her closer until she was practically on his lap. The heat from his skin branded her.

The kiss wasn’t even deep, but it held the promise of more to come.

A knock at her door had her sliding back onto the couch. His eyes held humor. He’d been holding back because they were in her office. He was following her terms even though she’d totally forgotten when their lips touched.

Another knock, and the door opened. “Hey, sis. We need to go over—” Jenny stopped mid-stride. Her mouth dropped open. She snapped it shut but not before a giggle burst out.

Great, just what I needed. My baby sister catching me making out with a rock star. Kelly’s face burned.

Jenny’s eyes screamed “we are so talking about this.” She cleared her throat through a grin she had trouble containing.

“Ahem. Uh, we have a meeting with the fashion week people...to uh...go over stuff.”

Kelly slipped into her mom persona and gave her sister a warning look. “Jenny, this is Buzz—”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Her eyes widened. “Sorry, I meant, no kidding. Anita’s glowing like the morning sun. Everyone was wondering what’s been going on here. I’ve got odds three to one you two were...” Her brows waggled up and down.

“Jennifer Clancy Hoffmann, grow up. This is business. I met Buzz at the party last night Nicki insisted I go to because you opened your big mouth about how all work and no play makes me boring. He’s agreed to be my guinea pig for a men’s line I’m considering.”

“I’d love a line of men. One is never enough.”

Buzz burst out laughing.

Kelly shot daggers at her sister. “Stop embarrassing me.”

Jenny drew the outline of a book in the air with her finger. “Little sister’s prerogative.”

The last thing Buzz needed to see was their silly game. Kelly had the *Big Sister’s Handbook*, and Jenny and RJ had the *Younger Siblings’ Guide to Getting Back*. She didn’t want to get into those kinds of explanations. “Jenny, we’ve had plenty of celebrities come here. Stop acting like it’s your first day with manners.”

Buzz chuckled and stood.

All humor left Jenny’s eyes and they narrowed. “Just because you raised me and RJ doesn’t mean you can use the mom tone with me anymore.”

The laughter in the air was crushed by the sudden tension. Kelly glared in a clear warning. She didn’t need Buzz knowing her business.

He cleared his throat. “I can see you’re busy. Call me when you have a schedule of when we can meet. I’m pretty flexible.” His brows waggled. “I can make myself available

when your calendar is open.” He stopped in front of Jenny and extended his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

They shook hands, and Jenny still stood there, dumbfounded, after Buzz left.

Kelly pushed her anger down. The last thing today needed was the Hoffmann sisters going three rounds in her office. Having Buzz come here had been a mistake. “Jenny, snap out of it. He’s gone.”

Jenny rushed to the door and closed it. “Tell me everything. How long have you been banging him? And why didn’t you tell me? And whew.” She fanned herself. “Does he have a brother? Those eyes.” Jenny plopped into the chair. “Why is it men have the longest, thickest, darkest lashes? All the guys in Stone Highway are good-looking. There’s usually at least one uggo, but damn, up close. I had no idea he was so gorgeous.”

Kelly hadn’t either. She’d seen pictures, but Buzz had a way of fading into the background. In band photos, Jack, being the lead singer, was always up front with the other three flanking him. Standard rock band photos. But Jenny was right about Buzz’s eyes. In band photos, he wore a neutral expression. If a picture was worth a thousand words, then his eyes in person were worth a million. She’d been sucked into them from the first minute at the vow renewal. Depth. That was what was missing in the photos. He was in familiar company both times. She understood something she hadn’t before. He was a private person, too. Whatever questions might arise during their time together, he’d never push her for more than she was willing to give.

And she wouldn’t push him.

“So?” Jenny prodded.

Kelly didn’t want to have this conversation with her sister, but at least Buzz’s charm had distracted Jenny from her anger. “So nothing.” Kelly took a seat behind her desk. “It’s business.”

Jenny's temper flared all over Kelly. She vaulted out of the chair and slapped her hands on Kelly's desk. "Are you ever going to let me be grown-up enough to stop being my mother and start being my sister?" Jenny's eyes narrowed. "I get it. When you met Enzo, I was only eleven, and you were never comfortable talking to me about your sex life. But I've told you about every guy I ever kissed. And I'm not saying you have to give me a blow by blow, but come on, Kel. Don't lie to me." Jenny stormed toward the door.

"Wait." Kelly stood and went to her. "It's not a total lie. He is going to be my guinea pig for a new line of tuxes. But we're also going to be...getting personal."

"Sex. You're going to have sex."

Kelly had had plenty of sex during her relationship with Enzo. She had no reason to be embarrassed, but she couldn't help the feelings swarming inside.

Jenny pulled her to the couch. "I think I get it."

Kelly scoffed. "Really? I sure don't."

"Can we talk honestly?"

"I have always said you can be honest with me."

Jenny smiled. "Yes, you did, and you even made it easy. Even when I'd screwed up. I knew I could tell you anything and you'd still love me. But you never had that. Not really. Maybe before Mom died. But after...you stepped into her role without a second thought. Between you and Dad, RJ and I had a great childhood. But you didn't. Even after Nana moved in with us to help out. She was already in her late seventies, and she didn't really know how to deal with us emotionally. Then a year later, she got cancer, and you helped Dad take care of her and us. When she died, the remaining bits of young Kelly died too. You were a full-fledged adult at thirteen. Don't get me wrong, Dad was great, but then when he got cancer...." Tears filled Jenny's eyes. "You were the one who'd make him soup because he couldn't tolerate solid food. You curled up on the bathroom floor with him."

Once the tears started, they'd flow until every last ounce of loss was felt, so they didn't talk about it often.

Jenny shook herself. "I'm asking you to be honest with me. I'm asking, no, begging you, please be my big sister who's only three years older than me. You deserve to finally only be my sister. And I deserve to fully be yours."

"I didn't... I thought I was." She'd struggled to let go of the role of mom, but she thought since Jenny had come to work for her she had. "It's not easy."

"I get that. And so does RJ."

"Oh, man. You guys have talked about this?"

Jenny smiled. "That's what siblings do. It's what we want to do with you."

Kelly's tears fell unbidden. Deep in the discussions with Enzo before they'd finally separated, when it was clear there was no hope, had been Kelly's inability to relinquish responsibility for her siblings. Enzo thought if she could let go of it, then she'd see she could have a family of her own with him. Hard as it was to admit to herself, the last thing she'd wanted was to give up one responsibility that had consumed her life for another. And no matter how great Enzo would've been, the bulk of the responsibility would be on her. *Except Mom and Dad had done it differently.*

A long-forgotten memory from two lifetimes ago surfaced. Since Dad had twenty-four on, forty-eight off shifts, Mom had worked part-time so they'd never been in daycare. Her salary was a lot higher than his. He was ten years older than her and had been the next in line, but he'd given up the chance to be chief in Ten House when they'd married and moved to Long Island. They'd been a team. And her dad had adopted Frankie.

Anger burned through her as it always did when she thought of her older brother. Some of the anger was really jealousy because Frankie still had a parent.

She was feeling very uncomfortable sharing with Jenny her planned sexual marathon with Buzz. Grabbing tissues, she

handed a wad to Jenny. “Um, I...” She shrugged. “I don’t know where to start.”

Jenny’s eyes glittered with glee. “Sex with Buzz. Start there.”

Kelly nodded. Her skin tingled. “We haven’t had sex yet.”

“But you’re planning to.”

“Yes.”

“You go, sis. Take that rock star to bed, and don’t come up for air.”

Kelly narrowed her eyes. “I have never talked like that to you.”

“No. But I have no idea how to respond to you as a sister instead of a kid, so we both have things to learn.”

Chapter Six

BUZZ PULLED INTO THE DRIVEWAY OF HIS PARENTS' HOME. Looking around the neighborhood he'd grown up in, he understood why Elliot and Siobhan and Jack had bought houses here. Pine Hill was a great neighborhood for families.

His parents had sold their apartment on Central Park West in Manhattan to move here when he'd finally been cleared after his heart surgery to repair an atrial septal defect because a more tranquil neighborhood would better suit them. He hadn't been sad about moving because he wasn't leaving anything behind. His only friend had been his sister, Stephanie. She'd play with him when she'd gotten home from school.

Between his environmental allergies and his mom's paranoia, he'd still spent most of his time inside. He'd been on medication that only slightly diminished his symptoms, so when he'd been four, he'd started immunotherapy. He'd had weekly shots for a year and then incrementally longer between shots for five years. Luckily, he hadn't had food allergies, too. Even though they were labeled non-drowsy, he still didn't take over-the-counter allergy meds because they all made him stupid sleepy. He'd found several homeopathic options that worked well to control his symptoms without the side effects.

The air was cleaner here. Buzz inhaled. Instead of the summer-intensifying stench of exhaust fumes, decaying garbage, and way too many people in proximity, the pine trees supplied the earthy base, and on this beautiful, warm, sunny day, barbecuing meat, flowers, and fresh cut grass topped off

the scent. A lawn mower buzzed in the distance, and kids played a few streets over. *Home.*

People cared about each other. Younger neighbors looked out for the older ones, volunteering to handle minor repairs and making sure their driveways and sidewalks were always cleared in the winter.

Kelly had called and said she'd be free tonight to take his measurements. He'd be going to her apartment, which suited him fine. Closer to her bed. Or couch. Or wall. Or all of those. His nuts ached with the need to fuck her. Jerking off wasn't cutting it.

"Honey, you coming inside?" Mom asked. She stood in the doorway, her light-brown hair in a ponytail, dressed in khaki shorts, a yellow T-shirt, and sneakers. Her standard summer attire was oddly comforting.

"Yup." Buzz hit the lock on the key fob and strode up the paving stone walkway. He hugged his mom tightly, feeling incredibly grateful. She was his rock. "Mmm. Dinner smells good."

"You always say that. I'm not the best cook." She pulled back and gave him a once-over. "You look too thin. Are you eating enough?"

Buzz grinned. "Why do moms always ask that?"

"Because we worry. It's in the job description. Doesn't matter how old you are, you'll always be my baby."

"Cause I'm the youngest?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Stephie's my baby, too." Her body tensed slightly as she glanced over her shoulder into the house. "She's in a bit of a mood."

Fuck. That was mom speak for Steph being out for blood. "Deran still giving her sh—uh, crap?"

Mom nodded. "She moved out of their apartment, but he's coming after her for half the rent. And alimony. Can you believe that?"

“What a...dick. Sorry, I couldn’t come up with a better word.” Buzz used to think Deran was an okay guy.

Mom smiled. “He is a”—she lowered her voice to a whisper—“dick.”

“He’s been in private practice for two years and makes more money than Stephanie.”

Mom sighed. “For now. She’s already getting offers with signing bonuses from practices once she’s finished her fellowship. Pediatric cardiothoracic surgeons are few and far between, and he’s going after her future earnings.”

“Why?”

Mom looked down. “His lawyer says he’s entitled, and because he’s still got his med school loans.”

Buzz’s jaw tightened. “And Steph doesn’t.” Their parents had paid for her undergrad and medical school while Deran’s had only paid for his undergrad.

“You know your sister, once she makes up her mind, she acts. Deran’s been dragging his feet on this, and she wanted to end things as quickly as possible, but now he’s done it. She’s going to fight him on everything. Said she’d rather pay her future earnings to a lawyer than him. Then she did that evil cackle she does, you know the one?” Mom rubbed her hands together.

“Oh, yeah. She developed it when I was little and the big kids were picking on me. It started with the cackle and ended with them running home to Mommy crying like little girls. I’m pretty sure Steph invented the bitch slap. More like a bitch punch.”

Mom chuckled. “You may be right. If he thinks his med school loans are big, just wait till he gets a bill from his attorney. She’s on the phone with her lawyer. Red is not her color.”

Buzz sighed. She’d be aiming some of her anger at him. He’d hoped, in addition to enjoying Kelly as much as possible on this break, he and Steph could put everything behind them

and go back to being siblings and best friends. “Still not forgiving me?”

Mom closed her eyes, the corners of her mouth dipped, and she shook her head. “She was getting there, but now...”

Steph was a great big sister, but it was her worst flaw. Everyone had them, and he supposed someone with such a big metaphorical heart was entitled to one extra shitty flaw. When she was pissed, really pissed, her anger wasn't limited to the source. Everyone was in the line of fire. Buzz squared his shoulders. This wouldn't be the relaxing family dinner he'd hoped. His therapist had said he needed to accept his sister's anger and confront it. Walking away from it, like he'd been doing, was only making things worse. He'd said he was giving her time to cool down, but his therapist had pointed out it looked a lot like avoidance. And after thinking about it a few days, Buzz admitted the truth of it. He didn't really like confrontation, but he needed to deal with his sister because he loved her too much to lose her. “Let's go.”

Mom's brown eyes held a glint of sadness. “Are you sure? You know the target on your back is the size of New York.”

“Yeah. I've put it off long enough.” He put his arm around her. “If we're lucky, we can get through dinner first.”

They walked inside. Steph was on her cell in the corner of the living room. *Oh, shit.* Her lips were moving, but he couldn't hear her. Warning bells went off inside his head. It was even worse than Mom said. Quiet, angry Stephanie was the worst. Not that her soon-to-be ex didn't deserve it, but maybe today wasn't the day to grow a pair and deal with her. When she yelled, she could be reasoned with. But there was no way to counter the controlled anger. Which was completely opposite of most people.

Dad walked in from the kitchen. “Son.” He pulled Buzz into a bear hug, and Buzz hugged him back. “How you holding up?”

Buzz gestured to the kitchen, and they left Stephanie to deal with her lawyer in private. “It's a work in progress. Mostly good days, though. I can't complain.”

“I’m so proud of you.”

They sat at the kitchen table and caught up. When Stephanie joined them fifteen minutes later, if looks could kill, Buzz would’ve been vaporized. He stood and pulled Stephanie into his arms. When she stood there, arms limply at her side, he hugged her tighter.

“Mom told you?” The constrained anger in her voice chilled him.

“Yeah. Sorry, sis.” It was better not to mention Deran’s name. “Anything I can do?”

She pulled back, and her eyes narrowed. Haven’t you done enough, they screamed at him. But she shook her head.

Well, that’s progress. She’s trying not to blow her anger all over me even though she’s still pissed at me. Several snarky brother comments came to mind, but Buzz remained silent. She was trying, and he wouldn’t be the one to poke the mean, pissed-off black bear.

“How’s work, dear?” Mom asked a little too cheerily.

“Fine.” Stephanie opened the fridge and pulled out a block of cheese. Cheese was her coping mechanism.

“Dinner’ll be ready in fifteen minutes. You don’t want to spoil your appetite,” Mom said.

“Fine.” She put the cheese back and plopped into a chair next to Buzz. She made a concerted effort to reign in her anger. “So, baby bro, how’s the tour?” she growled out.

This was a powder keg. “Well, the fans are great, as always. Just finished the run with Alchemy Riot. They’re great guys, and I’m glad we had a chance to get to know them better. Vince says ‘hi.’”

Her eyes narrowed, but a spark of interest flickered. She’d always been able to tell when he was lying when they’d been kids. “He actually said that?”

Buzz lifted his left shoulder in a half shrug. “Well, not in so many words.”

Stephanie's brow raised. "It's one word, Garth Junior."

"Why?"

"Why, what?" she asked innocently.

"You know I prefer Buzz."

She leaned forward, scruffed his hair, and grinned. "You'll always be baby Garth to me."

Buzz hated his name. Always had. Everyone called him Buzz, even his parents and grandparents. Everyone except Stephanie because she knew he hated it. Big sister's prerogative she'd said.

Their dad was incredibly intelligent, something he'd passed on to Stephanie, but by the time he'd been born, all Dad's genius DNA had been used up, but he'd inherited Mom's love of art. Not that Buzz thought he was dumb, at least not anymore, but his dyslexia would never go away. For most, reading was second nature. But technology gave him tools to make his life easier.

Because Stephanie had been a straight-A student, Buzz had hated following her in school. Every teacher who'd had her expected him to be an excellent student also. He'd struggled to get Cs.

As soon as he'd shown an interest in music, his parents had encouraged him. Only his parents and Elliot's father had been fully supportive when they'd dreamed of being professional musicians.

Buzz took a deep breath to calm down. She was baiting him, and if he didn't bite, hopefully, they would have a pleasant visit. "Mom told me surgical practices are wining and dining you. All those years of training are about to pay off. I'm so proud of you."

Stephanie shook her head while her grin of doom spread wide. "We were talking about you. Nice try, though."

He sipped his water. "Actually, we were talking about Vince." Buzz smirked.

Steph narrowed her eyes at him. “Don’t. He seems like an okay guy, but I’m not looking to get involved with anyone else.” A look of pure sadness covered her face. “I don’t think I ever will.”

Buzz put his hand over hers. “I get it.” His heart broke for her. Even though he was in the same place, his misery didn’t want company. The thought of his sister getting with some guy, the way he was about to get with Kelly, turned his stomach. Kelly had a brother who was six years younger than her. He’d keep it in mind if he happened to meet him, however unlikely it was for the purely sexual fun they’d agreed to.

“No special girl?” Steph asked.

“Nope.”

“Dinner’s ready,” Mom said. “Shall we eat outside?”

“Yeah.”

All during dinner, Buzz felt Steph’s glare. It was like being an ant under a magnifying glass on a sunny day. She vibrated with anger. His entire body hummed with the need to flee because he didn’t *want* to fight with Steph. It was coming. Buzz cleared the plates and brought them inside. “You guys relax. I got this.” He needed a break from Stephanie’s dagger-y spotlight.

His reprieve only lasted a few minutes.

“Problem, Buzzy?” she said with a sneer.

Buzz’s shoulders dropped. He ignored her and finished loading the dishwasher. She was going to have her say no matter what, so he faced her. “Go ahead.”

“With what?”

“You got something on your mind.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Have you used any drugs?”

“No.”

“Why don’t I believe you? Right, you lied to us all the time while you were using.”

Heat and anger rose in his chest, but he tamped it down. “Not as much as you’d think.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Stephanie Gabriella Stewart. Don’t speak to your brother that way.” Mom shook her head. “Don’t you think it’s time you forgive him?”

Buzz sighed. “Mom, you can’t force her to get over what I did.”

“He’s been in recovery for two years.”

Stephanie growled. “What I can’t get over is how you two are so forgiving. He hid his drug use and lied for years. He could’ve died!” Her face reddened, and her voice broke. Her hands fisted. “He’s used up all his benefits of the doubt.”

Anger surged. “You know what, Steph? I don’t need to come home and have you give me shit. I’ve apologized a dozen times. I’m done.” He kissed Mom on the cheek. “I’ll call you in a few days.”

“Buzz, please, don’t go. You two need to hash it out once and for all.”

Stephanie pulled out a chair, sat, and stretched her long legs out. “I’ve got nothing new to add.”

He stormed out of the kitchen.

“Son?”

The sadness in Dad’s voice tore at Buzz’s heart. He’d tried being patient and understanding with Stephanie. She had a right to her feelings, but every chance she got, she reminded him how stupid his choices had been. Buzz knew it in every atom of his being, and he didn’t think he’d ever let go of the guilt. The constant needling was pissing him off. Passive-aggressive wasn’t her way. She preferred aggressive-aggressive.

Buzz turned to his dad. “I don’t know how to fix this. It’s been two years, and frankly she’s pissing me off because how can I move on if she’s constantly reminding me what I’ve

done. I'm getting sick of apologizing. I don't know what she wants me to say or do to prove I'm not using."

"I don't think she knows either." His dad glanced over his shoulder. "Still going to NA meetings?"

"Yeah. Probably will for the rest of my life."

"Still seeing a therapist?"

"I am. I'm doing everything I possibly can." Guilt burned in his chest. "I know I screwed up, and I'm taking responsibility for the choices I made. I know Steph won't forgive me until she's ready. Every time I see her, she gives me shit. Like it's only a matter of time before I screw up again. I know the statistics, but I can't focus on that. I take each day, sometimes each hour, minute by minute. When I'm feeling like I might slip, I call Vince or Mike."

"What about your sponsor, Herb?"

Buzz sat on the couch. "He's a good guy, but Vince knows the pitfalls and how the stresses of touring can be an issue. And Mike..."

"Eddie's Mike?"

Buzz nodded.

Dad sat next to him. "I didn't know Mike had a drug problem."

"Been sober over thirty years."

"And Vince?"

Buzz didn't want to betray any confidences. Vince was very private about his past, but he'd shared it with Buzz. "He had a drug problem when he was a teenager, but he kicked it long before they hit it big."

"Another fucking addict? Why would you even associate with him?" Stephanie's voice was shrill.

Buzz sighed. "He was. He's been clean and sober for over a decade. It's not public knowledge, so please don't say anything."

“You need new friends.”

“He’s part of my support team. The guys are always there for me, but Vince understands in a way no one else can.”

“Yeah.” She turned her back on him.

The tenuous grip on his anger snapped. Taking the stick, he aimed squarely at the bear. “Maybe I could really use your support, and what I really need is for you to forgive me. But that’s not your strong suit, is it?”

Her eyes flared. “How dare you?” Her lips pulled tight. “You don’t even know everything.”

“Stephanie.” Dad’s tone held a warning.

His hands balled into fists. “What I know is that I’ve done *everything* I can to prove to you I’m sober. What do you want me to do, piss in a cup every time I walk through the door?”

“It’d be a start.” She rushed forward, and her palms landed on his chest, shoving him. “Every word out of your mouth was a lie, so excuse me if I don’t believe you.”

“Stephanie!” Mom’s voice held tears. “Stop this. He’s not using.”

“How do you know? Because he says so?”

Before he said something he’d regret forever, Buzz walked to the door. “Don’t worry, sis. I’m done talking to you.” He stomped out. Ripping his keys out of his pocket, he got in the car. He loved his sister, but no other person on the planet could piss him off the way she did.

As he drove back to the city, sadness, worse than any other, filled his body with fear and anxiety.

He wasn’t supposed to be at Kelly’s until eight, and even though it was barely seven, he didn’t think he’d calm down enough to see her without his foul mood spilling onto her. Not that it should matter because they weren’t dating, but he didn’t want to talk about it, and he didn’t want to start their arrangement off with angry sex. Kelly deserved his best during their time. But he also didn’t like canceling because he’d made

a commitment. Instead of getting on Route 9A, he turned around. Maybe after a drive he'd be in a better headspace.

Chapter Seven

WHEN KELLY WALKED OUT OF THE BOUTIQUE AT SIX, EVERY single one of her employees had knowing looks on their faces. Unless there was a family emergency, Kelly never left early. She was the first one in and last one out.

Buzz would be there at eight, and she needed to take a shower and do some maintenance. A lot actually. She'd stopped getting waxed because she just didn't have the time to spare. After Enzo had moved out, there didn't seem to be a point anymore. She'd let a lot of her personal pampering fall by the wayside. There was always work to do, and the extra time it took to get her hair highlighted and her monthly pedicure had all turned into time sucks she couldn't afford. She'd always done her manicure herself because she'd found it calming, but even that, a somewhat creative endeavor, had been swallowed up by work. She couldn't remember the last time she'd painted her nails, but she was certain it had been before she and Enzo had separated.

She had four weeks with Buzz, and she wanted to make the most of them. She'd meant to book a mani-pedi yesterday, but she'd forgotten. Then she'd told herself she'd do her own pedicure this morning before work, but her only bottles of polish, at least the ones she'd been able to open, had been gloppy messes, and she didn't have any nail polish thinner.

So instead of doing the smart thing and going in late, she'd told herself she'd get her paperwork done and her schedule cleared and leave early. She'd planned on leaving at four so she could pick up some supplies, but she'd had to referee two

consultants who were fighting over a commission and had two unexpected calls from overseas.

List in hand, Kelly got her errands done, and as she walked home, anticipation grew. Once they got Buzz's measurements out of the way, Kelly would pounce on him like a kid on Halloween candy. The sky was clear, and a light breeze brought the scent of Italian food. A few people waved as she passed by.

Kelly shifted her bags and unlocked the outside door to her apartment building. She was glad she'd stayed here. The neighbors were all nice, and everyone got along. She'd stopped at the market and picked up some prepackaged fresh fruit, cheese, crackers, milk, and whipped cream. She told herself the whipped cream was for the fruit, but she wouldn't mind covering Buzz in it and licking it off. Distracted with naughty fantasies, she shoved her key in the apartment door, opening it before making sure Satan was back far enough, and the little shit slipped between the door and the frame.

"No, no, no, no. Sadie, you get back here." She pulled the door shut before Chonkers and Squdgy followed. One of them hissed their disapproval. "I don't need this tonight." Satan vaulted on the railing and sat, supremely satisfied, her tail slowly swaying back and forth. Even though Cheshire Cats were fictional, Kelly swore Satan was grinning, but her grin was evil not mischievous. Her apartment was on the second floor, but if another tenant came home and opened the door, Satan would make a run for it.

Kelly slowly let her purse and shopping bags slip to the floor. *No quick movements.* "Hey, Sadie, there's a good kitty."

Satan narrowed her blue eyes. Waiting for Kelly to make her move, Sadie continued swaying her tail as if she hadn't a care in the world.

Kelly closed her eyes and calmed her breath. The last time Sadie had escaped into the hallway, Kelly had spent three hours trying to lure her back inside. Treats and toys hadn't worked. And every time she left the apartment, Chonkers and Squdgy tried to slip out to be with their evil queen. Sometimes

she'd wake up in the middle of the night, and Satan would be sitting next to her on the bed staring at her, as if to say "I could've killed you in your sleep, but I let you live so you can serve me."

Damn cat. Her phone rang, but Kelly didn't dare grab it. "Come here, good, sweet, kind kitty, kitty."

Satan's head swayed side to side.

Yeah, she's not buying it. "Okay, fine. You're evil and we both know it. Kudos to you for embracing what you are. But right now, I don't have time for your drama queen ways. I have a...visitor coming, and you will not ruin this for me, you ungrateful demon spawn from hell."

The front door burst open, and the Smith boys raced inside, covered in dirt as usual. "Nooooo!" Kelly lunged for Satan, but she was already down the stairs. "Close the door," Kelly screamed.

Satan's tail snaked out just before the door clicked. Swear words Kelly never used welled up inside her. The Smith boys stood staring at her, so she didn't give them voice. The younger one's eyes misted, and his face screwed up. Kelly's heart softened. It had been an accident. She exhaled her anger, walked calmly down the stairs, and kneeled before Colin. "It's okay."

He shook his head. "But your kitty got out."

Kelly swallowed the lump in her throat. Big fat tears spilled out of his huge blue eyes. "She does this all the time. She's going to have a little adventure, and then she'll come home." She wiped his tears.

He sniffled. "Really? Promise?"

She'd been trying to make him feel better, so she'd lied. Sadie had never made it outside the building before. "I promise."

His eyes narrowed. "Cross your heart? She'll be okay?"

Kelly smiled. "Cross my heart." She sent the boys up to their apartment. When her phone trilled from her purse, Kelly

forced herself up the stairs. She'd have to cancel her plans with Buzz. She wouldn't let Colin down. She couldn't. "Hey, Buzz." Even though at this very moment her evil kitty was probably amassing an army to take over the world, Kelly smiled. She hoped he'd understand and not think their fun little arrangement was too much effort.

"I'm sorry, but I have to cancel," they both said.

"Wait, what?" Kelly asked.

"What's wrong?" Buzz asked.

"What makes you think something's wrong?"

"You sound hurt. Are you hurt? What happened?"

The concern in his voice was touching considering they knew next to nothing about each other. She wanted to keep it that way. And as much as Satan probably spent most days plotting her demise, Kelly loved that damn cat. "One of my cats got out." *Yeah, I don't sound like a crazy cat lady at all.*

"But you're not physically hurt?"

"No."

"I'll be there in half an hour."

"You—"

He'd already disconnected.

Why was he still coming? They could've rescheduled for another night. It made no sense a rock star wanted to help her find her mischievous devil cat. But Kelly didn't have time to ponder. She still had to get into her apartment without two more cats escaping. She wasn't concerned with Mr. Darcy. He was too busy playing with toys or chasing dust bunnies to try to escape. She slowly opened the door, blocking it with her grocery bag. "Get in." She dropped her bags as Chonkers and Squdgy wound themselves around her ankles. She scratched them behind the ears. "I'll bring your evil queen Satan home." A giggle bubbled out. She'd bet her latest wedding gown design no one had ever uttered those words together before.

Thirty minutes later, Buzz walked toward her as she emerged from the bushes in the front of the brick building three down from hers. Her arms were scratched from the holly branches, and tiny dots of blood pooled. “Just great.”

“Hey,” he said.

She smoothed her hair down. “I’m so sorry about this.” He looked pissed off, but when she smiled at him, he grinned back.

“Not at all. I’m happy to help. Animals love me.” Anger darkened his eyes.

“You okay?”

He shook his head. “Had a fight with my sister. I know she’s still pissed at me, but I’ve been sober almost two years. If anything, she’s angrier now than when I was in rehab. Sorry.”

Kelly shrugged. “I can see that.”

“Really?”

Did she want to have this conversation? He looked upset, and she didn’t like it. He did say they’d be friends with benefits. Surely, there’d be no harm in friendship? He certainly understood more about her than pretty much everyone else on the planet because he was a creative, too. “When you went into rehab, she was probably really scared. And that kind of fear tends to push all other emotions down.”

“Really?”

She nodded “When my brother was ten, he fell off his friend’s skateboard and broke his arm. I was yelling at him to get off, and he looked at me instead of watching where he was going. He hit a twig in the street and fell backwards onto the pavement. All the anger I had at him sneaking behind my back vanished because fear took over. His head bounced off the pavement. I thought for a second—” She gulped in air. “It wasn’t until a few days later I started feeling angry again. Once I knew he was going to be okay.”

“So because I’m doing better and her fear of me relapsing is lessening, her anger is surfacing?”

“That’s how it was for me.”

Buzz nodded. “I guess I can understand that. Now I feel like a dick ’cause I said things I shouldn’t have.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Enough of my crap. Sorry. We’re here to rescue your cat.”

Kelly scoffed. “You might want to wait until you meet her. You may need rescuing from Satan.”

He stopped searching the bushes. “You named your cat Satan?”

“Sort of.” She tried to focus on searching for her cat and not how Buzz’s muscles bunched. “Her given name’s Sadie. Satan’s more of a way of life.”

Buzz burst out laughing. “She’s a hellcat, huh? No worries. I’ll have her eating out of my hand.”

Kelly shook her head. “If you mean eating your hand, then sure. I can totally see that.”

Buzz stood to his full height, closed his eyes, and exhaled a deep breath. “Here, Sadie, come on, good kitty.”

A piercing meow came from overhead.

Buzz turned, looked up, and pointed. “See, there she is.”

Kelly balled her fist. “You little…” She’d been in the tree the whole time and never meowed for Kelly. “You’re like the pet whisperer.”

“Told you. Ever since I was a little kid, animals have always been trusting of me.” His brown eyes saddened, but he blinked and the emotion was gone. “Even squirrels. We were shooting a video for our first single in Central Park, and I made friends with an entire squirrel family. We put the footage in the outtakes of the DVD compilation of all our music videos.” Buzz moved closer to the tree. “Hey there, pretty girl, your mama’s been worried sick. You shouldn’t have run off.” He didn’t make a grab for her.

“Mrow.”

“Really.” Buzz smiled at her evil kitty.

“You speak cat?”

“She misses you. You’re gone too much.”

“You got all that from one meow?”

Buzz smiled. “She’s a cat of few words.”

“Not usually. She’s very vocal, but maybe that’s just with me. She thinks she rules the place.”

Buzz chuckled and returned his attention to Sadie. “Don’t you think it’s time to come down?”

Satan’s fluffy white tail swished slowly back and forth.

Buzz clicked his tongue twice and extended his arm until his hand rested on the bottom branch. He clicked his tongue again.

Satan stood, tail held high, and meandered her way down, branch by branch, until she was on the last one. She stopped next to Buzz’s hand and sniffed. She rubbed her face against his knuckles. “What a good, sweet kitty.” He opened his palm, and after another quick sniff, Sadie rubbed her ear against it. He scratched her ear, and the evil little witch purred.

Kelly’s mouth fell open. Satan tolerated her and RJ, ignored Jenny, and hated everyone else.

“Are you ready to come down?”

Satan pondered that for a second before leaping onto Buzz’s shoulder.

“Oh, pretty little kitty. Who’s a good girl?”

She rubbed her cheek against Buzz’s.

“Come on, let’s get you inside and give you good-girl treats.” Buzz waved for Kelly to lead the way.

Kelly’s heart melted at Buzz’s kindness to her evil cat. She loved Sadie despite her lack of affection. Sadie, Chonkers, and Squdgy had a rough start in life, and apparently Kelly had a soft heart for wounded things.

When she walked past Buzz to open the outer door, Sadie meowed in approval. *Don't get used to him, he'll only be around for four weeks.* Being evil, Satan obviously read her mind, and she hissed, as if in disapproval of their arrangement. But it was the best Kelly could do.

When she got to the front door, she paused. "There's three more inside." She glanced over her shoulder. Sadie had left her perch and was now in Buzz's arms enjoying a pet. *Evil traitor.*

Buzz nodded and smiled.

Most people agreed three was the cutoff before the tag crazy cat lady applied. Mr. Darcy was the newest addition, and he was Satan's complete opposite.

She opened the door a crack, and two furry faces tried to smush their way through. "Ugh, get back."

Buzz smiled. "Let me."

She backed away, and Buzz crouched down, still stroking Satan.

"Hey there, little guys. We want to come in."

The two faces disappeared, and Buzz stood and opened the door a little wider, and when no faces appeared, he grinned and slipped inside.

Kelly closed the door behind her and flicked on the light.

Three cats wove around Buzz's ankles, and Sadie still luxuriated in his arms, mewling softly in appreciation of his pets.

Jealousy tore through her. She was the one he was supposed to be stroking. "Why did you call before?" Her cats still wound around him. "Come on, guys. Give him a break."

"It's fine. They're just getting to know me." He looked over her head. "I was actually calling to cancel."

Shit. She was making this too hard, and he'd decided he could get sex elsewhere. Her heart dropped. She'd really been looking forward to their time together, and now she'd screwed it up.

“Hey, you didn’t do anything. I told you. I had a fight with my sister, and I was so pissed off. I was having a hard time coming down from it, and I didn’t want to bring that energy into our arrangement.”

“Oh.” That was actually very considerate of him. She had enough of her own crap to deal with, and she didn’t really want to get involved with his, especially since this wasn’t a relationship. “You don’t seem pissed off now.”

His shoulders relaxed. “I’m not. Animals have a calming effect.” He walked over to the couch and sat with Sadie still in his arms. The other three cats jumped up, and Buzz set Sadie on his lap, where she turned in a circle and curled up in a ball. He reached out a hand, and the other cats moved in for their share of loving.

Sadie didn’t even swat at them. *What the hell?* “You *are* the cat whisperer.” Kelly picked up her bags and went to the kitchen. “Can I get you something to drink? I have seltzer, ginger ale, or plain water.”

“Well, after the day I’ve had, I need the hard stuff.”

Kelly popped her head into the living room. “Um...”

“Sorry. Recovery humor. Ginger ale’s the hard stuff.”

“Oh, I didn’t—”

“Yeah, you did. It’s okay. It usually takes people a bit to get comfortable around a recovering addict.” His smile was sincere. “So, for the record, I’m okay if you have a drink around me. Alcohol was never really my thing. But I will ask you to brush your teeth before we have sex if you’ve had a drink. Don’t want to tempt fate.”

She exhaled a shaky breath. “No problem. Ginger ale coming up.” He hadn’t changed his mind, and they were really going to do this. Kelly’s heart pounded. He’d called to cancel but then put aside his anger to help her find Satan. Only now was Kelly able to admit how terrified she’d been Sadie would’ve been killed or lost for good. Tears spilled down her cheeks. She’d adopted the three cats on a whim. She’d never had a pet growing up, and the apartment had been so empty

after Enzo had left. At twenty-seven, she'd been living on her own for the first time, and the adjustment hadn't been easy. She'd spent most nights sleeping on the couch in her office because she couldn't stand coming home to a barren apartment.

She wiped her tears, grabbed two ginger ales and the tray table, and smiled as she walked into the living room. Three cats lay on their backs getting belly rubs in turn. "I've never seen them behave like this."

Buzz glanced up. "It's not like I'm not getting anything out of it. There's actual scientific proof people who have pets are happier. Just petting them lowers blood pressure and relieves anxiety." He grinned. "And anger, apparently."

She set the cans on the floor and opened the small tray table and set it in front of him. He tried and failed to hide a smirk. Might as well get it out of the way. "Yeah, I don't have a lot of stuff."

"I didn't say anything, but now that you have... I hear minimalism is making a comeback." He glanced over to the window where the cats' window perch was and the opposite wall where the elaborate cat tree took up the most space in her sparsely furnished living room.

The mixture of anger and embarrassment faded, and Kelly laughed. Enzo had taken most of the stuff they'd bought when they'd moved from her grandparents' house except her parents' bedroom set. She hadn't cared about any of the other furniture, and she'd felt guilty for letting Enzo down. That, and she didn't want the constant memories of picking out the furniture together. They'd been in no hurry since they'd spent most of their time those first months in the bedroom. Having total privacy for the first time in their marriage had been amazing. And Enzo had never once complained the entire time they'd lived with her grandparents. She swallowed an intense wave of pain.

"So how does a woman who calls her cat 'Satan' end up with four"—he leaned closer to the cats—"glorious kitties?"

Their purring intensified, and if Kelly didn't know better, she'd think Sadie smiled. She beat the memories down, grateful Buzz wasn't asking any questions she didn't want to answer. She took a seat at the far end of the couch. Only Mr. Darcy came over to her. "Traitors." After Darcy settled, Kelly stroked him hoping for the calming Buzz claimed was backed by science. "Uh, well, my brother rescued these three from an abandoned building fire."

When she didn't elaborate, Buzz asked, "He's a fireman?"

"Yeah." This topic wasn't much better, but she reminded herself the friends part she'd agreed to meant conversation would be part of the deal. She was actually a little relieved he hadn't pounced on her the second they'd gotten inside the way she'd imagined it would be. That was fine in fantasy, but in reality, this was better. More relaxed and it helped ease any stress over sleeping with a guy she hardly knew. "He was going through looking for flare-ups when he heard meowing. Sadie was stuck and covered in soot and mud. He pulled her out and then saw Chonkers and Squdgy. My brother had trained as an EMT, so he rigged up some plastic cups on the end of an oxygen tank, and it was enough to get them to the emergency vet. I donated the cost of their medical care, and when no one else adopted them, I couldn't let them go to a shelter."

"That was amazing of you."

Kelly shrugged. Her finger made circles in Darcy's silky black fur. "This little guy was wandering around outside when I came home late one night after work a few weeks back. He was so tiny. I looked but couldn't find his mama. I took him in, and the next day, I asked around, but no one had a cat who'd had kittens, so I kept him."

"What's his name?"

She looked up, and Buzz was staring intently at her. "Mr. Darcy."

His head tilted.

"What?"

“Well, I know you design wedding dresses, but I never would’ve pegged you for a romantic.”

She sat up. “So I’m a bitch?”

Buzz stopped petting the cats and put his hands up. “Whoa, I never said that. I never even thought it. I get a much more ‘realist’ vibe off you. Romantic and realist could be considered mutually exclusive in most cases. I’m a realist, too, so I’m not knocking it.”

“So you don’t consider yourself a romantic at all?” Enzo had been the truly romantic one. He’d always been the one to set up the romance. Flowers, candles, soft music. The man had been the king of setting the scene. *How can I still miss him?*

He shrugged. “I’ve been told I haven’t got a romantic bone in my body.”

She wasn’t the only one carrying a torch. Buzz looked rather crushed. She’d never considered doing a search on him because she’d be upset if he did one on her. He’d certainly find enough but nothing she planned on sharing with a guy she’d never see again once their time was up. “Well, don’t believe it.”

“I haven’t done anything that would lead you to believe she’s wrong.”

“No?” Kelly felt bad for him. She’d never understand how some people said the nastiest things at the end of a relationship. “Let’s see. Despite the signals I was giving you the night we met, you were a gentleman and didn’t push it.”

“I got the impression you weren’t quite ready to jump in.”

“And now? You come over to help me find my cat, and here we are, talking. You still think I’m not ready?”

“Yes. But getting closer.” His brown eyes glittered with lust, assuring her he was more than ready.

Heat flared throughout her body. Her one-night stand was still a thorn in her side. The sex had been good, but it had been alcohol-fueled chemistry. The guy had been very good-looking, and his fitted dress shirt had shown off muscles and a

toned body. But if she hadn't been so devastated at Enzo moving on, she'd never have screwed him. There hadn't been emotional chemistry, which was a deal breaker for her, and why she'd been left feeling so empty and a little ashamed the day after. She never wanted to feel that way again. So as much as she needed to keep things casual with Buzz, she also needed a certain amount of an emotional connection. "Seems pretty romantic to me. The fact that you can sense things about a woman is the root of being a very capable romantic."

"That's very nice of you to say." He stood and went over to the cat tree and placed Sadie on the top tier. She meowed. "Oh, right. I promised you treats." Turning to Kelly, "Do you have any?"

Laughter bubbled up and out. "Yes." Retrieving the treat bag from the kitchen, she chuckled again when she returned.

All four cats were lined up at Buzz's feet.

She handed him the bag and was awed when he said each cat's name, and one by one held out a treat. Normally, she'd lay them on the ground for Satan so she wouldn't get part of a finger, and she never gave Squdgy and Chonkers treats at the same time because they'd fight. Mr. Darcy waited patiently for his turn by attacking Chonkers' tail.

"You're amazing. They never behave like this for me. When I feed them, it's like a death match."

"You just don't understand them." Buzz sat and gave Sadie another treat. "They've been through something traumatic, and they may never get over being stuck in a burning building. It was their home, and they lost it." He gave Chonkers and Squdgy treats. "We got a dog when I was ten. He was a rescue, and one day I was walking him, and it was really windy. A neighbor's empty garbage can at the end of their driveway got picked up by the wind, and it came at us. The little guy yelped and tried to run away, but I blocked it with my body. He cowered all the way home. After that, I was the only one who could take him for a walk when the weather was bad. And he never forgot, so any time it was really windy out, he'd be on guard the entire walk."

Kelly's heart melted. "That's the sweetest thing I ever heard."

"Why Chonkers and Squdgy? Neither one is really a fat cat."

"They're bigger than Sata—Sadie."

"Couple months, this little guy will be bigger than her, too." He petted Darcy. "She's really small. Are you sure she's healthy?"

"Yup. They all had a checkup at the vet a few weeks ago when Mr. Darcy came aboard. She's had at least one litter, but I don't know if Chonkers and Squdgy are hers since they're calicos. Could be strays who hung together for protection. But Sadie's definitely in charge."

Buzz nodded. "I get Chonkers. He's a little thick through the middle, but what's Squdgy?"

She and Jenny had come up with it to describe themselves. RJ hated when they called each other that, but it wasn't meant with malice. "Squat and pudgy."

"I think pudgy's a stretch. But I guess his legs are kinda short for a cat." After another treat and pats on the head, Buzz stood and put the bag on the tray table and quickly sat on the couch next to her. All four cats jumped up and tried to climb on him. He put his hand up. "No." He pointed to the empty seat. "There or cat tree. Now."

She'd never seen anything like it. She didn't know cats listened, let alone obeyed. Sadie lay next to Buzz's thigh, Darcy curled up in the corner of the couch, and Chonkers and Squdgy sprang on the cat tree and shared the scratching post.

Buzz angled his body toward hers and smiled another of those personal smiles. The one that felt like it was just for her, like he'd never smiled like that at any other woman, and nothing like the neutral expression he wore in band photos.

Her pulse pounded in her ears, and her heart thudded in her chest. "I'm nervous," she blurted. *Oh, no.*

"Don't do that."

“What?”

“Be embarrassed. I want you to tell me how you’re feeling. It’s okay. I get it.”

She shook her head.

“Still doubt my powers?”

“Not with them. That’s amazing.”

Buzz grinned. “If I were a betting man, which, for the record, I’m not, I’d say you recently, within say the last year or so, got out of a long-term relationship. You’re not normally a cat person, but you have a big heart, so you took them in. You’re too busy to shop for new furniture, and you’re loyal to a fault.”

Her mouth hung open. “You talked to my sister.”

“Not me. Nicki. But she only mentioned the loyalty thing. So, I cheated a little. The rest I got from listening to you and making an educated guess.”

Leaning in, he used his forefinger to raise her chin until their eyes met. The look in his sent lust straight to her girl bits. Her breath hitched, and he smiled.

“So fucking beautiful. So, so sexy. But you’re not ready. And that’s okay. I’ll wait.”

“But we only have four weeks.”

He shook his head. “We have four whole weeks to enjoy each other. Another few days won’t detract in any way. Guaranteed.” He brushed his nose next to her ear and inhaled deeply. “You smell divine. Like strawberries dipped in chocolate with whipped cream. I ache for you. But this won’t work if we’re not honest with each other. If I’m reading it wrong, tell me so. Otherwise, we wait.” He moved back so their foreheads touched.

“You’re not wrong.”

He quirked a brow. “But?”

“I have a question. But it may be none of my business.”

“Ask.”

“Why are you so willing to wait? You coulda had several girls since we met.”

He shook his head. “Don’t want anyone else, and I’m not so much of a male slut that I’d drown my desire for one woman by using another. Truth is, when I saw you at Eddie and Sheryl’s wedding, I was struck. You were the most beautiful woman there, and I wanted you then, but you skedaddled, and I thought I lost my chance. But fate, aka Nicki, doesn’t keep her nose out of other’s business when she cares for them. I don’t usually make the same mistake twice. So here we are. It’s easy to be patient when I’m waiting for a knockout like you. I’ve dreamt about you. Thought about you. And I’ll wait until you’re totally ready.”

Chapter Eight

AFTER THERAPY, BUZZ TOOK A CAB TO CENTRAL PARK. HE loved being outside, and he didn't mind the heat, but today, it was fucking hot and humid. Heat rising off the streets distorted like a mirage. He was too anxious to sit and watch the ducks, so he walked around the pond and up to his favorite spot in the Hallett Nature Sanctuary. He followed the tree-lined dirt path. It was still humid, but the canopy of trees provided almost total shade. Brown leaves carpeted spots on the forest floor wherever fauna had yet to grow. He stopped at the top by the large oak tree surrounded by a bench made of tree branches and planks of weathered wood. When he closed his eyes, the steady hum of traffic outside the park morphed into a calming waterfall, broken only by the aggressive honk of a car horn. Birds chirped, and the leaves rustled. He inhaled deeply. The heady smell of the trees and dirt calmed him.

He sat on the bench and enjoyed the solitude.

The doctor had wanted to prescribe him pills for his anxiety, assuring him there were nonaddictive options, but Buzz had refused. He steered clear of any man-made chemical remedies, and their bevy of unwanted side effects, whenever possible. He'd been dealing with anxiety for as long as he could remember. And being alone in nature was his number-one fix. At least as alone as he could be in a city with over eight million people.

The mastery that was Central Park awed him. It was more than an oasis in the middle of one of the busiest cities on earth.

It was his salvation.

His knee was pain-free, thanks to acupuncture and biofeedback sessions. For their next tour, he'd ask Dex to look into hiring someone who'd travel with them. After the physical stress of load in and load out, their crew would appreciate alternative therapies to deal with their aches and pains. He hit the record icon on his phone's notepad and dictated a reminder.

One of the things he loved about NYC was it had everything. He could schedule all different types of therapies within its borders. A cool breeze eased the oppressive heat. But from walking, sweat formed.

As his mind cleared, an idea for a song he'd been working on took over. He pulled out his phone, and tapped the speech to text app.

Unpacking the baggage living in the attic

Cutting out all the static

One piece at a time

Memories in rewind

The times that I laugh

The times that I cry

Doing whatever to cope with my life

All the things, good and bad

All the things, old and new

All the things I'm still going through

After communing with nature for almost an hour, Buzz walked back to the pond.

"Hey," a striking blonde said. She wore white short shorts, running sneakers, and a pink tank top that ended above her pierced belly button and clung to her impressive rack. Her makeup was perfect.

"Hi."

She fell in step next to him, and Buzz sighed. He wasn't interested if it wasn't Kelly.

"You're Buzz Stewart from Stone Highway, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Yup."

Her smile grew. Even her ponytail didn't have a hair out of place. Central Park brought out all kinds. Even women on the make. Several whistles came from passing men.

"I'm Brittany. I love your band."

"Well, thanks, Brittany. We love hearing from our fans." He smiled just enough to not be rude.

She took it as an invitation, and her hand went to his forearm. Her finger traced his pocket watch tattoo. "Got any more?"

Shit. Plenty of musicians lived for two things: music and sex. With whom never mattered. Jack had to deal with this kind of shit all the time, and being engaged to Emily didn't stop it as much as he'd have thought. Women came on to him right in front of her, but Em never let that shit pass. She'd tell them to fuck off in a heartbeat. Jack always handled it nicer, but a lot of times, hints and niceness didn't work. Em just cut to the chase. Or cut the chase.

"I don't live far from here," she said, adding a wink and a giggle.

The sound turned his stomach. He fell back on one of his tried-and-true letdowns. "Well, Brittany, I appreciate the offer. I do. But I'm recovering from diarrhea."

The look on her face was priceless, and she took a giant step away from him. "Oh. Eww. I mean...you don't look sick."

"I was feeling a little better, and I hate being cooped up, but—" He made a pained face, faked a cramp, and put his hand on his abdomen. "I gotta go. Damn. I thought the worst was over. Sorry. It was nice talking to you." Buzz double-timed it out of the nearest exit of the park. He wasn't ready to go back to Curt's yet, and he didn't feel like working out in the

gym. He still felt that not-being-comfortable-in-his-skin feeling he got after intense therapy sessions.

It had been a double session because his therapist wanted to try EMDR. And now he was stuck with shit that had been buried in his subconscious. Emotional hangovers after therapy were worse than when he'd come down from drugs because he could've alleviated it by getting high again. This was the path he needed to tread, but he didn't have to like it. So he'd suffer the heat and the crowded streets because being inside Curt's apartment was definitely the path to destruction. He'd stay outside as long as it took for the worst of the emotions strangling him to recede so he wouldn't try to take the easy way out by getting high.

Fury burned at himself for thinking drugs could ease his misery. They *could*, but he'd thought he was further along in recovery than his mind still fucking with him and looking for the easy way. *Drugs are misery*. He repeated it over and over. *Drugs and alcohol only make you think they're the easy way. Yeah, that's it.* Buzz mouthed the words silently as he navigated the crowded streets.

Walking a few blocks, he stopped at a convenience store and bought a New York Yankees baseball cap and a pair of cheap sunglasses. It was truly amazing how effective of a disguise this was. He hadn't shaved in a few days, and with the beard growth, he looked like any other guy.

He hailed a cab and went to Washington Square Park, which wasn't far from Curt's place. Stepping back out into the oppressive heat and humidity, Buzz took a deep inhale to exhale the stench from inside the cab that had imprinted on his lungs. Once he figured out where he wanted to live, he'd buy a car. For now, it was easier renting one whenever he needed to travel outside the city than it was to deal with parking or a garage. He might have more money than he'd ever spend, but paying several grand a month to park a car in a Manhattan parking garage was crazy to him. But if he bought a place in the city, he'd end up doing it anyway. But that was a problem for another day. Right now, he needed to connect to nature to help ease his anxiety and intense ooginess left from therapy.

He walked under the giant arch at the entrance to the park and past the water fountain until he found a less traveled path. He needed to expunge the sick feeling from his body before going over what had come up. He'd spent some time talking about the fight and his growing anger with his sister. He was still too raw to deal with what had been discussed. So he stopped walking, spread his arms and fingers, and inhaled.

He missed the scent of pine.

But the trees provided shade, and leafy trees had their own unique scent mixing with damp earth from the early-afternoon rain. Tension still bunched his shoulders, so he rolled them and stretched his neck from side to side. A few kids played on the grass while their moms chatted.

There were plenty of parks in the city, but it wouldn't be enough for him. Connecting to nature really helped him crush his anxiety and panic. He'd read walking barefoot in the grass or dirt was the best way to connect to Mother Earth and absorb her healing energies.

"I'm gonna need a yard."

Staying at Curt's helped him figure out he needed a house with property where he could be outside but still have privacy. Where the trees and the animals who lived there would bring him calming and comfort.

Totally opposite to what he'd thought he wanted.

After an hour, Buzz walked home. After his visit to Kelly's to help her wrangle her wayward kitty, she'd said it'd be better to conduct the business portion of their arrangement in her office. She wasn't ready to sleep with him, and he'd be as patient as she needed him to be, so it would be better for them in her office. Not that he couldn't think of half a dozen ways to have and pleasure her in her office, but it wasn't an option. He'd leave with a raging hard-on, but he'd handle it as soon as he got back to his place.

Her apartment though... He sure hoped she had a sturdy bed. Based on the almost total lack of furnishings, he was skeptical. She had a couch. Who only had a couch? He didn't

consider the folding card table, which was piled with fabric samples and sketch pads where her dining room table should be, as furniture. All her pencils were on the floor, courtesy of the kitties. She hadn't offered a tour of her place, and he hadn't asked, but he kind of wished he had. They might be better off at Curt's apartment.

Curiosity over why she had so little when her business was obviously doing so well almost had him asking her about it, but it was better to not get too close. For both of them.

Sally had been his first love. Now he wasn't so sure. Maybe he'd never really been in love with her. Or maybe it was knowing she'd never loved him that had him second-guessing his feelings. Loving someone who'd fooled him into believing she'd loved him was humiliating.

He had some time to kill before he had to be at Kelly's boutique, so he set up his new electronic drum kit. The mesh heads made drumming quietly possible. Even though Curt was moving and it was early afternoon, he didn't want to piss off any neighbors who might be home. It couldn't replace an acoustic kit, but it would allow him the stress release and euphoria only playing drums brought him.

Another reason to buy a house. He'd have a studio where he didn't need to worry, when sleep eluded him, if he was disturbing his neighbors in the middle of the night.

Buzz finished setting up the kit and sat on the throne. His mind cleared, and his anxiety melted away. There was just him and his kit. He warmed up by playing the drum part from one of his favorite drummers of all time, Neal Peart's "YYZ." With every strike of the sticks, he was more at home, more centered. Afterward, he worked on his part for a new song Jack sent him. Unlike some bands, they wrote music while on tour and during breaks. It was a first cut, just an acoustic guitar and Jack's vocals. But as was the way, as soon as Buzz had heard it, beats and rhythms formed in his mind. His kit hadn't arrived yet, so he'd gone old school, setting up various empty containers and lightly tapping with his sticks.

When he was done, he checked his phone. He'd missed a call from Elliot. He returned Elliot's call as he walked into the bedroom. He needed a quick shower before he left to see Kelly.

"Hey, what's up?" Elliot asked.

"Not much. Just checking in. How ya doin'?" Buzz smiled. His nephew's giggling in the background warmed him. Jason was the happiest baby he'd ever seen. Elliot was happier than he'd ever been. Fatherhood not only agreed with him, but it had brought out more of the sweet Elliot they all knew and loved. "If you'd called earlier, you'd have gotten an earful. Therapy this morning."

"Man, I'll never understand how something that eventually helps can hurt so fucking much. Rough session?"

"Yeah. This shit with my sister is really fucking with me. I love her, but for the last six months or so, whenever I see her, she's giving me shit. I get she's entitled to her feelings, but I don't know what else I can do to get her to forgive me."

"Want the buddy answer or the best-friend-who-won't-lie-to-you answer?" Elliot asked.

"Those my only two choices?"

"Yup."

Buzz exhaled slowly. Elliot understood the shit he was going through because he'd always had a contentious relationship with his only brother. Kenny was a major ballbuster. It was his sole way of showing he cared. It was also one of the reasons Elliot had buried his softer side. The other had been his father. "Best friend."

"Dude, there's nothing you haven't done. You've been clean and sober for two years. And we're so fucking proud of how hard you've worked to pull yourself out of that shit." Elliot sighed. "When your dad called and told us they'd found you on the kitchen floor, man, I thought... But you've done everything to not get pulled back into it. Whether or not Steph forgives you and you can be brother and sister again is up to her. You may have done some damage that can never be

repaired. And it doesn't help she's going through this shit with her not-soon-enough-to-be ex."

Buzz hadn't shared the details because they weren't his to share, but the guys knew Steph was getting divorced. "How do you know?"

"She told Siobhan. They talk every week or so, and they've got plans to go out to dinner with Em and Nicki. I thought you knew."

"No. Steph hasn't shared much with me lately." Everything he knew about his sister's life in the past year had come from his parents. She'd stopped returning his calls and only replied to his texts that she was busy and she'd get back to him later. She never did. "I didn't know Siobhan and my sister were that close."

"It developed after Siobhan's friend's baby needed heart surgery, and she recommended your sister. She went with her to the consultation, and she and Steph really hit it off. They've been hanging out for years."

Buzz's heart shredded a little more. If he hadn't gotten clean, drugs could've cost him his life. He prayed they hadn't cost him his sister. The realization that maybe time wouldn't heal their breach choked him. They'd always been super close, and the drugs hadn't been able to quell his regret when he'd been lying to his family. A tsunami of guilt and disappointment with himself could've sent him into a drug-use spiral. But he exhaled the urge and moved about the room. He didn't know why, but movement always helped.

"Dude? You still there?"

"Yeah, sorry. I just got a feeling she'll never forgive me."

"And?"

Buzz sighed.

"You need me to come over?"

"I got plans, but thank you. Love you, bro."

"Love you too, dude. Call me if you need anything. And I mean anything, asshat."

Buzz laughed. “Asshat isn’t even a thing.”

Elliot snorted. “Of course, it is, ’cause you’re one.”

“How old are we?”

“Siobhan says we topped out at twelve.”

“Yeah, she’s probably right. Thanks for calling.”

“Anytime, bro.”

He hung up, took a quick shower, and called Kelly to confirm. She sounded excited to hear from him, which made his dick throb.

He walked to the subway, grateful for his friends, but he didn’t think the hole in his life because Steph wasn’t in it would be filled by anything else.

Chapter Nine

“I’M ON MY WAY.”

Those four words echoed through Kelly’s mind long after Buzz had hung up. Her heart pounded, and her skin tingled. They’d never gotten to his measurements last night. After they’d recovered Sadie and Kelly’s panic had drained away, they’d spent an hour talking. It was disconcerting how easily he read her. He’d sensed she hadn’t been ready when she’d thought she was.

Right now, she didn’t have time to obsess over it. Her staff already suspected something was going on since he’d come for coffee. A joyful happiness bounced around inside her. One she’d never felt before.

Giddy. I’m giddy.

Her office intercom buzzed, and Anita’s voice came through. “Buzz is here.”

Kelly didn’t know if the smile in Anita’s voice was because of Buzz or Kelbu as she’d overheard one of her employees refer to them. “Damn.” The last thing she needed was to lose the respect of her people. Since she was younger than many of them, she’d worked hard to earn their respect in the first place. Some had over twenty years in the bridal industry, and Kelly would hate to lose them because she didn’t keep her libido in check. “Send him back.”

She checked her hair in the large mirror over the sofa. “Ugh.” She flipped her head over and back. “Little better.” Grabbing her purse from her desk, she shoved her hand in

looking for her lipstick. “Damn it.” She never found anything in her bag when she needed it. “Yes.” She yanked it out and, without a mirror, applied the deep red to her lips. Kelly threw the lipstick back in her purse and pinched her cheeks. It was midsummer, and she had almost no color. It had never bothered her before.

A quick knock sounded, her office door flew open, and Buzz strode in, stopping short. “Wow.” Taking the few steps which separated them, he brushed his thumb over the Cupid’s bow of her lips. “You didn’t have to gussy up for me. I think you’re beautiful just the way you are.” He leaned in, his lips near her ear. “But, damn, woman. I want to kiss that color right off your full lips.”

His tone was deep, sultry, and full of promise. “Gussy up? Who says that anymore?” He was the picture of walking sex in a dark green T-shirt that hugged every muscle, faded cut-off jean shorts that accentuated his narrow hips and long legs, and black flip-flops. Kelly struggled to draw in enough breath.

Buzz chuckled. “That’s what my dad says to my mom. Even when she’s in her PJs.”

As flattering as it was, she needed to put some distance between them, and her office door was still open. Which was just as well, because ever since their last conversation in her office, she couldn’t look at her desk without thinking of Buzz taking her on it. And the sofa. Damn. Her body reacting to her thoughts was a sure way for things to spiral out of her control. She walked around her desk and sat. “Have a seat. We have a few details to work out.” Her mother tone reared up. She’d been going for confident businesswoman.

Buzz’s brows shot up, but he shrugged and sat. “I’m clear on the details, but whatever.”

His slow, easy grin did funny things to her belly. Damn him and his good looks. She’d worked with dozens of handsome models on photo shoots who didn’t have the sex appeal Buzz did with a single look. But she wasn’t a teenager, and she willed her body to stop behaving like it was the first time her hormones had made themselves known.

It didn't work.

She opened her desk drawer and pulled out the agreement she'd had her lawyer draw up. Not that she didn't trust Buzz, because oddly she did, but one of the first lessons she'd learned in business was to get everything in writing to avoid complications and misunderstandings. "Here." She slid the document across her desk.

"What's this?" Buzz picked it up but didn't take his eyes off her. His sensual gaze seared her.

"I thought it best to get our agreement in writing."

Buzz flipped through the six-page document. "Really? You got your lawyer involved in our sex life?"

Heat flared in her cheeks. He was being outrageous and trying to embarrass her. "Not that part." She tried for a stern look of disapproval but only drew a laugh from deep in his chest, which resonated in her pussy.

She was an adult woman with needs like every woman, and wanting to have sex with Buzz shouldn't embarrass her. But that wasn't it. It was the fact they'd agreed to no-strings sex, which her body definitely wanted with him, but her brain was still railing against. This wouldn't be like her only other encounter since her divorce. They were going to spend the next four weeks together, and some of it would be spent out of bed. He was here so she could get his measurements. But her body only wanted to know the length and width of a very particular part of him, which from what she'd seen stressing the fabric of his fly, was quite impressive.

Buzz picked up a pen from her desk and flipped to the last page.

"Don't you want to read it first?"

He grinned. "I trust you."

"How do you know I haven't included a nude photo shoot?"

"I already volunteered to let you draw me naked. But a photo shoot?" He tilted his head to the side. "I'd agree to that

if you were the one taking pictures after we have sex. Of course, I'd want pictures of you, too." His eyes raked over her like a stroke, and she felt naked.

"Buzz!" Kelly rushed over and closed her door. She'd already had a ton of ideas she'd begun sketching. He oozed sex appeal in a subtle way. If that was even possible. It was more like him just being himself was the sexiest thing ever. "Didn't anyone ever tell you not to sign something without reading it?" With his fame and fortune, he shouldn't be so cavalier about signing anything. "You should have your lawyer look at it."

"I guess you're right." Buzz sat back and nodded. "And since it took your guy six pages of lawyer speak to say 'I agree to be your guinea pig for your ideas on tuxes,' I need a lawyer to translate." He smiled. "I guess being a songwriter, I'm naturally a less is more kinda guy."

"You write Stone Highway's songs?"

Buzz shrugged. "Not just a dumb drummer."

"I never said you were dumb."

He chuckled. "It's a thing with musicians that drummers are supposedly dumb. There's jokes and everything."

"Jokes about drummers?"

"Guys bust balls, and that leads to dumb jokes."

Kelly shook her head. "That's terrible."

"Guys are terrible, and musicians are brutal to each other. There's bass, guitar, and singer jokes too. The punchlines are interchangeable."

She'd never understand male humor. It wasn't even funny, just mean. "My brother would never act that way." She'd raised him better than that.

Buzz shook his head as a grin spread. "Of course, he'd never act that way around *you*. You're his sister. But when it's just him and his buddies, I'd bet my Neil Peart signed drum head he's no different than any other guy."

Kelly's mouth dropped open. "No way. Not RJ." She wasn't stupid. She'd grown up around firefighters, and she was sure they told dirty jokes and used foul language, but she couldn't imagine RJ being mean to anyone. He was a nice boy.

Buzz shrugged. "It's how we show affection."

"Then how do you treat guys you don't like?"

"Ignore, but if push comes to shove, beat the crap out of him."

Kelly shook her head.

"Okay, it's the same as how you'd never swear in front of your parents, right? But when you're with your girlfriends, I've no doubt salty language and colorful stories come out."

She didn't have girlfriends anymore. She'd never sworn around her grandparents. "I guess." Kelly never used foul language around her siblings either. She also wanted off this topic. "I didn't know you wrote songs."

"We all do, even Curt." He chuckled. "See what I did there? Seriously though, Jack writes many of our songs, but he's always open to any ideas we have because we're always looking to put the best out there. But I've written several that made it on our albums."

"Why wouldn't they?"

"Our first A&R guy was a decent enough fellow, but he'd pegged Jack as the songwriter, and he nixed every song from our first album Elliot, Curt, or I wrote. Jack never wanted to be seen as the 'talent' and the rest of us just backing him, so he suggested we credit every song to each of us. Says he wouldn't be half the musician he is without us. We've always pushed each other to grow, and I think that's one of the reasons for our continued success. We never rest on past achievements. We've lost fans over the years because our sound has changed, but we always gain more than we lose. We have no interest in staying the same. We purposely try to have each album be sonically different because writing the same song over and over is boring to us. We have to keep it fresh for ourselves,

and we accepted we'd lose some fans, but that's the only way we want to keep making music.”

“I totally get it.” Kelly leaned in. “I didn't start out wanting to be a wedding gown designer exclusively. But I was selected to participate in a contest that was televised locally to showcase the students at FIT.” She glanced at Buzz. “That's Fashion—”

“Institute of Technology. I'm from New York, remember?” His eyes pinned her. “That's the competition you won?”

“Yeah. Clineman's still has my design in their inventory.” Kelly sighed. “I'd thought winning would be my in to the fashion world, but the judges all said the same thing—compared to my wedding designs, my others were pedestrian. Winning was amazing, but I really wanted to design everyday clothes. I hate to use the word because I've been very fortunate, but for now, I'm stuck.”

Buzz nodded. “You've already branched out into custom brides and bridesmaids and now tuxes. I'm guessing everyday clothing is in there somewhere.”

Kelly grinned. “Yes, but years down the road. I've been niched into bridal, but once my brand is big enough, jumping into everyday won't be such a leap. It's not that I don't love designing gowns...”

“But you can do more, and as an artist, I think it's totally normal to want to stretch your design muscles.”

Her mouth fell open.

“What?”

“No one's ever called me an artist before.”

“You don't think of yourself as an artist?”

“I do. But...”

“Having someone else acknowledge it is nice. Most people hear the word art and think painting. But you draw, and one of these days I'd like to study the pictures in the hallway a little closer. They're yours, aren't they?”

“How did you know?”

“I saw the sketches you did of Em’s and Nicki’s dresses, and the one’s in the hall, they just kinda screamed ‘you.’ The pencil strokes look the same. The first time we performed in Paris, we had a day off, and I went to the Louvre. On the tour, the guide said brush strokes were like fingerprints, unique to every artist.” He grinned. “And it’s your place.”

She chuckled. “Right. Not a great leap to figure that out. But most people don’t have the eye to see it.” Her heart beat wildly, and her pussy throbbed. Him understanding her as an artistic being was as much of a turn-on as his physical desire for her. “Didn’t you have better things to do in Paris?”

“I’m lucky I get to travel all over the world to share our music. I’ve always loved art.” His gaze dipped to his hands for a second. “My parents would take my sister and me to the Museum of Modern Art, The Cloisters, Museum of Natural History, all of them, really. My mom loves art, and before she had us, she worked at MoMA. I visit as many museums as I can when we’re on tour.”

“Wow, I’m jealous. I’d love to visit Paris. After I won the Clineman’s competition, I had an opportunity to go to Milan to intern at Maison Signor, but... I had to... I couldn’t go.”

“Ever been to Europe?”

She shook her head. “I’ve never been outside the tristate area.” When her parents had been alive, they’d spent summers at Jones Beach and two weeks in the Hamptons. Even she and Enzo had honeymooned at Lake George. She’d given up her dream to travel long ago.

“What’s stopping you?”

“My life’s here. I couldn’t be away from the boutique.” *Or my family.* She’d never leave Jenny and RJ. They were all she had left.

“You don’t want to travel, or you don’t trust the people you have working for you to handle everything? I’m not judging. I get it. This store’s your baby. We feel that way about our songs. When we first started jamming, we covered our favorite

bands, stuff we'd grown up listening to. But after our first paying gig, we knew we wanted to be more than a cover band. We'd always had bits of songs we messed around with. Jack would sing a few lyrics, and I'd put a beat to it, and Elliot and Curt would riff. The idea that we could create music people wanted to hear was it for us." Nostalgia tinged his smile. "The first gig we planned on playing an original song, Jack threw up beforehand he was so nervous. We were all a little terrified. Putting a big piece of yourself out in the world is scary for anyone, but at seventeen, it was flat-out terrifying. He said singing for an audience words someone else had written had been hard enough because of the connection he felt to the lyrics. But when they were his words, his soul, he almost chickened out."

Kelly's heart warmed. "That's it exactly." She needed to keep what was left of her family together, but in her soul, she knew it was only a matter of time before RJ would move closer to Ten House. Bile rose whenever she thought about it. How did parents ever let their kids go? Buzz's insights into her psyche were disconcerting, but it was nice he understood her.

"Ready to do it?" Buzz asked.

Her head snapped to him. "What?"

Buzz's grin spread wide, and his gaze raked over her. "Measurements, remember?" He stood and walked around her desk, pulling her chair to face him. She was eye level with his crotch. "You said I couldn't have you on your desk." Placing his finger under her chin, he raised it until she met his eyes. "Or has that changed? Because"—he squatted—"I'm game." He glanced at her desk then back. "Say the word, and all this shit hits the floor and you're on your back."

Kelly's eyes drifted shut and her mind conjured the picture Buzz's words painted. "Oh." She added moans of pleasure. "No." But really, yes. But she wouldn't. Probably wouldn't. Maybe. But right now, she needed to get his measurements and snap a few pictures. Pushing her chair back, she grabbed her tape measure and stood. Picking up the step stool, she walked to the center of the room, and he followed. "Hold out your arms."

She stepped up, and between the step and her heels, she was eye level with him. His pupils dilated, and he exhaled a slow breath from his full lips. Buzz put his arms to the side, and she stretched the tape from his shoulder to his wrist. The heat his body was throwing off made her dizzy because it carried the overwhelming scent of raw male arousal.

“Hold on.” Buzz whipped his T-shirt off.

“What’re you doing?”

“Oh, I thought the measurements would be more accurate if I was naked.” His smile was innocent enough, but he was egging her libido on. “Just trying to be helpful.”

“Uh-huh, sure you are.” She took a steadying breath as she resumed the task at hand. Buzz’s naked torso was a piece of art. From his pecs to his chiseled abs, Kelly wanted to lick every inch. She cleared her throat. *Focus.*

She stared.

“You can touch me if you want to.” Buzz grinned.

“I had no idea how...muscular the rest of you would be. I know your arms...but...”

“My arms, shoulders, and legs get a workout every time I drum.”

Her eyes widened. “They sure do.”

His grin turned to a smirk. “You keep eye-fucking me, and I’m gonna need to come.”

Kelly’s mouth fell open on a gasp.

“Ohh.” His nostrils flared. “That works for me.”

Her hand shot to her open mouth. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Foreplay is everything.”

Kelly’s body flooded with sexual heat. “I’m just gonna get back to work here.” He had a small, barely noticeable scar on his left pec. Her eyes were drawn to the pocket watch tattoo on his right forearm. It was such an unusual choice. She wanted to know the story behind it, but she refused to ask. Tattoos

were meaningful, and therefore too personal for their casual arrangement. “Turn for me.”

He smiled and turned slowly until he faced the wall, and her breath caught. His back was covered in a huge black and gray tattoo of a tree. A couple dozen deep green leaves were scattered over the lifelike branches. Deep roots trailed below the waistband of his shorts. Kelly fisted her hand so she wouldn't run her fingers over the elegant lines. The only other color was a sprinkling of bright yellow dandelions sprouting from the earth. A few had transformed into puffy white orbs, and one had the seeds taken by a gust of wind.

“Everything okay?”

“Yes, sorry.” She forced her brain to ignore his perfect body, and she hoped to get the rest of his measurements without licking him. She reminded herself this was business not pleasure, but he did have a fabulous body.

And soon, it would be hers for the taking.



BUZZ DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WAS MORE OF A TURN-ON: TEASING her, the way her eyes ravaged him, or the dirty thoughts he read in her expression. Every inch of his body was acutely aware of every inch of hers. He enjoyed the banter, and she did too even though she kept telling him to behave himself. Her nipples stood erect from her lush tits. Buzz strained to keep his hands from touching them. His balls ached with need. And she smelled so damn good. The unique blend of sweet and spicy made his mouth water.

She looked absolutely stunning. Her black blouse was a soft, flowy material that hugged her breasts perfectly, and the sleeves flared below her elbows, moving softly with every action. The black pencil skirt ended mid-calf, and cherry-red four-inch patent heels and a matching belt finished her classy outfit.

The soft touch of her hands on his bare flesh as she reached around his chest with the measuring tape made his

dick throb, and her soft breath as she exhaled made it damn near impossible not to grab her and kiss her red lips. He tried to calm his thunderous need by staring at the wall behind her desk, but his eyes kept dropping to the flat surface, and images of them fucking followed.

She's not ready.

Her long, dark-brown hair flowed over her shoulders and down her back. He couldn't wait to thread his fingers through the silky length. It was a messy style that looked like she'd just fucked. Except for the red accents and her hair, she could've walked out of the nineteen forties. He'd bet she had on stockings and a garter belt.

The urge to find out had his hands itching to peel her clothes off. He'd do it slowly, torturing them both. There was something to be said for anticipation, and when Buzz finally had her, they'd both scream.

She kneeled before him and extended the tape from his hip to his foot. He couldn't wait until she was on her knees for a better reason. He didn't dare close his eyes to picture it because her face was already at his dick, and if he got much harder, he'd bust the seams on his shorts.

Or come.

Sitting back on her heels, she gazed up at him. Her mouth opened, and a slight gasp escaped. Her brown eyes went near black, and a beautiful flush rose in her cheeks. "Stop that."

Buzz lifted a brow. "Stop what?"

Her face bunched up. "You know what."

He shook his head and barely suppressed a grin. "I have not a single idea what you could possibly be referring to. I'm merely patiently standing here while you...measure me."

Her gaze dropped to his dick. "That."

Buzz's hands went to the button on his shorts. "Oh, if you wanted to see it, all you had to do was ask."

"Stop." This time, she giggled. "This is serious."

“I’m being serious, and clearly, you’d be doing me a favor. Seems I’ve run out of room here.” He popped the button.

She shot to her feet. “Stop teasing me.”

“You like it.”

“No, I most certainly do not.” She tried to stop smiling, but it wasn’t working.

“You’re teasing me, and I love it.”

Kelly huffed. “I’m not doing anything except trying to take your measurements.”

Buzz grinned. “Maybe not on purpose, but that’s the sexiest thing of all.” Buzz closed his eyes. “First, you got close enough so your breasts brushed my chest, then you began moving around me, and I felt your breath on my arm and the brush of your fingers as you took the measurements. Then you kneeled in front of me.” He exhaled a long, slow breath. “You forgot the inseam, by the way.” He grinned.

Kelly’s lips curled in, and a wicked glint blossomed in her brown eyes. She stepped close, their bodies all but touching.

Her spicy scent made it hard not to take what her body was readily offering. His skin tingled. No woman had ever pushed his control to near breaking.

“I didn’t forget,” she said innocently. “But you’re hard as a rock, and I need you flaccid in order to get a proper measurement.” She smirked.

Her sexy voice was driving him mad. “That’s gonna be a problem. I’m hard whenever I’m around you.” He licked his lips. “And I’ve been wondering what you’ve got on under that super sexy outfit.”

For a second, she glanced at the door. As she stepped closer, her breasts made contact with his bare chest, and she tilted her head up to look at him.

Buzz spread his feet a little wider.

“You like my outfit?” Her pink tongue peeked out and swept over her lush bottom lip.

“Oh, fuck yeah.” Buzz’s gaze dropped to her chest. The tops of her breasts were exposed, and he had no doubt that was why she’d stepped closer. “Sexy.” She smiled. He couldn’t wait until he felt them smushed against his chest while he kissed her. That image made his dick jerk in concurrence.

“Sexy, huh?” Taking a single step back, she laid her palms on her hips. “You don’t think it makes my hips look too big?” She turned slowly, and her hands smoothed over her ass. “Or my butt look too big?” She glanced over her shoulder and batted her lashes.

“Your hips and ass look great, and I can’t wait to see you naked.” Buzz held his hands out and made an hourglass in the air. “You’re fucking perfect.”

Kelly shook her head. “I’m not really an hourglass. My waist isn’t that small.”

Buzz’s eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about?” He closed the distance between them and lifted her arms out to her sides. He’d have liked to have put his hands by her breasts and run them down and over her hips, but he settled for his hands on her waist. “Feels perfect to me.”

“We, uh, should, that is, we need to discuss the terms of our arrangement.”

“We already did, remember?” He was glad her brains were as scrambled as his.

Her brows drew together, and her lips pursed to the side. “Uh...”

How he kept from kissing her, he had no idea. She’d let him, but then she’d be pissed because they were in her place of business. Maybe he’d be able to convince her to fuck him here after hours. He stifled a horny groan.

Shaking her head and taking a few steps away, she said, “I think we should discuss our expectations for our...”

“Sex?”

Kelly nodded slowly. “Yes.” She bit her bottom lip.

Buzz couldn’t wait to do that.

She closed her office door.

A small groan escaped his lips at the sway of her hips.

She walked around her desk and sat. Her hands quivered. "I've only had one long-term relationship, and I've never slept around." Guilt clouded her eyes, but she blinked, and it was gone.

If she thought a desk separating them was enough for her to cool off, she'd be sorely mistaken. He was enjoying teasing her too much to stop now. She wasn't shy about her sexuality, which really turned him on.

She pushed a pad and pen toward him.

Buzz's heart pounded, and his mouth went dry. He pushed it back. "You better do it. I've been told my handwriting's worse than a doctor's."

A breath stuttered out, but she picked up the pen. "Okay. Rule one. Four weeks only."

He settled into a chair and rested his ankle on his knee. "Okay."

"We should probably include the end date."

Unnecessary, but he agreed anyway. "We leave on September twelfth." Since she was insistent, there was one rule he'd like to get down on paper. "Rule two: no fucking around with anyone else." He didn't like the idea of her even looking at another guy. Which was stupid because their time together was limited, and he wasn't a monk, but he was picky about the women he spent time with. Even one-nighters. But Kelly hit all his requirements and more, and he couldn't wait until he had her.

"Do we really need to write that down?"

Buzz's heart pounded. "If you want to screw other guys, that's a deal breaker for me."

"Oh, no. Of course not. I'm going to be making time for you as it is. I don't have the time for anyone else, and you already said you wouldn't..."

He exhaled the breath caught in his chest. “And I won’t. Scout’s honor.”

“Were you a boy scout?”

“Yup. Me and Jack. We did everything together.” Jack’s family was Buzz’s second family. He still called Jack’s parents aunt and uncle, same as Jack did with his.

Kelly nodded. “That’s nice.”

“Well, you’re very outgoing. Surely, you must have many BFFs.”

Sadness crept into her eyes. Kelly cleared her throat. “I don’t have time for friends.”

That’s so sad. Her walls went back up. He’d asked too many questions. “Okay.” It was just as well they didn’t get too close. Neither of them wanted a relationship, but she really needed his help, and besides enjoying her sexually, he’d help her to get some balance in life. All work and no play wasn’t healthy. She loved her work, and that made it harder to do other non-work things. Kelly might not realize it yet, but if she didn’t make some changes, she was headed for burnout. And it was a lot easier to take steps to avoid burnout than recover from it. He’d learned that the hard way. Conscious choices needed to be made.

She shook off her melancholy. “Okay, rule two, for the duration of our time together, we’re exclusive.” She swallowed hard. “I’m on birth control. And I’m clean.”

Buzz nodded. “Me, too. I get tested every few months.” For one-nighters, he wouldn’t go without rubbering up, but if she was okay with it, he’d be happy to oblige. “So you’d be okay if we didn’t use condoms?”

She made a face. “I always hated them, but...”

“That’s fine. I’ll handle it.”

She smiled and nodded, but her shoulders bunched. “Rule three...”

“We have as much sex as possible.”

“Do we really need to make that a rule?”

He nodded. “I think we should. You know, to avoid misunderstandings. We’ve got to pound as much sex as possible into our time together.” He grinned. “Write that down.”

Kelly relaxed, shook her head, smiled, and wrote. “Four: No sleeping over.”

Buzz’s brows drew together. “Really? Is that a deal breaker for you?”

“Well, I thought you’d prefer it.”

“You thought wrong.”

“Sleeping together is very intimate,” she said, more to herself than to him.

Buzz wanted to sleep with her, to wake up with her, to slide deep while she was still relaxed and sleepy, but maybe she was right. He liked her. There was no denying it. But four weeks wasn’t enough time to really get to know her or for deeper feelings to develop. “Why don’t we play that one by ear? See how it goes.”

“You’d be okay if I decide no sleeping together?”

“Yeah. This has to work for both of us.” He needed to get something else straight, and now was as good a time as any. “I want you to be honest with me about what you like and what you don’t. Don’t try to be someone you’re not for me because you think I’m used to certain things because I’ve slept around.”

“I’m not sure what that means.”

Buzz leaned forward. “It means I’ve had sex where the girl did stuff she later regretted after telling me she was fine with it. That doesn’t end well for either of us. It’s happened twice I know about, and that’s twice too many times. I was left feeling like a complete dick because of her dishonesty.”

“But how could you feel responsible if you didn’t know she was being dishonest? I don’t think you did anything wrong.”

Sex was a big deal to him. Over their ten-year career, they'd been on tour with lots of other bands, and he'd seen some musicians treat the girls they screwed like crap. Before they were all smooth talk and promises, and after they'd kick them out without a second glance. One guy even said that was what groupies were for. They knew the score, and if they didn't like the game, then they shouldn't play. That didn't sit well with him. Even though they knew the game, it didn't mean they deserved to be treated like shit. When he'd first invited a girl back to his room fourteen months ago, he'd been careful to make sure she understood what the deal was. "So you've never felt guilty for something that wasn't your fault?"

Kelly shrugged. "Yeah. I have. I wasn't a girl scout, but you have my word. I'll be honest with you."

"Good." Buzz relaxed back in the chair.

"Okay, rule five: we do this at my place. I really don't like the idea of going to hotels."

"I'm staying in the Village, remember?" And if he could get her to his place, sleeping over might work itself out.

"Right. Well, I also need to stay close to home."

"Okay."

"So, you're fine with coming to my place?"

"Sure. Works for me. I'm easy." But she wasn't. Not even a little. And now that he'd spent some time with her, he didn't think it only had to do with the strain and stress of running her own small empire. She didn't want him to ask any questions. He had his own secrets, and he was fine with Kelly having hers. "I get it. You'd feel more comfortable having sex in your own bed."

"Uh, yeah. That's it exactly." She smiled and wrote it down.

She wasn't a good liar. He knew that wasn't it when he'd said it, but her relief was palpable.

"Six: I think we should just have sex."

“Right now?” Grinning, he stood and unzipped his shorts. “If you insist.”

“Stop that or we’ll never get through this.” Her small smile made his dick pulse. “I mean not going out to dinner or any other date-like things.”

Her eyes were glued to his bare chest, and he resisted the urge to flex. He had too much respect for her to keep pushing sex right now. Grabbing his shirt, he slid it over his head.

She sighed.

He grinned and sat. “Can we stay in for dinner? I can’t imagine hunger for food, in addition to the other hunger I constantly feel for you, won’t need to be satisfied, too. To keep our strength up.” He wagged his brows.

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “I don’t really cook.”

“We’ll order in.”

She palmed her forehead. “Duh. I’m sorry. I’ve never done this before.”

Buzz stood and went around the desk. “Me either. I’ve had one long-term girlfriend, and way less one-nighters than you’re probably thinking I’ve had. Friends with benefits is new territory for me, too. You have enough stress.” Standing behind her, he placed his hands on her shoulders and gently kneaded her flesh. “Wow. You are strung tighter than Elliot’s bass.”

“Oh.” Kelly sighed, and her shoulders dropped down. “Feels so good. Your hands are like magic.”

“Just wait till I get you naked. I’ll show you magic.” The muscles in her shoulders were roped tightly, and Buzz let himself fantasize giving her an all-over, naked body massage. Picturing her nude body laid out on a bed of tangled sheets as he straddled her and touched every inch of her made his breath catch in his throat. “Damn.”

“Hands tired?” she moaned.

“Uuh-uh. Dick hard. Harder.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m wet.”

It made him feel something, but better wasn’t it. He’d love to bend her over her desk and take her from behind. “Tell me, how do you like it?”

“Like what?” She was so relaxed her speech was slightly slurred.

“Sex. Hard and fast? Up against a wall? In the shower? On all fours?” He wasn’t doing himself any favors. “Soft and slow with deep, wet kisses and full-body contact? Mmm. I can practically taste you now. Do you like oral, Kelly? Giving and receiving?”

She nodded, cleared her throat, and rolled her chair a few inches to the side. “We should get back to the list.”

“I was making my own list for future reference.” Buzz grinned and removed his hands. “But we can finish your list first.” He adjusted his cock and went back to the chair and sat.

“Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” Buzz smirked.

“Like I’m good enough to eat.”

Buzz licked his lips. “Now who’s teasing?”

“I didn’t mean it like that!” A red flush spread over her cheeks.

“No? Too bad.” He smiled. “Next rule. What are we up to?”

“Seven. We should keep it light. No heavy conversations or talking about our past relationships.”

That was more than fine by him. “Agreed.”

She wrote it down.

“You have nice handwriting.” In fact, she had nice everything. But he needed not to come on too strong. If he said every outrageous thing she made him feel and think, she’d end this before it began. He got the feeling she was having second thoughts, or maybe she was struggling with the idea of

sleeping with a guy she wasn't in love with. But she liked him. If he pushed her, they'd end up in bed tonight, but he didn't want her to have any regrets about their time together. If she needed more time to come to terms with their benefits, he'd give it to her because that was what a friend would do. Waiting was a small price to pay if it got her to where she needed to be.

“Thank you.” She smiled softly. “It’s like my mom’s.” She cleared her throat. “Eight”—she pinned him with her eyes—“No sex in my office.”

“Still on that, huh? Okay. But if you change your mind, let me know.” He purposely held her gaze, then dropped his to her desk, pictured him having her, and raised his eyes to hers again, smiling. “I’d bend you over this desk first. Then you’d straddle me on the couch, ooh, or maybe in your big boss-lady chair.” He furrowed his brow. “Do the wheels lock?”

Her eyes were glassy, and her impressive rack rose and fell with the effort to draw in air. “Why?”

“Probably not a good idea if fucking in the chair has us rolling all over your office.”

Kelly burst out laughing. “You’re terrible.”

Buzz quirked a brow. “Want me to stop?”

“No.” Her shy smile made his heart pound. “I’m not used to such outrageous talk, but I like it.”

“You make it easy to be outrageous.”

“I thought all rock stars were outrageous?”

“Not me. I’m the quiet one, remember?” He tilted his head to the side. “None of us are outrageous really. Just four regular guys who make music together. As a matter of fact, I’d say most of the bands we know would describe themselves that way. Of course, some of the bands have personas that are out there.” Paul St. Sinclair, Alchemy Riot’s drummer, came to mind. But no one would recognize him on the street if he didn’t want to be noticed. Emily had said it was all an act for the stage, but Buzz wouldn’t have believed it if he hadn’t seen “normal Paul” for himself. There were no secrets on tour. “Anything else?”

Kelly blinked slowly. “One more thing. Rule nine: Keep it quiet.”

Buzz nodded. He’d certainly keep it to himself, but Nicki already thought they were sleeping together. He figured she meant her family. This part of Brooklyn had small-town vibes. Everyone knew everyone else and their business. The last thing he’d ever want to do was hurt her reputation within her community. “Agreed.”

Kelly wrote the final rule.

Buzz stood. “Shall we seal the deal with a kiss?” Every inch of his body tingled.

Kelly’s eyes shot to the door and back to him. “Um, okay.” Walking over, she stopped and glanced up at him.

The excitement in her eyes shot to his dick. He steeled himself. He would keep the kiss gentle. He had to. Leaning down, he pulled her in until their bodies touched. Her perfume intoxicated him. When his lips touched hers, all thought ceased. Her mouth was warm, inviting.

Like home.

Chapter Ten

NICKI WAS DUE IN TO APPROVE THE FINAL DESIGNS FOR HER four dresses in ten minutes. Kelly was incredibly pleased with how they'd turned out, and she hoped Nicki would be too. Normally, brides didn't collaborate quite so much. Nicki had said she'd wanted to go to FIT, but her parents hadn't approved. They also hadn't approved of her going away to college, but she'd done it anyway.

When Emily walked in with her, Kelly wasn't really surprised since they were best friends. Two massive bodyguards followed discreetly behind them. Kelly couldn't imagine having to live like that. But after what had happened to Emily last year, Kelly understood why Jack took precautions.

Nicki's smile grew to a grin, and she waved furiously. Kelly met her halfway and was immediately pulled into one of the strongest hugs she'd ever experienced.

"Nic, come on, don't squish her," Emily said. "She doesn't know her own strength."

Nicki released her, and Kelly drew in a big breath.

"Yeah, I shoulda warned you. When she's incoming, you definitely need to suck in as much oxygen as you can." Emily chuckled. She gestured to the two men who stood a few feet behind them. "You remember Brick, and this is Shep."

Brick nodded politely.

Shep smiled. "Emily, you don't—"

Emily turned to him. “You are people too, and I refuse to pretend you’re not here. I am grateful for you both.”

Brick cleared his throat. “Don’t fight it, Shep. This is how she accepts your protection with grace.”

Brick made the boutique’s security guard, Simon, look like a normal-sized guy. “Brick’s an unusual name.”

“It’s a nickname I got from my drill sergeant in boot camp, ma’am.”

Nicki’s brows drew together. “Really? Why?”

Brick surveyed the store. “Not really something I can say in polite company.”

Emily’s lips pulled in as she held back laughter. “I can.” She stepped closer to Kelly and Nicki. “It’s because he’s”—her voice lowered to a whisper—“built like a brick shithouse.”

“That’s terrible.” Kelly hated male humor.

Emily laughed. “Shithouse could’ve stuck.”

Kelly covered her mouth and, in spite of herself, laughed. “True.”

Nicki giggled, and when she faced Kelly, a wicked gleam lit her eyes. She grinned. “So...how’s Buzz?”

They were about the same height, and they both loved high heels. Even though Nicki was dressed casually, she still wore hot-pink, four-inch heels with her light-pink capris and an aqua, cap-sleeve blouse. Her over-the-shoulder purse was in a darker shade of aqua, and she looked incredibly elegant. “I love your outfit.”

Nicki let out a squeal. “Thank you.” She scrunched her nose at Emily. “At least someone appreciates fashion.”

Over Nicki’s head, Emily mouthed, “That won’t work.”

But it was because Nicki was giving her a rundown of where she’d purchased each item. The heels she’d found in Italy, and the purse when they’d been in Paris. “I had a sunny-yellow patent belt, but Em said it was too much. But really, can there ever be too much?”

“Obviously not for you,” Emily snarked. She fanned herself. Instead of a skirt or capris, she wore jeans and sneakers. She was tall, thin yet curvy, and had great proportions. She’d look amazing in anything, and Kelly couldn’t fathom why a woman with a body like hers didn’t show at least some of it off. If it were her, she wouldn’t be shy about it. Especially on a summer day in New York that was hot as hell.

“Curt said I look fabulous.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Kelly said. But Emily had been right. The belt would’ve been too much. The door to the boutique opened and with it a burst of hot, humid, acrid air. “I think it’s hotter than they said it was going to be today.” Even though she’d left her apartment at five thirty this morning, the heat from yesterday hadn’t dissipated enough for it to be considered cool.

Emily’s eyes widened, and her head shook.

The glee from talking fashion left Nicki’s eyes, and the wicked gleam returned. “Speaking of hot...how’s Buzz?”

“I walked right into that one.”

Emily shrugged. “Tried to warn you. If you want to avoid a topic with Nicki, you can’t use words like hot, heat, burning, sweaty, steamy, spicy.” Emily chuckled. “Any words, really.”

Nicki swatted Emily’s arm. “Just checking on my match.” She waggled her brows. “So...”

“What?”

“Nic, she obviously doesn’t want to have this conversation with you. Let it go.”

Nicki pouted. “Well, when you are ready to dish, I’m available twenty-four hours a day.”

Kelly shook her head and laughed. Nicki and Emily were complete opposites. “I’ll keep that in mind. Now, are you ready to see the final designs?” She waved them along. “Oh, and some of the fabric samples have arrived.”

“Yay,” Nicki said, clapping and bouncing up and down like a little child would. “Oh, this is new.” Nicki stopped at one of the mannequins. “Can I try this on?”

“Nic, really? Having four custom dresses isn’t enough?”

Nicki shook her head. “Five is better than four. And look at it. It’s gourgaful!”

“Gourgaful?”

“Gorgeous. Beautiful. Stunning. Amazing!” She twirled around in a circle.

“It is really stunning,” Emily said. She ran her fingers over the detailed beading on the bodice. “And it’ll look stunning on you.”

Nicki’s eyes widened. “It would look stunning on you, too. We could have matching wedding gowns.”

“Nic, we’re not having a double wedding. We’d never find a venue to fit all of the guests. And even if we could, do you really want to wear the same dress?”

“Yes. If it was good enough for sisters Elizabeth and Jane in *Pride and Prejudice*, it’s good enough for us.”

Emily’s eyes narrowed. “They had a double wedding, but they wore different dresses. Besides, I’ve already finalized the details with Kelly for my *one* dress. I’m not getting a second dress.”

It wasn’t the first time Nicki had tried to persuade Emily into getting at least two wedding gowns. Kelly sighed. “Oh, I love that book. I think the miniseries the BBC did was far superior to the movie that came out a few years later. That book is just too delicious to fit into two hours.” It was also one of Kelly’s favorite memories with her mom. Jane Austen had been her mom’s favorite author, and they’d watched the miniseries together.

“Kelly could come up with a way to accessorize them differently, couldn’t you?”

“Of course, but this is not supposed to be out here.” Kelly dialed Rose, her sample room manager. “Can you come to the

sales floor, please?” The samples had arrived, but Kelly hadn’t had the chance to look them over yet. She had five new designs she’d debut at New York Bridal Week in October.

Rose walked toward her and stopped short. “I’m so sorry. That’s not supposed to be out. The new stock boy…” She looked to heaven, shook her head, and rattled off in Italian.

Kelly wasn’t fluent, but she understood enough to know the new stock boy was in for quite a tongue-lashing. “Isn’t Mario your nephew?”

Rose pointed to the front of the store. “Out there, he’s my nephew. In here, he’s just another employee. I told him if he wanted this job he’d have to do better than everyone else. I don’t play favorites. I am so sorry, Kelly, I’ll take care of it.”

Kelly smiled. Rose’s words were tough, but she loved her nephew. “Go easy on the kid. It’s his second day.”

“I hired him.”

“It’s still his second day. There’s a lot to learn, and he’ll get there. He’s a smart kid, and he wants to do well. If he’d been here for months, I’d say tear him a new one, but Rose, everyone needs time to learn. It’s not a big deal.” It was, but Rose was pissed enough for both of them. Since it was easily corrected, Kelly didn’t want Rose to overreact and damage her relationship with her sister or nephew. Rose was a hothead, and this wasn’t the first time Kelly had to calm her down. It was one of the hardest jobs; keeping her staff happy and in line at the same time took balance. But she’d had plenty of experience from raising Jenny and RJ.

Rose took a deep breath. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I don’t want to disappoint you. You’re a great boss, and this is the best job I’ve ever had.”

“And you’re one of the best employees ever.” Rose had worked for a very famous wedding designer in Manhattan who was known to treat her employees like shit. Kelly never understood how some women treated other women so abominably, especially in an industry dominated by men. Shouldn’t they be sticking together?

Nicki's joy was so contagious Kelly didn't have the heart to say no to her. "Rose, Nicki wants to try on this dress. Can you have it put in dressing room one? And ask Carol to meet us there in twenty minutes?" Her newest consultant would make a nice commission off the sale.

"Of course."

Nicki hugged her again. "You're the best."

They followed Kelly to her office. Nicki loved the final designs. Kelly showed her the samples of fabric.

Nicki pointed to a raw silk. "I really like this for the ceremony gown, but would it be a problem to wait until I see all the samples?"

"Of course not. I'm hoping the others will be in while you're home, but if not, I can always have them overnighted to you. Have you picked a date yet?"

"Jack and Emily are getting married next October, so I was thinking September or November." Her eyes lit up. "Maybe December. I'd need a red velvet cape." Nicki bounced in her seat. "Can I try my dress on now?"

Emily smiled. "She might burst if she doesn't get to soon."

"Sure."

Nicki smiled at Emily. "I know I can be a little difficult..."

Emily put her hand on Nicki's. "I wouldn't use the word difficult. You're particular, and you want what you want."

Nicki sniffled. "You always did understand me better anyone else until I met Curt. I truly feel loved for who I am, the good and the...less good."

"It's your special day, Nicki, and if you want five dresses, don't let anyone make you think that's crazy." Emily smiled at her. "You are one of the most generous people I've ever met, and in all the years we've been friends, you always accepted me for me. You never pushed me to be more into fashion or dress...differently. Now go try on that dress."

Nicki shot out the door.

Emily stood, and when she followed Nicki, she limped.

“Are you okay?” Kelly asked.

Emily turned to her, and her eyes held pain. She blew out a slow breath. “Yeah, just more pain than usual today. We had a busy morning.”

She’d seen Emily several times since April, but Kelly had no idea Emily had chronic pain. “Do you want to wait here?”

Emily shook her head. “And miss Nicki trying on that fabulous dress of yours? Not a chance. I’m dealing with it.”

By the time they arrived at the dressing rooms, Nicki was already inside with Carol.

Emily took a seat in one of the white, high-backed chairs opposite the pedestal. She rubbed her thigh.

“Can I get you anything? Some water?” *Wow, that’s stupid.* Why did people always offer to get water? It wasn’t a cure-all.

“I’m okay.”

Kelly’s mothering instincts blared Emily was not okay. She was trying to hide it, but pain showed on her pretty face, in the tension she held in her body, and the deep breathing she was doing. “Would elevating it help?” Kelly moved one of the other chairs over.

“Nope, but thank you.” Emily exhaled slowly. “I was in a car accident when I was seventeen.” She swallowed hard. “My parents and brother were killed.”

“Oh, that’s terrible. I’m so sorry.” Now she understood why Emily was so set against wearing heels with her gown.

“Thank you.” She took another slow breath and rubbed her thigh. “I’ve got this as a constant reminder. I’m going to need surgery to remove scar tissue, but I’ve been putting it off until after the new year. Not looking forward to another surgery.”

“How many have you had?”

“This’ll be four.” Emily smiled and tilted her head to the side. “You’ve been very polite.”

“Huh?”

“You never asked or even blinked twice when we first came here with my aunt and uncle. Most people aren’t so respectful. But I guess I’m not the first bride to come in whose parents are...gone.” Her voice hitched.

Kelly grabbed the box of tissues and sat next to her. “Here.” Kelly swallowed her own pain. This wasn’t about her loss. “Many brides come with other family members for a variety of reasons.”

Emily nodded and dabbed her eyes. “It never gets any easier, does it?”

Kelly’s back stiffened.

“I’m sorry. That slipped out. I just know you understand.”

Kelly sighed. Emily, being a writer, had research in her blood.

Emily’s hazel eyes seared into Kelly’s brown eyes. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“What?” Kelly wanted to look away, but the empathy in Emily’s eyes drew her in.

“Invade your privacy by looking up your life on the web. I hate when people ask me, so I’d never do that to anyone else. But now I’m engaged to Jack, my life’s fair game. I did one interview with him in California before the *incident*, but we’ve declined every one since, so they go and write their articles, and there’s nothing we can do about it. I really didn’t think my life before Jack would be a topic.”

Kelly looked to see if any of her staff was nearby. “How could you possibly know then?”

The door to dressing room one opened, and Nicki floated out. “Because she’s an empath. It’s one of the things that makes her such an outstanding writer. She’s able to put herself in other’s shoes, walk that mile, and describe every bump and pebble along the way.”

Emily wiped her eyes. “Oh, Nic, you look astoundingly beautiful.”

“Simply breathtaking,” Kelly said. Seeing a finished design on a model for the first time was always the true test of its appeal, but on Nicki, this dress looked even better than Kelly had imagined. It wasn’t that Nicki didn’t have an amazing body, but she was short. Pretty much any outfit looked good on a tall, skinny model, but designing for the average woman, who had lumps and curves and disproportions was where her heart lay.

Nicki stepped up on the pedestal and looked at herself in the mirror. Even though she had four dresses designed, this one was different. The skirt of the ball gown was much fuller than the trumpet design she’d picked for her entrance into the reception.

“Kelly, this dress... I feel like it was designed for me. It’s perfect in every way.” She turned and admired the low back with three rows of chunky beading along the sheer edge before it met with the satin of the bodice. “It looks stunning from every angle.”

“Curt’s gonna cry when he sees you.”

Nicki smiled and dabbed at her own tears. “He’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Believe it or not, my parents adore him. You know, when we met, it was like we were in this little love bubble. I put off introducing him to my family because I was afraid they’d take one look at his jeans, T-shirts, tattoos, and long hair, and well, try to talk me out of it. Rock stars don’t exactly have the best reputations, and he was so totally different than any of the guys I’d ever brought home. He took my brother and my nephew to a Yankees game. My brother hates sports, and he’d never been to a single sporting event, unless you count polo, but they had a great time. And my grandparents are totally in love with him.

“You know, I’ve always been the oddball in my family. But since Curt came into my life, I feel closer to my parents than I ever have. It’s like he healed a breach I didn’t know was there. And I feel like they’re finally accepting me for me. Even my brother. You know what he said the last time we talked?”

“What?”

Tears flowed down Nicki's cheeks. "He said he loved me." She gulped in air. "He's never said it before."

Kelly's face must've shown her shock.

Nicki chuckled. "My family's very...reserved. Especially my brother. They don't believe in sharing feelings, and he's kinda a stick-in-the-mud. But now every time I see my mom and dad, they tell me they love me. I mean, I always knew they did. I don't want you to think they never said it, but there was a time and place for it. Now they say it all the time."

Emily stood and hugged Nicki. "Jack always said Curt was the unifying one. Not so much now, but when they were nineteen and first moved into the apartment in Brooklyn, they fought all the time, but Curt was always the one to say he was sorry first or get the guys to make up. He's amazing, Nicki, and I couldn't be happier for you."

Kelly felt like she was intruding, so she turned to leave.

"Don't go," Nicki said. She hopped off the pedestal and floated over. "As a matter of fact, Em and I are going to have lunch, and then we're spending the afternoon at a spa. Why don't you join us?"

"Oh, thank you, but I can't." Her throat was so tight she could barely speak.

"Can't or won't?" Emily asked. "You're the boss, so you can do anything you want."

Nicki turned to Emily. "Maybe she has appointments this afternoon."

"Nope, we checked."

"Checked with whom?" Anger blossomed.

"Jenny. She's very helpful."

"Oh, really?"

Emily quirked a brow. "Yes, and don't get pissy. You work too hard. When was the last time you had a spa day?"

"I've never had a spa day. And my sister had no right—"

“I have every right, Kel.”

Kelly spun around, and Jenny stood by the entryway. “Carol, can you give us a minute?”

Carol nodded and left.

“You said you’d try to be more like a sister than mother. But you know what? You also said when you hired me I’d be taking over a lot of your day to day so you could get back to designing. I’ve taken the responsibility, but you still spend most of your time overseeing. Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course, I trust you.” Kelly’s lips pulled tight. “Can we have this conversation later, please?”

“No. We’ll have it now.” Jenny walked to her. “You’re still burning the candle at both ends. I’m worried about you. And so is RJ.”

“I worry about you guys, but you don’t have to worry about me.”

“That might be the stupidest thing you’ve ever said to me.” Jenny huffed. “We worry because we love you. You’ve done everything for us, and now it’s time you let us do for you. Go have a girls’ day with your friends.”

“I can’t. I have too much to do.”

Jenny’s hands balled into fists, and her face reddened. “Do you want to end up like Gramzilla?”

“Jenny, please.” They loved their grandmother, but she was domineering, and their nickname for her wasn’t something that should be shared outside the family.

Jenny took a few steps closer. “Oh, they don’t care we call her that, do you?”

Emily chuckled. “I’m totally using it in my next book.” Emily nudged Nicki, and they disappeared into the dressing room and closed the door.

Kelly glared at her sister. “I’m nothing like her.”

“Yeah, Kel, you are. You’re getting more and more like her. I was only eight when... But I remember what Grams

used to be like. You know, I don't think I've heard her laugh since. She works, and she goes home, and she takes care of Pa. She stopped living, and now you're doing it too. You're not even thirty, but you act like you're sixty. You're hiding from life!"

The avalanche of anger burst out. "How dare you compare me to her? And you don't know what the hell you're talking about. I've built this life." She gestured to the room. "This isn't hiding. It's called working." Her voice was shrill, and Kelly didn't care she was screaming. She didn't care she was in her place of business.

Jenny's eyes narrowed and she nodded. "Well, it's about time."

Kelly blinked a few times. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"This is the first time you've ever yelled at me. All those years you took care of RJ and me, you'd get mad at us, but you never even raised your voice."

"Mom and Dad never yelled at us."

Jenny smiled. "No, they never did. They would sit us down and calmly tell us what we'd done wrong, why it wasn't okay, and how to be better next time." Tears streamed down Jenny's cheeks. "They were the best parents ever, and Kel, you did an amazing job, but you don't have to be the parent anymore. You need to find a life for yourself outside of us, outside of this place." She gulped air.

Kelly's hands balled into fists. She didn't need her little sister telling her how to live her life. She took a slow steady breath.

"Don't stop now."

"What?"

"Stop trying to be in control every second of the day. Sisters fight, Kel. You know we've never had a fight?"

Kelly's jaw tightened. "What are you talking about? We've fought."

Jenny's eyes pleaded. "No, we haven't. Sure, when we were little, but after Mom...you changed. You never allowed yourself to really get angry at us. Or at our loss. Or at your divorce. You've been holding it together for fifteen years. It's okay to get mad."

The boutique's PA crackled to life, and a voice informed Jenny her conference call was on the line.

Kelly closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. "You should go. You have work to do," she said through gritted teeth. Her anger threatened to overwhelm her. "And send Carol back."

Jenny's eyes narrowed, and her chin tilted up. "This isn't over." She turned on her heel and stomped off.

Her head pounded, and the tightness in her jaw and neck weren't helping. The door to the dressing room creaked open, and she turned.

"The first step is the hardest," Emily said. "Look, I used to be like you. After I lost my family, I had to build an entirely new life. But my recovery from the emotional trauma took a lot longer. I thought if I never got too close to anyone I wouldn't get hurt again. But it's exhausting, and it doesn't work." Emily inhaled and exhaled. "But pain and loss are a part of living. And you can't insulate yourself from them without shutting out all the good things as well."

Kelly's throat was so tight she could barely breathe.

Emily's lips curved into a sad smile. "I'm sorry if I've overstepped, but I can't watch someone go through what I've been through and not try to help."

Nicki floated over and hugged Kelly. "Told you she's an empath."

Carol appeared, and Nicki turned toward the dressing room but stopped in front of Emily. "And don't think I don't know that you refer to butting into people's lives as a 'raging case of Nickiitis.'"

Emily shrugged and grinned. "Never tried to hide it."

Chapter Eleven

THE NEXT DAY, BUZZ LEFT HIS THERAPIST'S OFFICE THINKING about Kelly. As if he didn't have enough on his mind, his conversation with Kelly about romance the night he'd helped her find Sadie had him spending too much brainpower going over his relationship with Sally instead of focusing on himself.

They'd come so far as a band, but Buzz was still the weak link.

Even though he was feeling particularly lacking, he took comfort he'd come a long way from the guy who'd woken in the hospital to his mom crying at his bedside. He'd never put his parents through a nightmare like that again. His detox had been bad but not as bad as some of the other residents in rehab. The real test had come after he'd left treatment. He'd sought out alternative therapies to deal with his knee pain, but the emotional traumas he'd been blotting out with pills were another matter.

Some days his mind had begged him for relief. *Just this once. Touring is stressful, take the edge off. Why struggle when relief's so easy?* If he didn't quell those voices, he was in imminent danger of relapsing. And that was why he'd finally given in and was going to therapy.

But it sucked.

He was doing three sessions a week, and he'd barely recovered from one before his next. He was grateful his career allowed him to have the time to really dig in. At first, the idea of three weekly sessions had been to get it over with as soon as

possible. But this was going to be a long process, so next week he'd cut back to two sessions. No sense in not doing it right because trying to process too much at once could land him back on drugs.

Yeah, it sucked all right. And digging into the blackness was terrifying because he never knew what he'd uncover. But he had to, and he'd do it. Mostly for himself, but he acknowledged the fear of causing his family and bandmates more grief and disappointment was also a driving need. He meditated every day, sometimes twice, to help maintain an even keel.

Balance was key.

And Vince was always only a phone call away. He still went to NA meetings at least four times a week. It wasn't that long ago the idea of missing a daily meeting had him breaking out in a sweat. But he was on better footing now, and he allowed himself to feel the pride that rose. He'd come a long way, and he'd be more conscious of acknowledging that whenever negative feelings invaded.

Sally. His therapist insisted he needed to deal with that relationship, because if he didn't, it would poison future ones. Buzz had no intention of getting that involved with a woman again. He didn't feel strong enough to deal with it, but Sally popped into his mind on a regular basis these days, so he figured his brain was trying to tell him something.

When he'd found her passed out, his heart had been split in two. She'd always said he was her knight in shining armor, but knights didn't let their girlfriends die of an overdose. The four days she'd been in a coma, he'd been terrified he'd let her down. She had no family, only a foster brother she sometimes kept in touch with, and she'd depended on Buzz for everything.

Last night, unable to think of anything else, he'd realized he'd relished the role as her strong knight. Her neediness made him feel in charge and strong for the first time in his life. A life which had started with so little control. Part of him still

felt like the weak, pathetic, lonely boy who could only watch the world from the safety of his bedroom window.

The familiar fears from his childhood swirled inside him, and even though he was healthy now, the fear he'd end up like he started never left him.

Which reinforced his place as the weak link. Elliot wanted more breaks so he'd have more family time. There wasn't anything weak about that.

Buzz and Jason were buddies, and it turned out he was as good with kids as he was with animals. He'd mastered the one-arm baby hold so he could use his phone while Jason napped on him. It had felt odd, holding this tiny life against his chest. So dependent on others for survival. So accepting. Jason would reach out for Buzz whenever he was around, and it warmed a part of Buzz's heart he hadn't known he'd had.

As he got back to the apartment, his cell rang. He smiled. "Hey, Kelly. Got some free time?"

"Yeah, about that."

Fuck. "Second thoughts?" He pushed the up button on the elevator and stepped inside when the doors opened.

"Um, sorta. You know that rule I had about not having dinner out?"

"Yeah." The elevator stopped, and he went down the hall. Once inside, he chucked his keys in the bowl on a small table by the door.

"I changed my mind." She sighed. "I'm sorry. I know it was my idea, but I just don't feel right about jumping..."

"I think dinner sounds great. I'm free tonight." He'd kept most of his nights clear because he figured, for this to work, he'd need to be available when Kelly called.

"I don't know." She sighed. "I had a fight with my sister."

"Seems to be going around."

"Yeah. I've never... Never mind. Dinner tonight. How's seven?"

“Perfect. Do you want to come into the city, or is there a place you’d like to go by you?”

“By me. There’s a great Italian restaurant I haven’t been to in ages. Oh, is Italian okay with you?”

Buzz imagined Kelly naked. “Mmm-hmm. Sure is.”

Her sharp intake of breath made him smile. “We are talking about Italian food, right?”

“Food. Eating. You.”

“Stop that.”

“Why? You like it when I tease you.” His blood pounded just from talking to her. “If tonight’s just dinner, I’m okay with that.”

Kelly let out a long breath. “I really appreciate it. I’m sorry I’m being a pain in the butt.”

“You’re not. You need some time to adjust to the idea of the benefits our friendship will bring. And believe me when I tell you those benefits will be plentiful and worth the wait.”



BUZZ HAD MADE THE RESERVATIONS AT THE RESTAURANT Kelly suggested for eight. She’d said seven, but she had a hard time stepping back from work. He would use their time together to help her realize all work, no matter how much she loved it, didn’t replace a personal life. He’d learned that lesson this past eighteen months being on tour. He’d offered to pick her up, but she preferred to meet him there because this was just dinner between friends.

He got a haircut and shave.

When Kelly called at six thirty saying she’d be late, Buzz assured her it wouldn’t mess with their reservations.

He picked up a rental at seven and drove to Brooklyn. He was early, but the restaurant seated him.

Several patrons recognized him, but all they did was smile. He smiled back, and the hostess showed him to their table. The scents coming from the kitchen made his stomach growl in anticipation. The cream-colored walls set off the dark-oak molding, and marble and brass light fixtures hung from the ceiling. All the tables were covered in cream linen tablecloths, and the flatware was wrapped in red napkins. Happy couples sat holding hands and sipping wine. Every table had a trio of flickering candles in the center and a small, clear vase with two white carnations and greenery.

The door to the restaurant opened, and Buzz glanced up. His breath knotted in his throat. *Damn, she's beautiful.* When their eyes met, a huge smile spread across her face, and Buzz felt special her smile was for him. He'd assured her waiting wasn't a problem, but he sure as fuck hoped it would be tonight. As she reached the table, he stood and held out her chair. She'd changed out of her usual black outfit into a dark red blouse with a deep vee that emphasized her breasts, a knee-length purple skirt that billowed around her legs, and black patent leather, peep-toe heels. The top of her head reached just under his chin. He crushed the urge to kiss her, but it wasn't easy. "You look absolutely stunning." He tucked the chair under her.

"Thank you."

Her makeup was classy as usual. She wore her signature red lipstick, which gave Buzz dirty thoughts.

He felt her gaze on him as he took his seat, and his body heated. Her eyes glowed, and her nipples showed through the silky material of her blouse. He grabbed his water glass to give his hand something to do besides grabbing her. Her pink tongue darted out and licked her lips. He doubted she was trying to entice him, which was the most enticing of all. Naturally sexy was his favorite kind of sexy, and Kelly had it. Other than earrings, she didn't wear any jewelry. She'd painted her nails red, and the same color was on her toes.

"You...you look so handsome." Her throat worked, and her eyes glowed.

“Thank you.” He wanted to nibble the soft skin of her throat. “I clean up pretty good for a rock star, huh?” Like most guys, he preferred jeans and T-shirts, but he’d purposely dressed up because the restaurant she’d picked was classy when he’d scoped it out online. He’d also taken the opportunity to check out the menu.

She’d been out of a long-term relationship for a while, and she’d said she’d only dated one guy her whole life. Her sister had told Nicki she never went out.

“More than pretty good.” She smiled, and her eyes lit up. “I hope this restaurant is okay. I haven’t been out to dinner in a long time.”

Buzz stopped himself before he said something goofy like anywhere would be great as long as she was there. She wasn’t the only one out of practice. Not that this was a date, but most of the girls Buzz had slept with he’d met in restaurants or after-parties. The last date he’d been on had been with Sally, but he didn’t want to think about her anymore. She was living rent free in his mind, and he needed to close the door on the past. “It’s great. Cozy.” He hoped she didn’t read anything into it.

“The owners live a few streets away from my grandparents. I like to support my local businesses as much as possible.”

A waiter appeared and handed them menus. “Would you care to hear the specials?”

“Yes, please,” Buzz said, placing his menu on the table.

From memory, the waiter recited the daily specials. “I’ll give you a few minutes to look over the menus.”

Kelly opened hers. “I’m starved. I hope it’s okay, but I’m going to have a salad and an appetizer. I was too busy to eat lunch today.” Her eyes shone with lust, and she smiled.

Buzz tried not to think of her lips on his cock. Didn’t work. He shifted and smiled back. “You been here before?”

“Yes, we used to eat here all the time.” Kelly’s gaze dropped.

Buzz let the “we” go. She clearly wasn’t over whoever it was, and maybe now she was regretting bringing him to a place she’d been to with her ex. “Do you want to go somewhere else?”

Before Kelly answered, the chef came out of the kitchen and walked over to their table with a huge grin on his face. “Mrs. Hoffmann-Coppola, it’s been so long.”

Kelly’s face burned bright red, and she wouldn’t look at Buzz. She stood and hugged the chef. “Oh, Carmine.” She swallowed hard. “It’s just Hoffmann now.”

The chef glanced at Buzz and back to Kelly. “I’m so sorry. You and Enzo were together for so long I forgot.” He cleared his throat. “How are your grandparents?”

Ex-husband. Nicki’s research had missed that one.

Kelly sighed. “They’re good. Pa’s still recovering from his heart surgery, and Grams is ornery as always. Says he’s not allowed to die.”

Carmine laughed. “Yes, she’s ornery but such a wonderful woman. So caring, a staple of the community. This neighborhood wouldn’t be the same without them. I heard they’re selling the bakery... I hope they aren’t planning on leaving.”

“No. Grams still works there in the afternoons, and Pa’s hoping to return after he gets the all clear from his doctor. They’ll never leave Brooklyn.”

“Well, it’s lovely to see you again. I hope you won’t be a stranger.”

They hugged again, and Carmine went back to the kitchen. Kelly sat and stared at the table.

Buzz opened his menu even though he would be having one of the specials. “Well, I’m starved, too. What’s good here?”

“I...”

He smiled. “No explanations necessary. But if being here is making you uncomfortable, we can go somewhere else.”

Kelly closed her eyes and shook her head. “You’re very sweet. But the food is amazing here. And it’s been too long since I’ve enjoyed it.”

Buzz nodded. She looked terribly uncomfortable, but clearly, she wanted to overcome it. “Any recommendations?”

Kelly put her shoulders back. “I’ve never had a bad meal.” She opened her menu. “You probably don’t eat fried foods, but the calamari is excellent. It comes with three dipping sauces, including the classic spicy marinara.”

Buzz leaned in. “Why do you think I don’t eat fried foods?”

“Hmm?” Kelly glanced up from the menu. “You’re so… fit.” Her eyes glittered.

“Thank you. I do work out, and I eat healthy because I feel better when I eat better. It can be difficult on tour, but moderation is key. I allow myself to eat whatever I want on occasion. We could split the calamari?”

Kelly made a face. “I shouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“I don’t get to exercise as much as I should. But it’s so good.”

He grinned. “Exercise is important. It helps to reduce stress. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with watching what you eat, but you look amazing just the way you are.” Buzz sat back. “So I’ll order it, and you can have some of mine.”

“You’d share it with me?”

“Of course. Any other suggestions?”

Kelly’s head tilted. “Don’t you want to look at the menu? It’s quite extensive, and I haven’t tried a lot of it.”

Buzz cleared his throat. “I saw the menu online. I’m leaning toward the Chilean sea bass special, but I’m open if there’s something you’d recommend.”

“You can’t go wrong with the sea bass. I was thinking of that, too.”

The waiter returned with a basket of warm bread, and they placed their orders.

Buzz offered her the basket. Her dainty hand selected a piece and placed it on the small plate. He grabbed a piece, ripped off a hunk, and popped it in his mouth. “Wow. If the bread is this good, I can’t wait for the calamari.”

A blush crept up Kelly’s neck. “It’s from my grandparents’ bakery. All the local restaurants get their bread there. It’s kind of a tradition.”

“They own Cappomagi’s?”

“Yeah.”

Buzz grinned. “When we lived here, I went there all the time for their cannolis, and if I didn’t bring bread home, well, let’s just say you don’t want to meet hangry Elliot. I’ve traveled all over the world, but this is still the best bread I’ve ever had. There was this tiny trattoria in Italy, which was a close second but second nonetheless.”

“People come from all the boroughs to get their bread. It’s my Grams’ secret recipe.” Kelly’s face clouded over, and she put the bread back on her plate and pushed it away.

“Is something wrong with the bread?” Buzz sniffed it but couldn’t detect anything but yummy bread smell.

Kelly shook her head.

“Are you worried about your grandfather?” She’d said he was recovering from surgery.

Another head shake.

Buzz would’ve let it drop, but she was ridiculously upset. “Hey.” He reached over and placed his hand on hers. “We can leave.”

Kelly’s shoulders went back. “No. This is a small town. My ex-hus—probably baked the bread.” She sighed. “And it’s not really my grandparents’ bakery anymore. He bought into it

as a partner, and he'll eventually be full owner because none of us wanted to take it over. He's worked there since he was sixteen, and they know he'll take good care of it."

She looked like she wanted to talk about it. "You used to come here with him?" That explained a lot. Breakups left most people hesitant about getting involved again, but a marriage ending was exponentially more serious.

She nodded. "This was our place. We had our first grown-up date here when we were seventeen. We got married at twenty-two, and we'd come every Saturday for date night until I got too busy." She sighed, and her head dropped into her hands. "I'm sorry. You didn't sign up to listen to me reminisce. We haven't even...and I've already broken rules six and seven."

Nothing date-like, and no talk of past relationships. He stroked the back of her hand with his fingertips. Her skin was so soft. "Listen. This is our thing, and it can be whatever we want it to be. If you need a friendly ear, I'm fine with that. Sometimes it helps to talk to someone who's outside the situation."

"You are just as sweet as Emily said you were. But don't you have enough of your own stuff to deal with?"

"When did Emily tell you I was sweet?" She'd promised to stop interfering, and it wasn't like Em to go back on her word. He hadn't bothered getting Nicki to promise because he didn't want to make her a liar.

Kelly smiled. "Back in April when they first came into the boutique with her family. Jack and Curt came in with them, but they didn't stay. While they were here, they took pictures and signed autographs. I mentioned Jack and Curt were nothing like I would've expected from rock stars, and Emily said you were a real gentleman." Kelly sighed.

"Well, I won't pry, but if you want to talk..."

Kelly sat back. "We've been divorced for almost a year. It was amicable, but I haven't really gone out since. I just didn't think I'd be bombarded with memories after all this time."

Buzz sighed. He could tell her a little about his shit to ease her mind that her sharing was going to ruin their arrangement. “Yeah, my breakup was two years ago, and I still get hit with stuff. We were together for seven years. Since I got out of rehab, I haven’t dated anyone. I need to focus on my sobriety. I’m not at a place yet where I feel comfortable not putting all my energy into it, you know? I think you need to take as much time as you need to before diving back into dating. You’re clearly intelligent, young, beautiful, and very successful.” Buzz smiled and leaned in. “And any guy would be lucky to be with you. I find all that very, very appealing.”

So did his dick. Her scent intoxicated him. A gentle floral scent mixed with warm woman sent blood rushing through his veins, and every inch of his body was aware of her. His hands itched to explore her lush curves. Imagining how her purple skirt hugged her curvy ass sent more blood south. He should clean up his thoughts, but it had been so long since he’d felt desire this intense that he relished it. She was an amazing woman; she had it all, brains, beauty, compassion. Someday she’d make a lucky guy very happy.

“I have no intention of ever getting into another serious relationship let alone married again. And while I appreciate the compliment, you are a successful rock star. Even if you weren’t good-looking, which you totally are, you’d get any girl you wanted.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. But I met...my ex at nineteen. I never cheated, and it’s been maybe a year that I’ve started enjoying that particular perk. It’s fun, but once it’s over...” *Not too well thought out.* Nothing he could say wouldn’t sound like he was the asshole that Sally said he was.

Kelly tilted her head to the side, and her hair shimmered in the soft lighting. “You feel kinda lonely?”

“Yeah.”

“I understand that. Sexual attraction without even a small emotional connection doesn’t work for me.” Her eyes widened, like she’d let a cat out of the bag.

Buzz was quick to reassure her. “I agree. Well, sorta, it obviously *works* for me, but it’s not my ideal. And I’m glad you’re feeling that with me because I’m feeling it with you. I think that’s why friends with benefits is perfect for us. It’s the best of both worlds.”

Kelly nodded. “Okay, good. I didn’t want you to think I was looking for more because I’m not.”

Buzz raised his water glass and kept his voice low. “To friends with benefits.”

Chapter Twelve

Wow. THE AIR WAS HEAVY AND HOT. GAZING INTO BUZZ'S eyes, she was ready. Her heart pounded with the rightness of it. When they'd met, the sexual chemistry had been instantaneous.

Intense attraction swept through her.

Because Buzz wouldn't drink and his desire for her wasn't fueled by anything other than pure chemistry made this okay for her. She wouldn't look back after their time together and feel ashamed.

The atmosphere here had always been one of her favorite parts: warm, cozy, inviting. It wasn't on NY foodies' radar, so everyone was local, which was part of the charm. All she could think about was getting through dinner and back to her place. "You never did tell me your real name."

"Garth. It's my dad's name."

She tilted her head. "You don't look like a Garth." It was such a grown-up name to give a baby. Buzz suited him.

"What's a guy named Garth supposed to look like?"

Kelly giggled. "I have no idea. You said Jack gave you the nickname Buzz when you were five. I can't imagine how?"

"I don't tell this story. But since we're friends, I feel I can trust you." His brows waggled. He thought before he spoke. He did that a lot. "I had this bumblebee Halloween costume. I liked it so much I wore it all the time, so Jack called me Buzz, and the nickname stuck."

“You said it was better than your previous nickname. What was that?”

“Fart.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Oh no. You heard it right.” He used his finger to draw on the tablecloth the letters G, A, and S.

Kelly clamped a hand over her mouth. “Oh no. Your initials.”

“Yup. First day of kindergarten, the teacher made us name tags. She included every kid’s middle name, and this kid pointed and said my name was Gas. It didn’t take long for it to turn into Fart and every possible derivation. So when Buzz stuck, it was a relief.”

“Kids can be so cruel.” Kelly sipped her water. “When my brother was nine...we moved here.” Damn there was no way to tell this story without getting into the weeds of her life. “Uh, he was shy, and some bigger kids thought it was hilarious to teach him bad words.” Grams hadn’t seen the humor in it, and Kelly hadn’t at the time either, but in retrospect, it was kinda funny. She’d remind RJ about it the next time they talked. “We always stopped in at the bakery after school, and the place was packed. He points to our grandmother and says ‘Grams has tits.’ I thought she was gonna have a stroke. The women gasped and the men tried to hide smiles.”

“Oh, wow. Boys are terrible to each other.” Buzz laughed. “What’d she do?”

“She insisted he tell her who told him that word, washed his mouth out with soap, made him say an entire rosary, and she called all their mothers.”

Buzz laughed. “We grew up in that kind of neighborhood, too. My parents and Jack’s parents are best friends. They still go on vacations together.”

“Have you patched things up with your sister?”

“Not yet. I’m still feeling a little pissy with her.” A sad look passed over his face, but he shook it off.

Kelly's body was acutely aware of Buzz. His eyes never left her, and the gentle touch of his hand covering hers heated her blood. She was glad this place was within walking distance of her apartment.

The waiter arrived with their salads. His hand left hers, and she felt the loss of it. *Whoa*. She needed to be careful. She shouldn't be enjoying such a simple gesture from a guy she hardly knew. But holding hands was something she and Enzo had done all the time. It was more a boyfriend-girlfriend thing, and she'd do well to avoid it. She'd already broken two of her rules, but at least she hadn't told Buzz about Enzo's engagement and impending fatherhood. She got a small pain in her heart every time she pictured Enzo with a baby. If only she'd had these feelings years ago, maybe they'd have been able to work it out. Kelly groaned.

"Something wrong with your salad?" Buzz asked.

Her head snapped up. "Oh, no." She stabbed a piece with her fork and popped it into her mouth. This time, she moaned. "I don't know what Carmine's secret ingredient in the Caesar dressing is, but it's the best."

"Mmm."

They finished their salads, and the waiter returned with Buzz's fried calamari and her sea scallops in lemon sauce.

Buzz stabbed a piece of calamari, dipped it into the first sauce, and ate it. His face showed pure bliss. "Wow. The calamari is so tender, and what is that sauce? It's unbelievable." He gestured to the plate. "Take some."

Kelly put six on her bread plate, dipped one, and ate it. Her eyes widened. She should never have stayed away from here. "I have no idea, but I want a vat of it. Would you like to try the scallops?"

Buzz grinned and pushed his bread plate over. "I was hoping you'd offer. They look amazing."

Kelly put half on his plate and pushed it back.

Buzz cut a piece and ate it. "So good."

Kelly forced herself to keep the rest of the conversation on neutral topics while they finished their appetizers. It was harder than she expected. She found herself very curious about Buzz's life as a musician. Probably because he understood the artistic side of her in a way that no one else had before. Yeah, that was it.

"How was your day?"

"Busy." She took another calamari. "There was a bit of a dustup." She shook her head. "I had a customer escorted out by security."

"Why?"

"This mother of the bride was a complete bitch to my consultant. She started screaming at her in the middle of the salon because she'd checked her watch. This woman and her daughter have been in three times, and she's pushed to go over every time."

"And your consultant had another appointment waiting?"

"Yes. I tried to smooth it over, but this woman was just so nasty and entitled. She insisted on a custom appointment right then and there."

Buzz put his fork down. "She wanted you to stop what you were doing and accommodate her?"

"Yeah, and when I told her I couldn't but I'd put her on the wait list, she lost her mind." Kelly laughed. "Said she'd tell everyone she knew never to come into my boutique. I told her to do it. I'm not going to let her be abusive to me or my people. I don't care how much money she was going to spend. Her poor daughter was mortified."

"I'm guessing it was a lot?"

Kelly nodded. "She'd picked two out of three dresses."

"Why didn't she start with a custom appointment?"

"Because she didn't want to wait seven months for one." She shook her head. "I think the bride's mother figured she'd find a way around the waiting list by ordering off the rack and then backdoor into a custom, or maybe she liked all the

specialized attention and wanted to drag it out. Either way, I won't allow anyone to treat my people like shit."

The waiter cleared their plates and replaced them with their entrées.

"So," Kelly said. "Tell me what it's like to travel for a living."

Buzz wiped his mouth. "I love it. But it's always good to get back home. After a few weeks, I start to miss the road." He smiled.

Kelly's heart flipped. *Stop that.*

"By the time we leave, I'm so amped up to get back to performing for our fans. There's an energy playing live which nothing else compares to. When we're working on new songs, it's a totally different energy. It's just the four of us until we go into the studio. It bonds us in a way that gets stronger every year."

"You never get sick of each other?"

Buzz's brow furrowed. "Not really. We have separate tour buses now. When we traveled on the same bus, there'd be days being so confined we'd get pissy with each other, but nothing a couple hours apart wouldn't cure. And we never bring that shit on stage. It'd be unusual for it to even follow us into the band room pre-gig. On those rare occasions, whoever it was would have it out, say what needed to be said, and then it'd be over. Life's too long to let that shit ruin a brotherhood."

Kelly chuckled. "Don't you mean life's too short?"

Buzz took a sip of his water. "Nope. Life, being alive, is the longest thing any of us do."

"Well, that's a different take on it, I suppose." Kelly smiled. "Brotherhood?"

"Can't really think of a better word. We started as friends, but somewhere along our journey we became brothers." Buzz cleared his throat. "I can't imagine my life without them. I feel the same way about my sister." A sadness crept into his

expression. “How about you? Is it tough working with your sister?”

There really was no way any conversation wouldn't eventually lead back to a topic where deep emotions weren't involved. But they'd agreed on friends with benefits, so Kelly figured their friendship could last beyond the benefits portion of their agreement. At least until his friends' weddings were over. It *was* nice being understood. Nicki and Emily understood, too. Jenny had already blabbed about Kelly practically raising them, but Buzz hadn't asked, and she was grateful. She'd been lucky in that sense; when they'd been forced to move to Brooklyn, everyone already knew the entire horrible story. Even Enzo had respected her wishes to not keep picking at the wound that would never heal. “My sister and I are very close, and working together has been really nice.” They'd had a fight in front of Nicki and Emily, but even though they'd talked later, Jenny was still annoyed with her. “We've mostly been able to keep any personal issues out of the boutique. Everyone knows not to disturb us when the door's closed.”

A wicked, sensual grin spread across Buzz's handsome face.

Her low belly fluttered, and heat flared throughout her body. “We. Are. Not. Breaking. *That*. Rule.”

“What?” Buzz's expression turned innocent.

She narrowed her eyes. “You know what.”

“No idea.” Buzz ate a piece of his fish and smiled.

But his eyes held ideas. Naughty ideas. Ideas that made her wet. Kelly squeezed her thighs together. She could practically see into his mind. He was picturing them in her office. Her bent over her desk as he fucked her from behind. “Oh.”

“Now who has ideas.” Buzz winked and took a gulp of water.

There are no safe topics.

They enjoyed the rest of their dinner in relative silence, only the occasional food appreciation sound.

The waiter cleared their plates and used a crumb sweeper. “Dessert?”

Kelly’s eyes locked on Buzz’s. “No, thank you.” Normally she’d have tiramisu or tartufo, but tonight, she’d be having Buzz.

He nodded. “Just the check, thanks.”

The waiter returned and laid the check portfolio on the table next to Buzz. He slipped his credit card out before Kelly could protest, and the waiter left.

“What?” Buzz asked.

“I planned on paying.”

Laughter danced in his eyes. “Not a chance.”

He’d shaved and had gotten a haircut. He’d looked sexy with a little scruff, but cleanly shaven meant when he went down on her she wouldn’t get beard burn. At this rate, they’d never make it back to her place. Kelly mustered indignance. “But you’re doing me a favor, remember? Offering to be my guinea pig? Or was that an excuse?”

“No. Offer stands. I’m happy to help you. My lawyer said the contract’s fine, and I already signed it. And I do really need a tux for Jack’s and Curt’s weddings.” He leaned in. “And I’m paying for it.”

Kelly huffed. “You have no idea how valuable the service you’re providing is. I’m giving you the tux.” She wouldn’t allow him to change her mind.

The waiter returned, and Buzz signed and stood. He gently ushered her out of the restaurant.

She dug in, but it did no good. “We need to get this straight.”

He kept walking until he reached the side of the building. He pulled her around up against the brick and kissed her. Her brains scrambled the instant his lips touched hers, and she melted into him. She opened her mouth, and Buzz grinned as his tongue mated with hers. The warm night air swirled around them, bringing with it an awareness of the raw need in his kiss.

When he pulled back, his pupils were dilated. His breath came in short bursts, matching her own. "Sorry. I have been wanting to kiss you since you walked into the restaurant. You look good enough to eat." He pulled her closer, and his heart pounded against her cheek. "You're doing me a huge favor by making me a tux. Now I don't have to go shopping, which I really avoid at all costs."

She didn't believe that one bit. His gray slacks and navy polo were new and very high quality.

"Online shopping's my friend."

"Oh." Sudden nerves had anxiety tingling through her. "About the tux, it's going to take me a few months after we finalize your choice, but it'll definitely be ready for their weddings." The last words came out shaky. Kelly enjoyed being in the warmth and safety of a man's arms. She'd missed it. Almost as much as she'd missed the sex... Her body tensed.

"It's okay if you're having second thoughts." He exhaled slowly.

"I was just... It's been a long time since I've...been with..."

Buzz nodded. "We can wait."

She shook her head. "Don't want to. Just a little unexpectedly nervous." She felt how much he wanted her, and it inspired more confidence to shine inside her. The way he looked at her made her feel beautiful. She'd wanted to show him she had more to her wardrobe than black. And that he'd dressed up thrilled her. Not that he didn't rock jeans and a T-shirt, but a well-dressed man always caught her eye. He looked utterly edible. She moaned.

Buzz tucked her hair behind her ear. "Keep looking at me like that, and we won't make it back to your apartment."

Grinning up at him, she pushed away from the building and hooked her arm through his. "My thoughts exactly."

"Minx. I rented a car." He pointed across the street to the parking garage.

“It’s only a few blocks.”

Even though it was still warm, a gentle breeze cooled the heated air, but it did nothing to cool her skin. Or her boiling desire. By the time she put her key into the outside door to her building, she could barely stand. The anticipation had her knees feeling like jelly. With his hand on the small of her back, Buzz ushered her up the stairs.

He took her keys and unlocked the door, opening a bit so he blocked Sadie from shooting out. “Not tonight, Lady Sadie.”

Sadie mewed and disappeared back inside.

Kelly’s mouth hung open. Sadie never listened to her. But right now, she was grateful their long-awaited night wouldn’t be delayed searching for her naughty kitty.

Buzz pulled her inside, and as soon as the door was closed, he tugged her into his arms, and his lips crashed on hers. Kelly’s arms went around his neck, and he lifted her. She used to have a lamp on a timer so the kitties wouldn’t be in the dark when she worked late, but they’d broken it, and she hadn’t replaced it.

She flipped on the wall light switch. Four cats weaved around Buzz’s ankles. “Shoo.”

Buzz kissed a trail from her lips to her ear. “Do they need to eat?” His voice was thick with want.

She pressed her breasts into the hard wall of his chest. “I have one of those feeder things for nighttime because I sometimes work late.”

“Only sometimes?”

Kelly shrugged

Buzz groaned at the increased contact. “Fresh water?”

She’d changed clothes in her office so she hadn’t come home first. “Probably.” Her nipples were so hard they hurt. She wanted his mouth, his hands, on them. She wanted him inside her.

With tremendous effort, Buzz released her. “Stay right there.” He went into her small kitchen. The faucet turned on.

She walked to the doorway, not liking the distance between them. Her body ached. Buzz was washing their water bowls. “You don’t have to do that.”

“We’re going to be very busy for the next few hours. I want to make sure they have everything they need, because once I get you in the bedroom, I’m not letting you out.”

His ragged voice sent shivers of pleasure shooting to her pussy. How could a man look so damn sexy washing cat bowls? The kitties were at his feet, waiting for him to give them their due. He placed the bowls on the cat mat and crouched down. “Now listen.”

Eight furry ears perked up.

“We are going to need some privacy.” Buzz gave them a stern look. “I don’t want any of your kitty shenanigans interrupting us. That would make me very unhappy with you.” He pointed to each of them and then petted each for a few seconds. When he stood, his erection strained the front of his slacks.

He stalked toward her, his eyes dark with lust.

She’d never been more turned on in her life. Even in his strained desire, Buzz looked out for her kitties. A small bit of ice cracked off her frozen heart. There was something ridiculously sexy about a horny man in her kitchen being sweet to her cats.

Warmth spread from her chest throughout her body. She reached for him and pulled him down for a deep, wet kiss.

Easily lifting her, he carried her into the bedroom and shut the door. His lips and tongue worshipped at her mouth. She flicked on the switch, and a soft glow from the bedside lamp chased the shadows away. He set her down gently. His brown eyes darkened to near black. “You sure?”

She answered by cupping his cock through the fabric of his pants. “Very sure.” Part of her wanted to drop to her knees, unzip him, and suck his cock until he came in her mouth. But

she needed him inside her as soon as possible, so blowing him would have to wait.

Looking around her bedroom, Buzz's throat worked as he swallowed. "Wow. I half expected a mattress on the floor."

Kelly giggled. She couldn't blame him. Her hands went to his belt and slipped the end free. "I want you naked now." It had taken her years to be bold in the bedroom, and she'd half expected to be a little demure again. "I'm going to undress you." She wanted to have sex with Buzz, and she wanted him to talk dirty to her.

"The sooner, the better."

She undid the button and pulled his shirt free. As she lifted it, she kissed his bare skin. He smelled like hot male and soap. The spicy scent of his arousal had her mouth watering. She licked over his well-muscled abs while running her palms over his chest and lifting the shirt higher and higher until he grabbed the bottom and whipped it over his head.

Kelly took a step back to take in his magnificence. "Wow." She'd already seen his naked torso, but she was struck again by his muscled arms, broad shoulders, tight abs, and the thick dusting of dark hair covering his chest, tapering down his flat stomach and disappearing into the waistband of his pants. Her fingers traced the tattoo on his forearm.

"Baby, if you're gonna look at me like that and only touch my arm, I'm gonna fucking explode."

His cock pulsed behind the zipper. Kelly slowly lowered it, and he moaned as the fabric separated, easing the tension on his erection. "Better."

He shook his head. "Not better enough." A deep breath stuttered out.

She rubbed him through his underwear, loving the feel of his hard cock against her fingers. Loving the power he was allowing her over him. She'd spent more time than she had to spare daydreaming about what their first time would be like, but this hadn't been it. She'd imagined him taking the lead, but

this was turning her insides into molten liquid. Her pussy pulsed with need, drenching her silk panties.

Buzz inhaled deeply. “Mmm, you’re so fucking wet. My mouth is watering just thinking about licking your pussy.” His arms hung at his sides, but they swayed as if he was trying not to grab her.

“Oh.” Yeah, dirty talk. “Well, if you’re a good boy, I might let you before you fuck me.”

Buzz licked his lips. “Yes please. I need to fuck you so badly.” His head fell back. “I’ve wanted to fuck you since the first minute I saw you.” He let out an openmouthed breath. “Please take my pants off before I faint. Not a good look for a guy.”

Kelly hooked her fingers into the waistband of his pants and underwear and pulled them down.

“Oh, yeah. So much better.” He blew out another breath.

She made quick work of untying his shoes, and Buzz kicked off his pants and then toed off his socks.

While he stood before her completely naked, Kelly took a minute to admire his body. Every inch of him was toned. And it was all hers for the next few weeks.

“My turn,” he said, licking his lips.

Kelly swore she felt his tongue at her core. When he didn’t move, her confidence dipped. “We could turn the light off if you prefer?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed wildly. “No way. I want to see every glorious inch of you. I want to kiss and lick and nip you everywhere.” He exhaled a slow breath. “I need a few seconds.” Closing his eyes, he rolled his left shoulder then his right.

Kelly’s eyes slipped closed. He was trying to get his desire under control because touching her, undressing her, would be his undoing. A hot blush spread up her chest, neck, and to the top of her head. Every inch of her tingled in anticipation of his touch.

His eyes locked on hers, and he closed the inches that separated them. The heat coming off his body singed her.

“You are so sexy. When you walked into the restaurant, all the air got sucked out of my lungs.” His hand stroked her hair. “It’s like the finest silk.”

“Aren’t you going to undress me?”

“In due time.” His hands stroked down her arms and rested on her hips.

He was completely naked, and she was totally clothed, but the raw desire in his eyes made her feel naked. Like no matter what she wore, she couldn’t hide from him. “Please.” Every nerve in her body was begging for his hands, lips, and tongue to stroke her. Her eyes lowered to his engorged cock.

“I’ve wanted you for a long time. I don’t want to rush this. We’ll have sex many, many, *many* times, but we’ll only ever have one first time. I want to make it perfect for you.”

He couldn’t still think she had doubts? “I’m ready.”

He nodded slowly, ran his gaze up her entire body, and licked his lips. “Oh, baby, I know you are.” He inhaled deeply. “Mmm.” He licked his lips. “I want you to know you’re not some random woman I need to scratch an itch. Since the moment I laid eyes on you, you’ve filled my quiet time with your smile, your laugh. Your beauty.”

She’d never venture to guess how many women he’d slept with, but he wanted her to understand she was special. Having his considerable attention all focused on her made her feel that way. And very sexy.

His fingers went to the silk-covered buttons on her blouse. “Red is definitely your color.” Button by button, he revealed her. His breath caught when her sheer red bra was exposed. After he popped the last button, he walked around her so her back was to his front. He moved her hair over her shoulder to expose the soft skin of her neck. When his lips touched the delicate skin, she sighed. Nibbling her earlobe, he slid the blouse off her shoulders. His hands went around her waist and up her torso until they cupped her aching breasts.

“Lovely,” he murmured. He trailed his tongue along her neck as his thumb and forefinger pinched her nipples, sending an arc of awareness to her pussy.

He stepped back slightly, and she shivered. Slowly, he unzipped her skirt. His hands went to her hips, and with the slightest tug, the skirt fell to the floor. He took her hand, helped her step out of it, and turned her to face him.

His cock pulsed, and with his free hand, he stroked his shaft from base to tip.

“You like what you see?” Her voice didn’t sound like her.

“Oh, yes. Red matching bra and panties with black heels. I could come just looking at you.” He continued stroking himself. Still holding her hand, he raised his arm. “Turn in a circle.”

If he didn’t touch her soon, she was sure she’d combust. She’d never had such devastating need in her entire life. She did as he asked.

“Slower.”

When her back was to him, she wiggled her hips.

“Definitely the most fabulous ass I’ve ever seen. You’ve got it all, baby. Hips, ass, tits. I’m so close.”

Glancing over her shoulder, he continued stroking his dick. It was turning her on to the point where she could come watching him pleasure himself. But she wanted to feel him in her mouth, so she faced him, took two steps, and slid to her knees.

“No, no, no.”

Looking up from lowered lashes, she pouted. “Why not? It’s what we both want.”

His head fell back on a groan. “Yes, it’s true. I want to feel your warm, wet mouth on my cock. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve imagined your red lips devouring my dick. But”—he held out his hand—“I have one hard and fast sex rule. The woman always comes first. Maybe twice.”

She took his hand and stood.

His hands went to her hips, and slowly, his right hand caressed lower, slipping inside the top of her silk panties.

“Mmm.”

Cupping her pussy, he slipped one finger between her lips and stroked her aching clit.

“Stop teasing me.”

Buzz shook his head. His wicked grin sent tingles through her. “It’s not in the contract. Therefore and to wit, I can tease you as much as I want.”

“Okaaay.”

He pulled her into his arms, and his lips crashed onto hers. His tongue swept into her mouth, taking. Her sensitized nipples made contact with his chest, sending jolts of pleasure throughout her body. His hands slid around her body and beneath the silky fabric of her panties. His hands cupped her cheeks and kneaded her flesh.

Kelly groaned and held on to his strong shoulders.

Stepping back, he slid the straps of her bra down her arms.

“When did you...”

He waggled his brows.

Dropping to his knees, he kissed her belly then slid her panties off. “Leave the shoes on.”

Picking her up, he gently placed her on the bed. “Lie back for me.” He placed her feet on the edge of the bed. “Scoot forward.”

His hand caressed her calves as he leaned in and opened his mouth on her. His tongue flicked out, circling her clit. He pushed his thumb into her pussy as his lips closed around her distended clit, and he sucked gently. Her hips rose off the mattress, and her muscles strained. She was so close she had to pant to get enough air in her lungs. His tongue tortured her until she begged. “Buzz, please, I need to come.” She closed

her eyes, and bright sparks of light broke the darkness as her body tensed, and she cried out an intense climax.

Buzz left her, the bed dipped, and then she was in his arms. He cradled her as she slowly became aware of her body again. His strong arms held her firmly against a solid chest, and Kelly allowed herself to relax against him.

These were going to be the best weeks she'd ever had.

Chapter Thirteen

SHE LAY ASTRIDE HIM, AND BUZZ HELD HER WARM, SOFT BODY against his as she slowly recovered from her first orgasm. He loved that she'd worn sexy underwear. Buzz concentrated on the ceiling, because if he looked at her, he'd flip her over and take her. Since her long-term relationship had been a marriage, at least for now, she needed to set the pace. He had no idea how much sex she was used to, but he was pretty sure it wasn't going to be enough. Only weeks to revel in her lush curves and her sweet scent that amped up his already raging sex drive.

It wasn't just the eight weeks since he'd had sex. He'd gone ten months before he'd been confident enough to reintroduce sex back into his life. Every few weeks, he'd see a girl who'd sparked his desire, but the clawing fear that any deviation from his routine would cause him to relapse had doused his desire. Fear was a powerful motivator, and being back on tour had totally changed his structured routine after rehab. Slowly, he'd built a new one. He felt more in control when he knew what each day held. In four months, this tour would end, and he'd have to adjust again.

But right now, the most beautiful, intelligent, talented woman he'd ever met had allowed him to pleasure her, and that was a routine he'd thoroughly enjoy for the rest of their time together. Kelly's breathing slowed, and she nestled closer. He'd been glad Kelly hadn't had alcohol because he wanted her stone-cold sober for all the delicious things he had planned.

A soft meow came from the other side of the door. When Buzz glanced over, a stark white paw flailed back and forth under the space between the floor and the door. It would be nice to have a pet, but with their touring schedule, he'd never considered it. Since their girls would be traveling with them, Jack, Curt, and Elliot were buying their own tour buses. He hadn't seen the need to since he was alone, but he'd consider it for the next tour. Brian had found a company who built custom buses.

Kelly's cheek nuzzled his chest, and her eyes opened. "Oh, I'm so sorry." Red slashes covered her high cheekbones.

"Don't be. You'll need the rest for what I've got planned."

She rolled on her back and stretched, giving Buzz a full view of her naked body. His erection roared back to life until Kelly turned to face him. Her eyes were half closed with exhaustion.

She placed her palm on his thigh, just east of his dick. They'd left spending the night open-ended, but he really hoped she'd invite him to stay. If she didn't, he'd deal. But thinking about not getting to hold her incredible body next to his all night had his body deflating.

"Something wrong?" Her voice held concern.

He smiled and touched a section of her hair that hung over her shoulder. "Not really. Just a little disappointed."

"I said I was sorry I fell asleep." She made a grab for the sheet to cover herself, but Buzz wasn't having that.

"That's not it. Nothing like a little catnap after an intense orgasm. Or did I read your moans and cries wrong?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You're teasing me."

He nodded. "But I can see you're exhausted. And I think it'd be better to call it a night so you can rest up for tomorrow."

She sat up and huffed.

Her breasts were glorious, and he couldn't not stare. "You're not shy, are you? Because when you're naked around

me, I'm totally looking. Staring. Gawking. Touching. Sucking."

She moaned. "Well, no, not really. I'm comfortable with my body. I know I'm not perfect—"

Buzz sat up and took her lips. She opened to him, and he invaded her mouth, tasting the soft skin. When he pulled back, he gasped for breath. No woman had ever left him breathless before. "You *are* perfect. Not an imperfection anywhere I can see."

She bit her upper lip. "Then why do you want to leave? We haven't even..."

"Fucked yet?"

Kelly's eyes closed as heat crept up her neck. When she opened her eyes, they were dark. She exhaled a slow breath that ended with a "Yeah."

He scooted closer and pulled her into his arms. "We will. But I think you need sleep first. I'd like to stay the night, but we didn't nail down that particular detail. So yea or nay?"

She melted into him. "I'd really like you to stay."

"Good. Now that's settled, get under the covers." He flicked the lamp off and pulled the sheet and light blanket over them.

A chorus of "meows" came from behind the door. Sadie's was the loudest. Buzz smiled. "Let me guess, they have free run of the place twenty-four seven?"

"Of course. But I understand if you don't want them in here. Satan might try to off you in your sleep."

Buzz laughed. "Not me." He got up and stretched and pulled his underwear on. "Just to be safe." After he opened the door, four cats flew into the room and onto the bed. "You have to share her tonight." Slipping back into bed, he got comfortable, pulled Kelly into his arms, and sighed. This was nice.

Chonkers and Squdgy curled up on her other side, and Mr. Darcy nestled at his feet. Sadie walked up his body and over

his shoulder, plopping on the other side of his head, and purred.

“Wow, she really likes you,” Kelly said, her voice thick with sleep. She sounded a little jealous.

He'd made the right call. He wanted her, but he also wanted her eager participation. Maybe he'd get her to slow down a little. Buzz really did understand. There was always something she could be doing. He was just what she needed to get more life in the work-life balance.

Buzz woke in the early hours as the sun crept in around the seams of the frilly, white curtains. In addition to everything else, he'd been having trouble sleeping, but he'd slept straight through. Kelly lay against him, snoring softly. Even the cats were still sleeping. Shifting to get more comfortable, she stirred next to him, making little sounds, and his morning erection throbbed.

He wasn't sure how she'd feel about him waking her for sex, but he needn't have worried. Her hand resting on his chest began slowly making its way below the covers, down the waistband of his underwear, and gently curled around his cock. “Mmm.”

“Mmm-morning.”

“So far so good.”

Kelly disappeared under the covers, and Buzz lifted his hips as she tugged his undies down. He held his breath until he felt her warm, wet mouth on his cock.

“Ohhh.” Not that he didn't want her to blow him, but he needed to fuck her. He'd dreamed about it many nights, including last night, and it was long past time to make it a reality. He'd placed a few condoms on the nightstand.

Tossing the blanket aside, Buzz watched his dick slide in and out of her mouth. “Fuck, that's hot.”

Sadie's tail landed next to his face, reminding him they weren't alone. “Hold up, baby.” When Kelly moaned, it took every ounce of his control to not explode in her mouth. “You don't play fair.”

Her sassy grin as she sat back made it hard to remember what he wanted to do. That and her tits were glorious.

“*Mrow.*”

“Satan, beat it and take your minions with you,” Kelly said, giving Darcy a gentle push on his behind.

“Don’t be like that.” Buzz swung his legs over the side and stood. “Come now, good kitties.” He stopped at the door and waited for the cats to exit before gently closing it. “Now you’re all mine.” He stalked to the bed. Kelly went up on her knees and met him at the edge. Buzz pulled her into his arms and groaned. Nothing felt better than naked woman against his flesh. His mind flashed through all the ways they could proceed, his dick pulsing at the possibilities.

She pulled him down and kissed him hard. His heart pounded in his chest. She pushed him onto his back and climbed on.

“Damn, I love a woman who knows what she wants.”

“You’re not upset I’m taking the lead?”

“Uh, no. Nothing sexier than a woman strutting her power.” Kelly was undeniably appealing. She was sexy, and she wanted him. He reached for a condom, but it wasn’t on the nightstand. He sighed. “Which one of you naughty kitties knocked the rubbers on the floor?” he asked toward the closed door.

Kelly chuckled. “We don’t need it.”

Buzz blew out a breath as more blood raced to his cock. “You sure?”

Kelly licked her lips. “Well, I’d planned on teasing you some more, but I can’t wait to feel you inside me.” She centered her body over his cock and slid down inch by inch until he was fully inside her. “Oh.” Her muscles contracted around him, but he had a way to go before he’d have to come. He’d love to get her off again.

She tilted her hips and slid up and slowly back down.

Buzz's hands went to her breasts. They filled his hands and then some, and he rolled her nipples between his thumb and finger.

“Oh, yes.”

Her chest, neck, and face had the most delightful flush. Her muscles tightened again, and Kelly's head went back as she let out a long moan.

“You are so fucking beautiful when you come.” He sat up, and that drove his cock deeper into her hot, wet pussy. This time, he moaned. “You feel so damn good.”

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen.”

“Stop apologizing. You're not done, are you?”

“No, but I owe you one. Now two.”

He shook his head and brushed her hair off her face. “You don't owe me anything. I like getting you off, and any self-respecting man gets his lady off as many times as possible. It shouldn't ever be tit for tit.”

She chuckled. “I think you mean tit for tat.”

He stared at her breasts. “I don't know.” He tilted his head, stared at her left breast, then at her right. “Two perfect tits.”

Kelly grinned. “Either way, I love the way you think. But ___”

Whatever she was about to say got lost when his lips closed around her hard, rosy nipple. Her chest arched closer to him, and he fondled her other breast while sucking and teasing her.

She flexed her inner muscles as she moaned.

He caressed a path to the back of her head, and his fingers threaded through her thick hair.

Her hands moved to either side of his face, her mouth crashed onto his, and her tongue delved in. Their tongues clashed. She tasted like honey.

As good as this felt, the need to move inside her overwhelmed him. He flipped her so she lay on her back, and Buzz positioned himself over her. Closing his eyes, Buzz slid deep, and his mind shut off. There was only Kelly. He inhaled her scent: spicy, raw, feminine. He opened his eyes and pounded into her. She drew her knees up, and he slid balls deep. Kissing her with a wildness he'd hardly ever felt before, Buzz upped the pace until he came hard as Kelly screamed out her second orgasm. Careful not to collapse on her, he rolled to the side, and Kelly immediately snuggled into him, throwing one leg over his. Sleep tugged, and Buzz gave into it.

The next time he woke up, bright beams of sunlight poked through the sides of the curtains and reflected off the large mirror over the dresser sending prisms of color onto the pale-lavender walls. Careful to get out of bed so as not to wake her, Buzz pulled his underwear and pants on. The cats loved him, but he wouldn't take any chances in case they were pissy about being kicked out of bed early in the morning. He quietly opened the door enough to slip out and close it. She kept long hours and deserved the rest, and he didn't want the kitties waking her. He used the bathroom, and when he opened the door, the cats were there.

Sadie meowed.

"You guys hungry?" Buzz smiled, scruffed each a few times, and went to the kitchen to get them fresh water. The drying rack had four white bowls with paw prints. Buzz opened cabinets until he found their food. Two at a time, he placed the bowls on the floor, and they rushed in, Sadie getting there first. She hissed as the other cats approached.

Buzz squatted down and stroked her. "That's not nice." Sadie's back arched into his palm. Buzz picked up her bowl and went into the living room and sat. "Sadie, come." He placed her bowl on the floor between his feet, and she shot over. The other three went into the kitchen. "It's okay, little girl. I understand. Your mommy told me you lived in an abandoned building. You probably had to scrounge for food, and even though that was a while ago, you're still afraid this will be taken away from you." She stopped eating, and her sad

blue eyes locked on his. When she finished, she jumped on to the cat tree and bathed. The other cats joined her a minute later.

He opened the fridge, half expecting there would only be ketchup, but Kelly had everything he needed. He grabbed a carton of eggs, milk, butter, and a loaf of bread. He checked the freezer, but there was no bacon. He'd pick some up. He wasn't a chef by any means, but breakfast was his specialty, and on the road, he cooked for the crew on his bus. He kind of missed the days when it had been the four of them. He was starting to feel like the seventh wheel.

Mixing the eggs in a bowl, Buzz poured them in the hot buttered pan. He placed four slices of bread in the toaster oven. The only other appliances were an old microwave, which wasn't even plugged in, and a coffee maker. After he set the coffee to brew, he got juice out of the fridge. Searching through nearly empty cabinets, he only found one wineglass and one regular glass. She had three mismatched plates, one bowl, no spoons, two forks, and one knife. She had no napkins, so he took a few paper towels and folded them.

He supposed her ex took everything else, but Kelly was clearly doing well, and it made no sense she hadn't gotten at least a few pieces of furniture and maybe a set of dishes. There were no family pictures, but then she didn't have an entertainment center or even a coffee table to put them on. And she had cats who were notorious for knocking everything off every surface.

The only pictures on the walls were hand drawn and stuck up with masking tape. Kelly's designs, but none of them were wedding dresses. Flowy skirts, blouses, and dresses, some black-and-white, and some she'd penciled in color. He moved several sketch pads on the folding table where a dining table should be, resisting the urge to open them. He wouldn't like anyone snooping at his lyrics, but then they were all on his phone. He never wrote them in notebooks the way the guys did.

As he finished up the eggs and toast, Kelly appeared in the doorway. Her hair was messy, her eyes sleepy, and she'd

pulled on a pink silk robe. Even though the belt was tied, her luscious breasts were barely contained, and his body's reaction was immediate.

"I never sleep this late." She rubbed her eyes. "I was going to make breakfast." She inhaled. "It smells delicious."

Buzz turned and bowed. "At your service. The cats have been fed, they have fresh water, and breakfast is ready. Nothing for you to do but sit and enjoy." He snickered. "And maybe buy a set of dishes and some forks, knives, and spoons."

"First of all, they have sentimental value, and second, it's just me. I hardly ever eat here. I can't remember the last time I even made coffee. It's easier to pick up something on my way to the boutique."

Buzz put his hands up and smiled. "Not judging. Let's eat." He pulled out a folding chair and Kelly sat. Her robe gaped, and he ogled her tits. "Mmm."

Kelly glanced up at him. "You keep looking at me like that, and we're skipping breakfast."

Her playful taunt turned him on. Everything about her turned him on. He was glad she didn't have any regrets. He poured two cups of coffee. "Milk, sugar?"

Kelly sighed. "I knew I forgot something. I don't have sugar. I hope milk's okay."

"It's fine. I'm easy."

"I'm not. I hate coffee without sugar and half-and-half." She dropped her head into her hands. "Maybe I'm not built for this."

"What?"

"Even casual hookups. The least I could do was offer you breakfast."

Buzz cupped her cheek and stroked it with his thumb. "You are most definitely built for sex. And that's all this is, so no harm, no foul. I'm used to making breakfast, and living on the bus with eight other guys and girls, improvising is a

necessary skill. Someone always finishes something off and forgets to write it on the shopping list. The only time it'll come to blows is the asshole who finishes the last roll of toilet paper. That's unforgivable." He handed her a mug of steaming coffee.

Kelly laughed. "In my house, first, it was reminding RJ to put the seat up, and then getting him to remember to put it down."

"My sister and I shared a bathroom. I left the seat up once." He put up his pointer finger. "Once."

"What did she do?"

Buzz took a bite of toast. Surely there was no harm in relating a funny story? "I was maybe five or six, and it was the middle of the night. She'd gone in after I forgot, and to get back at me for her butt taking a dunk, she got a glass of ice water and doused me while I was sleeping."

"Your parents couldn't have been okay with that."

"They weren't. Said she overreacted. She's always had one hell of a temper. She thought I deserved to know what it was like to sink into cold water when you're half asleep." His parents had been quite pissed with Stephanie. "It worked because I've never forgotten again."

"Thank you." She smiled and took a sip of her coffee. "Yeah, nope, can't do it." Her face scrunched. "But thank you. It was nice of you to make breakfast." She ate a forkful of eggs. "Wow. These are amazing." Her eyes misted over, and she turned her head away.

Buzz bit his toast, having every intention of not asking her what was wrong, but when she wiped a tear, his resolve crumbled. "Hey."

"I'm sorry."

"I know my eggs are second to none, but they've never brought anyone to tears."

"My ex-husband used to make breakfast every morning. He was always a morning person."

Buzz brushed her cheek with his thumb. “First time you’re saying it out loud?”

She nodded.

He’d been with Sally for seven years, and even though marriage had never come up, he’d thought they’d be together forever. If she’d wanted to get married, he would’ve. But they’d never talked about it.

Kelly cleared her throat. “You have girls sleeping on your tour bus?”



KELLY WANTED OFF THE SUBJECT OF HER EX.

Buzz smiled and took a sip of his coffee. “Yeah, I sleep on the bus with some of our crew since the guys got their own buses.”

“You didn’t want one?”

He shrugged. “Not necessary. There’s seven of us, and two bunks are for the drivers, but they sleep during the day.”

“How many women on your crew?”

“Several, but on my bus, it’s Val and Beth Pearlow, my drum tech and Elliot’s bass tech, and Viv, our tour manager’s assistant, who you met, and her fiancé, Holden, who is Jack and Curt’s guitar tech. Brian our tour manager and my bodyguard, Miller.”

“You have your own bodyguard?”

“Yeah, we all do since this tour. Jack had a bit of an issue with a crazed fan when the tour started. We’ve always had some security, but this is next level.”

“He’s not outside right now, is he?”

A deep rumble started in his chest, and he chuckled. “No. I get away with walking around unnoticed more than the others do. But on tour, we don’t go anywhere alone.” He shrugged. “Better safe than sorry, you know?”

Kelly made a face. "I'd hate that. No privacy? Uh-uh."

"I get all the privacy I need. When we're in a city for more than one night, we stay in hotels. The bus has two lounges, one in the front and a smaller one in the back. When I need alone time, I close the door to the back lounge. Everyone's respectful. And believe it or not, you get used to someone following you around. They kinda blend into the background."

Kelly laughed. "Not for Emily."

"Yeah, Em's different. Her uncle and her dad had a security business together before... She never forgets they're willing to put themselves in harm's way to protect her."

She took a bite of toast. "No kidding."

Buzz nodded. "Got Em'lied, huh? Yeah, she has insights that can be downright freakishly spot-on. But you should know she doesn't go butting into your life unless she really feels like she can help. There's not an ounce of busybody or gossipyness to her. She's a vault compared to Nicki."

"Yeah." Kelly felt more at home in her home than she had in longer than she cared to admit. She'd had a great night's sleep, and Buzz looked incredibly sexy wearing only his pants. He had an easy smile, and she was more relaxed around him than she'd have expected. There hadn't been any awkward moments, and last night had been nothing like her previous encounter, and she was grateful. Maybe now she'd put that awful night out of her mind for good.

She'd never been to a concert in her life. She and Enzo had been content to stay in once they'd moved into this apartment. On their wildest night, they'd have sex before dinner and after. Enzo loved Brooklyn, and he'd only ventured into the city to have lunch with her when she'd been a consultant at Clineman's, their annual visit to Rockefeller Center to see the Christmas tree and go ice-skating, and their honeymoon in Lake George at a cozy bed and breakfast.

With Buzz, what she saw was what she got. He wasn't a cocky rock star, and he'd allowed her to lead. Part of the attraction was he was a nice guy. He was thoughtful, and he'd

been very open about what he was looking for, which matched what she wanted. And the more she got to know him, the more she suspected maybe he still pined for his ex the same way she did for Enzo. No, that wasn't true. She pined for those first few years of marriage when they'd been so happy. She'd always love Enzo, but she told herself she wasn't still in love with him.

Why couldn't she have been normal and wanted normal things like kids? Maybe it was selfish, but it was better she'd understood that about herself before having kids who would only suffer when she chose building her business over being a mother.

Buzz paused mid-sip. "You okay?"

"Why would you want to get involved with a mess like me? You can have any woman you want for no-strings sex."

"You're the only woman I want. We're two adults who are sexually attracted to each other, and we're free to explore that attraction." He sipped his coffee. "And I think I can help you get a little balance in your life."

Kelly sniffled. "You don't need balance?"

"Of course I do, but I've been at this a little longer than you have. Life on tour is a different animal than off tour. I've got a routine that's really working for me, but when the tour ends, I'll have to figure out a new one." He shook his head. "But for this to work, it has to work for both of us."

"On paper, this was exactly what I wanted."

Buzz nodded. "It sounds to me like you'd like to spend time with me. I thought dinner was nice last night. Nothing wrong with two friends sharing a meal. But if eating out makes you uncomfortable or you're worried we'll run into more people you know, we'll stay in, order takeout, and have sex. Or we can just have sex."

"Why are you being so understanding?"

He rubbed a hand over his face. "Because when my relationship ended, I was you. I didn't want a new one, and I'd spent years fending off groupies because I was involved with

someone, but then I wasn't, and I had no interest in them anyway. A few months later, I ended up in rehab, and I had to figure out a new way to live my life. I needed to focus solely on how to exist sober, and then we started rehearsals for the tour. Once the tour started, it was a rough transition. I...had a few close calls, which terrified me because I thought I was over the worst of it. When I finally felt like I was ready for company, I felt awkward because we'd been together so long."

This was already a lot cozier than Kelly had anticipated. She'd expected more along the lines of they'd have sex and he'd leave. But waking up with a man was nice. He was right; they were free to explore and enjoy sex together. Wanting to spend the night with him didn't mean they were in a relationship. Neither did sharing a meal. "Wait a minute. Routine."

"What?"

"Maybe that's my problem. Let me think for a minute." She'd had to be very structured to open her business. It had taken her a long time to get used to leaving some tasks unfinished. But she'd been her only employee, which meant she handled all the business aspects as well as every appointment, until she'd been able to afford to hire another consultant. When everything she had to do was equally important, no task could be put off forever. Paying the bills, finding suppliers, and creating new designs all needed attention on a rotating basis. That first month had been a disaster, but once she'd gotten herself on a sustainable schedule, she'd been able to better juggle all the responsibilities of owning a business.

Kelly grabbed her phone and opened the calendar app. Creating a new event, she blocked out until September twelfth for Buzz time.

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Look, you'll probably think I'm crazy, but I think this would work better for me if we planned out our time together. I'm willing to ease up on my work schedule. I've already talked to Jenny about taking over some things for the duration. But I have a

responsibility to my people. It probably sounds dumb, but we're like a family. They all count on me."

A slow grin spread across Buzz's handsome face.

She wanted to lick his morning stubble.

"That's how it is with our crew. And you treating your staff like family instead of employees, well, that's oddly turning me on. It says a lot about you as a person. And we may be exploring the sexual attraction here, but I like you, and that's a bonus." His eyes glittered with lust. "Let me get my phone."

A rush of heat rose in her chest. She felt completely understood for the first time in her life. They spent the next half hour going over their schedules. There were some meetings and tasks she couldn't delegate, and Buzz had therapy, NA meetings, and studio time booked with the guys.

She smiled and placed her phone on the table.

"So, we good?" His brown eyes held lust.

"Yeah." Heat spread across her skin. She knew she was working too hard, but so far, she hadn't found a way to ease up. But committing to this time with Buzz could be just what she needed to build more non-work things into her life.

"You look good enough to eat."

A confident smile crossed her lips. "I was thinking the same thing." Standing, she untied the belt of her robe and let it open a little.

Buzz's pupils dilated, and he pushed his chair back from the table.

Kelly straddled him, and he pushed the robe off her shoulders. He took her nipple in his mouth and tugged lightly with his teeth. "Ohhh." She thrust her hands into his hair, tilting his head back and taking his mouth. She lost herself in kissing him.

Standing, Buzz carried her into the bedroom. The cats followed. Buzz turned with her still in his arms. "Be good kitties, and you'll all get pets when we're done."

When the cats stopped outside the door, Kelly smiled. “I cannot believe how they listen to you.”

Buzz grinned. “Are you going to be a good pussy and do what I say?”

Kelly’s belly fluttered in anticipation. “What do I get if I do?” Heat rushed to her core.

He sat on the bed, and she hooked her ankles behind him. He groaned at the intimate contact. “Guaranteed multiple orgasms.”

Kelly moaned. Now that she knew what to expect out of their time together, she relaxed. “What are the rules?”

“Whatever you need them to be.”

“I don’t understand.”

Buzz’s warm breath brushed her ear. “I want you to be utterly comfortable with everything we do. Nothing turns me on more than a woman who is true to her authentic self. You don’t need to worry you’re not enough for me because I think you’re perfect the way you are.”

“Why wouldn’t I be enough for you? What does that mean?”

“Sorry, it’s hard to make sense when I don’t have enough blood in my brain.” He kissed her gently behind the ear, and she shivered. “I don’t do comparisons. While we’re together, as far as I’m concerned there are no other women on the planet. I want to breathe you in and bask in your glorious beauty. I want to make you feel good, and I want you to tell me anything you want to try.”

Kelly mustered all her will and climbed off his lap. “I thought you were going to tell me what you want?” Her body ached with need. She let the silk robe fall to the floor. The cool air did nothing to cool her skin.

Buzz’s eyes glittered as his gaze raked over her naked flesh.

Every inch of her tingled.

Buzz licked his lips and glanced around the room. “Sit on the bed.” Standing, Buzz lowered the zipper on his pants and pushed them and his underwear off.

Kelly sat in front of him.

He took two steps so she was eye level with his hard cock.

Kelly inhaled. His musky scent made her pussy throb. She smiled, glanced up at him, opened her mouth, and took his cock all the way.

“Oh, yeah.” He widened his stance. “Yeah.” His words were slightly slurred. After a minute he blew out a long breath. “You like it from behind, baby?”

Kelly nodded, his dick still in her mouth. She ran her tongue along his thick shaft.

Buzz cupped the back of her head and stroked her hair. “Good. ’Cause I’m gonna enjoy my dick in your sweet mouth for another minute.” He moaned again. “Maybe two.” His eyes closed. “Then you’re going to get on all fours, and I’m gonna fuck you.”

Her nipples puckered, and a rush of molten liquid headed south. “Oh.” Kelly closed her eyes, clasped the base of his dick with her hand, and stroked him with her hand and mouth.

“Stop, stop, stop.” He pulled out. “Damn.” He took a few openmouthed breaths. “Oh, that was close.”

Kelly pouted. “I wasn’t done.”

“Mmm, later. For sure. But I want you to come on me.”

She took his offered hand and stood. His hands cupped her breasts, and she sighed. When his thumbs stroked over her nipples, she gasped.

“Mmm, so responsive.” He lifted her and set her on the bed. “I’m gonna eat your pussy.”

“I thought you wanted to fuck me from behind.”

“Gonna do that too. I promised you multiple orgasms, remember?”

She nodded and lay back. Buzz kneeled and then his mouth and hands were on her. "So beautiful." His tongue swirled around her aching clit, and he pushed two fingers inside her. Kelly's back arched off the bed. Her hands fisted in the sheets.

He hooked a finger and hit her in just the right spot while flicking her clit with the tip of his tongue. Kelly clutched the sheets as her climax crashed over her. "Oh, Buzz."

He moaned and shot to his feet.

Even though her limbs felt like wet noodles, Kelly mustered her strength and rolled on to all fours. Buzz rubbed his hard cock between her legs, coating himself in her juices.

He gripped her hips as he stroked them both. One hand cupped her left cheek. "I love your ass. It's fucking perfect."

When the thick head of his cock stroked her clit, she cried out as another orgasm overtook her.

Buzz leaned forward and kissed his way up her back, nipping at her shoulder, then up to her ear. "That's two. Ready for number three?"

"Uh-huh."

Buzz straightened, and with one thrust, he entered her to the base of his cock.

Her inner muscles contracted around him, and Kelly closed her eyes and exhaled a slow breath. Buzz thrust in and out at a leisurely pace. Having just come twice, she'd have thought she'd need more time, but she was already so close.

"That's it, baby, squeeze me. Harder."

She did and Buzz growled.

"Fuck, yeah, like that. Again."

He withdrew and pushed back in all the way again while Kelly clamped on to his dick. The added friction was driving her mad, and she pushed back to meet him thrust for thrust.

Buzz's pace increased. "Come for me."

Kelly glanced over her shoulder. The wild, crazed expression on Buzz's face excited her, almost pushing her over the edge. "You first."

He shook his head. "Come. For. Me. Now."

She couldn't hold out any longer, and her climax tore through her. She felt it in every cell of her body, as if she exploded and then reassembled.

Buzz thrust faster and growled as he came. He collapsed on the bed next to her while pulling her into his body. "That was fucking incredible."

Kelly nodded.

She was going to ride this rock star every chance she got.

Chapter Fourteen

BUZZ TOOK A QUICK SHOWER AFTER HIS WORKOUT. HE HAD AN hour before he was due to meet the guys in the studio. He'd spent a lot of time this week playing his electronic kit, but he couldn't wait to get back behind his acoustic. His hands itched to *really* play.

Other parts of him itched to see Kelly again. The sex was off the charts, and he truly enjoyed her company. Whenever they saw each other at night, he'd slept over, and waking up with a woman whom he had a connection with besides sex was so much better than waking with one he didn't. It could get awkward with one-nighters. But he and Kelly had settled into a nice routine. She'd normally be out of her apartment by six thirty, but the last two days, Kelly hadn't left until almost nine. And always with a smile on her face.

They had two weeks left, and a contentment he'd never felt before had settled in. He hadn't even cared when Sally had called him out of the blue to tell him she was getting married. He'd gotten the impression she'd called to gloat, but he'd wished her well and hung up.

He was finally over that relationship.

Kelly had plans with her brother and sister for dinner tonight, which worked out because he'd be in the studio until late. When they'd planned out their time together, she hadn't complained about his time with his bandmates, and he wasn't used to that. His ex had known it was part of his career but still had given him shit over it.

Buzz took a cab to the studio and arrived early because with traffic in New York, there was no telling how long it would actually take. He only had to wait ten minutes for their time.

As he passed some guys leaving the studio, one said, “Whoa! Buzz Stewart.” He gulped. “Dude, you’re the reason I became a drummer.”

Buzz smiled. “Wow, thanks, man.” Being the inspiration for another musician was a heady feeling. He offered the guy his hand.

The guy was so totally starstruck, he hesitated. “Really?”

“Sure.” Had he ever been so at a loss? Probably. He’d been lucky when he’d met two of his inspirations. They’d been really nice, even taking a couple of minutes to talk music. Way better than an autograph. Buzz never understood the guys who were dicks to their fans or other musicians. But it happened.

The guy finally shook his hand.

“What’s your name?”

Looking even more shocked, the guy said, “Mark. Mark Lester.”

“Nice to meet you. What kinda kit you got?”

They spent the next few minutes chatting about equipment.

“Buzz, we’re ready for you.”

Mark looked down. “Oh, man. Sorry to hold you up.”

“No worries, dude. It was nice talking to you.”

A silly grin curved Mark’s lip. “You made my year.” He pumped Buzz’s hand again and caught up to his bandmates.

Buzz strode into the studio and took a deep breath. “Ahh, home.” The scent of electricity in the air, the heat radiating off the overhead lighting, and wires all over the floor curling like dozens of snakes were second to none.

After he’d recovered from his knee surgery, he’d had to make several adjustments to his kit setup and how he played.

He'd always been exclusively heel up on his bass drum, but keeping his foot on the pedal with heel down was less stress his knee. About six months ago, he'd begun switching back and forth on pedal technique because he'd wanted to be flexible on acoustic songs when heel up worked better for him. He'd adjusted the height of his throne and distance from the drums. By making small adjustments to the height of the snares and toms, his kit felt more like an extension of himself. Buzz had expanded his left foot techniques for the hi-hats.

Since taking better care of his body to better handle drumming, he was conscious of how his breathing and muscle tension altered his playing. He became acutely aware of how holding the sticks affected his wrists, forearms, and shoulders, and how even his groin muscles came into play from his legwork.

Buzz had never played better. His mind and body hadn't been the only things drugs had fucked with. He'd come to realize the toll it had taken on his playing.

He smiled when Elliot entered with his bass. "Hey." It was good to get breaks from each other after being on tour for months at a time. They never needed as much time apart as some bands did.

They fist-bumped.

"Brother, you look good," Elliot said. "Knee?"

Buzz nodded. "Like new. Think I got the right combination of therapies down to keep it in shape. How's my nephew?"

"Come to dinner and find out. He misses you."

"Yeah right. More like you miss free babysitting."

Elliot's eyes clouded over. "Not free...trusted. He does miss you."

Oddly, Buzz really missed the little guy. "Problem?" He'd known Elliot most of his life, and something in his tone set off alarm bells.

"Been some paparazzi spotted in town. No one's given out our address, but I feel violated. I mean, don't they get enough

access to us when we're on tour? Aren't we entitled to our off time in peace?"

"Yeah, man, we are." Pine Hill was a nice town filled with mostly nice, hardworking people who didn't need that shit.

"We love it, but now I get why people have fences. I don't want to live in a fortress, but I want them safe, you know? Siobhan thinks I'm overreacting." He held up his thumb and forefinger an inch apart. He scoffed. "You know, I kinda hated growing up there. Not many kids with divorced parents, let alone somewhat famous ones who fucking hate each other."

The Blacks had been in a popular East Coast band together before settling in Pine Hill with Elliot's older brother Kenny after the band had broken up. They'd been a one-hit wonder, which his dad had blamed his mom for because she'd been the one to give up when she'd gotten pregnant with his older brother, and she'd refused to give the band another shot after Elliot had turned two, so he'd left and taken Kenny with him. Their bitter divorce had scarred Elliot. Even after all these years, his parents couldn't stand to be in the same room together. They'd sat on opposite sides of the reception at their wedding and separately visited their grandson. After his mom had remarried, Elliot had spent more and more time at Jack's house jamming. Curt was a year younger than them, but they'd needed another guitar player, so they'd let it slide.

"You thinking of moving?" Buzz asked.

He nodded. "Hence Siobhan thinking I'm overreacting." He smiled. "Don't get me wrong, my in-laws are great, always offering to babysit, but..."

"But?"

"Her mom's driving her crazy. Everything Siobhan does is the wrong way, and they've been bitching at each other nonstop. The last fight was over Jason's socks. Socks!" He sighed. "When we bought the house, I figured it'd be a good thing for her to be close to her family because I was away so much, but now..."

"Too close?"

“Yeah. Siobhan doesn’t want to move. And her mom’s still pissed she took Jason on tour. Says that’s no life for a baby and we’re being selfish.” Elliot cracked a small smile. “Do not tell my wife she doesn’t have the best interests of our kid at heart. Whoo, her Irish exploded all over Maeve. Suffice it to say her mother will never say it again if she knows what’s good for her.”

“What about Siobhan’s dad? Where does he stand on all this?”

“As far back as possible. He knows his wife and daughter well enough not to try to referee. That way lies madness.”

Buzz laughed.

Jack and Curt walked in. “Hey.”

Everyone exchanged fist bumps and hugs.

“How’s the apartment?” Curt asked. “Piss off all my neighbors yet?”

“Nope, got an electronic drum kit so they don’t hear shit. It’s been great not staying in a hotel.”

Curt grinned. “Like it enough to buy it?”

Buzz shook his head. “I need more space. A yard.”

“Gotcha. Sorry to bust up your enjoyment, but I got an offer.” He glanced away. “It’s almost double what I paid, and they want to close by the end of the month.”

“Do what you gotta do.” Buzz smiled. “I’ll figure something else out.” Buzz winced.

“What?”

He scoffed. “Just amazed at how quick I got used to having a home base again. Whatever. I’ll go back to The Yorkshire.”

Curt nodded. “Sucks, I know.” He shrugged. “I can try and push the move out until the fifteenth.”

“You can always crash with us,” Elliot said. “Siobhan would love to have you, and like I said, Jason misses Uncle

Buzz.”

“You sure you don’t want to check with your wife first? That’s Marriage 101, isn’t it?”

Elliot clapped him on the back. “For rookies, but Siobhan and I have been married for over seven years, and I know her better than anyone else. She’d be happy for you to stay with us.” Elliot shrugged. “Plus, she already told me so.” He looked at Curt. “You really got an offer on the place, or is this another one of Nicki’s matchmaking machinations to push Buzz and Kelly together?”

“Dude. I’m not that pussywhipped. Even Nicki has her limits to how far she’ll go.”

They all burst out laughing.

“Okay, so maybe I haven’t actually seen that limit yet, but I know it’s there. Besides, she’s only doing it because she truly believes you and Kelly are meant to be.”

“Yeah, I know. She calls me every few days to remind me of that.”

Curt shook his head. “Wow, I had no idea. I’ll talk to her.”

He clapped Curt’s shoulder. “Don’t bother. It’s fine. I really do know she means well. And it’s kinda nice she’s checking up on me. It’s not like she only asks about Kelly. She also recommended a medicinal herbalist a friend of hers uses who may be able to help with any pain I have once we’re back on tour, which I completely appreciate. She’s very sweet, and it’s truly impossible to stay mad, or really even *get* mad, at her.”

“Don’t I know it.”

The PA crackled. “You guys almost ready?” the studio producer asked.

The sounds of his brothers readying their instruments for their first jam in weeks had his blood pumping furiously through his veins. He sat on the throne and began his warm-up. With each strike of the sticks, he became more and more invincible.

“Dude!” Jack yelled.

Buzz’s head shot up. “What?”

“We’re trying to tune here.”

They all laughed. Drummers were notorious for disturbing the tuning of their bandmates’ instruments with their own warm-ups. “Sorry.” He grinned. “Not sorry.” He closed his eyes and tapped the pedal on the bass drum over and over. “I’ve missed that sound, that feeling.” Nothing replaced the vibrations transferring to his body while drumming. He’d paid a lot for the top-of-the-line electric kit, but nothing beat acoustic. Guitar players wouldn’t agree. Or bass players.

Jack pulled out a notebook and his tablet. “I put all the WAVs you guys sent with your parts of the three songs on here and lined them up. It’s only the rawest of the raw, and they sound fucking incredible.”

Buzz looked at his friends. These moments, the new beginnings of another album, taking new ideas from embryo to full-on screaming baby, were what he lived for. Buzz had run through Jack’s vocals only once or twice to get the ideas flowing, working in the background. He did his best work, came up with his best riffs and fills, when they were all in the same room. He and Elliot spent a lot of time playing off each other, as did Jack and Curt, and then they’d put the pieces together, riff some more, and keep the process going until they had the finished song. Then after Jack’s vocals were laid over, they’d tweak anything that wasn’t quite right.

They’d learned early on never to give up on their gut feelings where songwriting was concerned. That wasn’t to say they didn’t abandon some songs that just weren’t working. But it was the last resort.

The five hours they booked flew by. They were so in the groove they didn’t even break for dinner. Who needed food when music fed their souls?

Buzz rubbed his knee.

“Pain?” Curt asked.

He removed his hand. “Uh, no, actually.” He grinned. “Force of habit.” He stood and stretched. He walked around the room, and his knee didn’t even have a twinge. Another perk of knowing Emily was her brother Eddie. Being a physiotherapist and having his own pain issues, he’d turned Buzz on to a lot of alternative therapies. While they might not be accepted by Western medicine, Buzz had tried many and seen results even his orthopedic doctor couldn’t pooh-pooh away.

“We are definitely doing things different on the next tour,” Jack said. “That reminds me, Dex said he’ll be flying in to discuss Harmony’s offer once he’s gotten them good and wound up.”

Buzz chuckled. “I’m glad he’s on our side.”

“No shit, right?” Curt said. “He’s got four out of the five top bands under his management. He didn’t get there by being nice.”

Elliot snorted. “I almost feel sorry for Harmony.” He snickered. “Not really.”

Dex was a shark when it came to getting his bands the best deal, but he also had a softer side. Like when he’d finally told Dex about his dyslexia, Dex provided a secure link to every document so Buzz could use the read aloud feature on his computer or phone before signing. And when he’d visited Buzz in rehab, he had told him to do what he had to do and he’d handle the record company and the media and postpone the tour if need be.

The PA crackled. “Buzz, I got a spot in the back if you’d like to keep your kit here so you don’t have to lug it back and forth,” the producer said.

“That’d be great, thanks.” Buzz broke down his kit and packed it up.

“Another reason not to be a drummer. Dude, it takes you *forever* to load out your shit,” Elliot said. “I’m starving. Wanna grab dinner?”

“Sure thing.” Buzz stashed his kit and met the guys out front.

“Where you wanna go?” Jack asked. He turned to Curt. “You lived closest. What’s good?”

“No fancy shit,” Elliot said. “I want real food.”

“There’s a Thai place...” Curt couldn’t hold back a grin.

“You know I hate weird food. If I can’t identify it, I’m not eating it.”

Buzz felt bad for him. Elliot’s parents had done a lot of damage, but this particular bit was courtesy of his father’s third wife who’d grown up in Peru. Every Christmas since their divorce, Elliot and his brother swapped parents. When he’d been eleven, his stepmother had made guinea pig for Christmas, which was a very common protein in her country, only she hadn’t told Elliot what it was until after he’d eaten it. Chuckles, his pet guinea pig, had died the summer before, and Elliot promptly puked up his dinner. His old man had played dumb about the incident, but Elliot had later learned he’d wanted to toughen him up. For two years, Elliot had refused to see his father, and by then, he’d moved on to wife number four. Almost twenty years later, even Siobhan hadn’t been able to get him to vary his diet.

Jack smirked. “Thai food too exotic for ya? What about Italian?”

Elliot gave him the finger. “Don’t be a dick.”

They laughed.

“There’s Chinese and Italian a few blocks from here. Or burgers and steaks,” Curt said.

Elliot took a deep breath. “Is Thai like Chinese?”

“I was just busting your balls,” Curt said.

“Yeah, I know, but I’m trying to do better for my kid. I know he’s still a baby, and Siobhan is his main food source, but I don’t want him to grow up like me. Being afraid of food is... It feels stupid and irrational.”

“Dude. You blow me away.” Buzz envied the changes Elliot had made since learning he’d be a father. He pushed himself to be better than his father, not that it would take much, but Elliot was dealing with his shit head-on, and Buzz was proud of him.

Jack gripped Elliot’s shoulder. “Jason is a long way off from eating exotic foods. No reason to throw yourself headfirst. Take baby steps.”

Elliot grinned. “Speaking of baby steps, Siobhan thinks he’s gonna be taking his first ones soon. He’s been holding on to the couch to stand and move to the other end. Any day now.” Elliot’s eyes glowed.

“He’s only eight months. Isn’t that early?” Curt said.

Buzz grinned. “Something you want to tell us, buddy?”

Curt shoved him. “No. Nicki’s doing research, and we chat about it over dinner.”

“Good. You know what they say about babies having babies.”

Curt flipped the bird.

“Eight months is early, but Jason’s exceptional. Just like his mama.” Elliot grinned. “And yes, she’s pregnant again. But don’t say anything. We haven’t told her parents yet.”

They congratulated him.

“Let’s celebrate. I’m pretty sure the Chinese place has some Thai and Japanese food,” Curt said. “We’ll order family style...”

“Thanks.” Elliot kicked his heels. “Let’s rock and roll.”

After dinner, they went back to Buzz’s place and worked on another new song inspired by Elliot’s determination to resolve his issues so he didn’t fuck up his kids. Jack started writing down a few words over dinner, and by the time they left well after midnight, they had the bones in place to another song.

Buzz locked the door behind his friends. He should be exhausted, but he was still amped up from their two jam sessions.

He grabbed a bottle of water, flipped off the lights, and sat on the sofa. He channel surfed for a while, but nothing grabbed his interest. His brothers going home to their ladies had an unexpected pang of jealousy stabbing his chest. He wasn't ready for anything serious, and his arrangement with Kelly was working out better than he'd hoped it would. Just thinking about her had blood rushing south. But the last thing he needed was another responsibility. And having a relationship was a gigantic one.

Words swirled around in his head, so he hit the speech to text app on his phone.

Sitting in the dark, waiting on the day to begin

Going over all the things I've done with sin

It's grinding me down and stealing my time

Stop looking back to escape the past's vines

The times that I laugh

The times that I cry

Doing whatever to cope with the lies

All the things, good and bad

All the things, old and new

All these things have brought me to you

He tapped stop. No. Not to Kelly. They were having a really good time. The sex was great, and they were friends. But they weren't a couple. He hit record.

All the things, time to forgive the past

He needed to stay grounded and focus on his health and sobriety. Then whatever was leftover went to the band. She'd be having dinner on Sunday at her grandparents' house. His mom had wanted him to come to dinner, but he wasn't ready to deal with another round of Stephanie's anger. He deserved it, but mentally, he wasn't prepared for it. The night of their fight, he'd had the urge to deal with it by popping a few pills, and if Kelly hadn't needed help with her wayward kitty, Buzz wasn't sure he wouldn't have caved. He'd talked about it in therapy, but if one fight with his sister could send him into a spiral, for now at least, he'd avoid her until he was strong enough to take her anger without undoing all his hard work.

Buzz was fine by himself. He actually needed time alone in peace and quiet. Which reminded him, he needed to vacate his current digs. If his sister wasn't staying at his parents' house, he'd go there. He'd hang out in the back yard so nature could work her magic, but with his sister's current state, that wasn't an option. Elliot had offered, but if he crashed there, his parents would be hurt. They knew he was looking for a place in the city, so when he'd told them he'd be apartment sitting for Curt, they hadn't thought twice about it.

He did miss his nephew. Maybe he'd take Elliot up on his dinner invitation on Sunday.

Chapter Fifteen

KELLY COULD GET USED TO THIS.

Waking up to a warm, hard man, snuggled up close, cupping her breast in one hand and stroking her clit with the other, put a smile on her face.

Buzz kissed her neck below her left ear, sending shivers to her toes. “Oh, B.”

“Mmm,” Buzz chuckled. “Can’t even get my whole name out? Ha, ha, my evil plan is working.”

“Evil plan?”

He nipped her earlobe gently with his teeth as his fingers continued working their magic. “Steal all your words so you cannot make excuses why we can’t spend the entire day in bed. Mwah ha, ha, ha, ha.”

Kelly’s breath caught as her body bowed and a gentle orgasm washed over her. When she relaxed back against Buzz, his erection greeted her. He wouldn’t rush her to reciprocate, so Kelly enjoyed the warm feeling of being held. Buzz placed gentle kisses on the soft spot behind her ear down her neck to her shoulder. Nips and licks and kisses. He acted like he couldn’t get enough of her.

Kelly rolled onto her back. She caressed his abs and down his happy trail and curled her fingers around his impressive cock. “You’re ready.”

His brown eyes locked on hers. “Around you, always.”

She stroked him from base to tip.

His eyes closed, and a long moan escaped his full lips. “Yeah.”

The kitties were on the cat tree Kelly had purchased for her bedroom. It had only taken Buzz two tries to get the cats to leave the bed when they wanted to have sex. “Hold that thought.” Kelly sat up and pushed the covers back. “Let me get them fed—”

Buzz’s strong arms closed around her waist and pulled her back to the bed. “Done. And they have fresh water.” His lips crashed on hers, and Kelly gave herself up to the passion in his kiss.

When they finally came up for air, Kelly smiled at him. “You’re amazing.”

“That’s all it takes? Feeding the kitties?”

Kelly shook her head. “Not just that. You didn’t think I was weird when I got the second tree for them and put it in here.”

“I’ve grown quite fond of your cats.”

“Oh, really?” Kelly grinned. “Are you fond of me?” Her eyes widened. “Sorry, didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

Buzz kissed her. “It sounded like you were being playful, so I hope you meant it. Sex should be fun and playful.”

“Well, I just...didn’t want you to misunderstand.” She turned on her side. Kelly had broken enough of their rules, but she didn’t want Buzz to think she was getting too attached. They’d agreed to keep it casual. One rule she’d never break if she wanted to keep the promises she’d made to herself. She was finally getting her life back on track after the last two tumultuous years. And she was learning, slowly, how to get more balance. She’d known it for years, tried dozens of times, but hadn’t succeeded.

This time was different. She was different.

But some things didn’t change.

RJ would be joining his new firehouse in a few days, and stirred-up memories warred with worry for dominance. She’d

never stop worrying about him or hating him being so far away, but for now at least, he wasn't moving to Manhattan. She'd never been happier about the high cost of living in the New York area.

He'd never ask for the money in their family trust. Her grandparents had been executors until Kelly had turned twenty-two. It had been used to pay for their education above what had been in their college funds but mostly remained untouched. *Frankie*. Her mind never failed to go there whenever she thought of the family trust. Not out of love or longing, only anger.

News of him made its rounds every few years. Frankie was just like his father. Always looking for the shortcut, the next get-rich-quick scheme. Some people never understood doing the work *was* the shortcut.

"Not that I don't love it when you snuggle closer, but I have a rather urgent...need."

"Sorry, lost in thought." She rolled to her back.

Buzz's lips took hers. His hand cupped her breast, and she arched into his touch. "I know. Hope it wasn't about me."

She nibbled his jaw, running her tongue over his morning stubble. "Why?"

"Because it wasn't good. I interrupted on purpose. Were you thinking about your ex?"

Ex-brother, yes, ex-husband no. Kelly caught herself. It would be so easy to tell him the whole awful story, and that scared her. It wasn't part of their agreement, and even though she'd already broken the rule about keeping it light, she had no intention of revealing any more of her past. Buzz wasn't the most talkative guy, but whatever he said had merit. He saw things easily. Way too easily for her peace of mind. Her past had too much reality to be relayed to a four-week casual fling. "No." Kelly sat up, and still kissing him, she stroked his cock. When a bead of cum emerged, she ran her thumb over it, spreading it over the thick head.

Buzz sucked in air, and his eyes darkened. “Ohh, does this mean you’re gonna blow me?”

Kelly raised a brow. “Do you *want* me to blow you?”

“Fuck yeah!”

She disappeared under the sheet and settled between his legs. He was so strong. His thick, muscled thighs had a dusting of dark hair. His dick pulsed, and she nuzzled it with her nose, taking a big inhale. She loved the scent of his arousal. Salty, musky, and outdoors. As soon as she took him in her mouth, the sheet whipped off. She glanced up and smiled as best she could with his dick in her mouth.

“You know I like to watch.” His Adam’s apple bobbed.

Keeping eye contact, Kelly licked his thick shaft and moaned.

“Yeah. Yeah.”

Kelly smiled and focused all her attention on the cock in hand. Gripping the base, she stroked and licked, teased and taunted. Buzz’s breathing hiked up, so Kelly took him all the way in her mouth.

His head fell back, and a groan rumbled deep in his chest.

She loved that sound. It made her feel powerful. Cupping his balls in one hand, she stroked gently as her tongue worked over his cock.

“Gonna co—”

Kelly moaned as she took every drop. When he settled back on the bed, Kelly lay next to him, drew up the sheet, and cuddled into his side. His arm flopped around her shoulders, and his hand smacked into her chin.

“Shit, sorry. Can’t seem to control my limbs.”

Kelly laughed. “No problem. Didn’t hurt.” She envied how Buzz lived in the moment. She worked hard to stay out of the past, but she spent far too much time in the future. Partly out of necessity. She had to look ahead to run her business, but it was also a way to avoid present problems. Looking forward

had been the only way she'd survived the last two years. She'd been doing it her whole life. It was so much easier, simpler, to focus on the future when the present held strangling pain. She supposed her preferred method of dealing with trouble was just as bad as living in the past. But it was a lot harder to break the habit because the future could still be changed. The past, no matter how she wished it, was dead and buried.

"Mmm. Thank you."

"Mmm. You're welcome. And thank you. I like waking up with you...touching me."

"By touching, you mean stroking your clit and teasing your tits?"

"Damn it, Buzz. That's fuck talk. Stop it unless you're prepared to fuck the fuck."

Buzz burst out laughing. "Fuck the fuck?"

"Yeah. Like walk the walk but for fucking."

He rolled to his side, pinning her to the bed. He took her nipple between his lips and sucked. This never got old.

"I'm gonna need some time, so how about breakfast?" He flicked her stiff nipple with his tongue, then sucked it into his mouth again. "Can you wait? Or do you need to come again?"

"I. I..." Kelly heaved in air. "Come."

Buzz grinned and kissed a path down her belly, over her hip, and buried his face between her legs. Her hips shot off the bed at his bold intrusion. He usually teased her more first, kissing the soft skin of her inner thighs, behind her knee, her belly, before taking her clit into his mouth. "Oh. B. You must be really hungry."

He looked up, and lust shone in his eyes. "Baby, you have no idea. I can't wait to taste you again."

"I meant food."

Closing his eyes, he inhaled her scent and smiled. "I can go without food." He spread her lips and stared at her. Stroking her with his thumb, he licked his lips, and when he

took her in his mouth, his forefinger slid down and pushed in. Then a second finger. His tongue teased her clit while his fingers fucked her.

Unlike her earlier orgasm, this one hit like a tsunami. She cried out as her body tightened around his fingers.

“Oh, yeah, baby, don’t hold back.”

Her heart pounded, her lungs dragged in air, and her vision blurred. She screamed out again, coming on his waiting tongue. Her body collapsed back, but she doubted she’d left the bed.

Buzz’s face appeared with the smuggest, shit-eating grin she’d ever seen. And she’d grown up around firemen. Going into burning buildings and living to talk about it lent itself to smugness.

“Breakfast?”

Her belly growled in response. She wasn’t usually hungry in the mornings, so she didn’t eat until lunch. There were always pastries in the break room at the boutique, and if she was having a bad day, she’d visit them. That didn’t mean she wasn’t conscious of her food choices, and the sugar rush from the pastries led to the sugar crash in the afternoons. “What’d you have in mind?”

“I used up the last of the flour, and we’re out of bacon, eggs, and toast.”

“Shit, I forgot. It was my turn to get the groceries.”

“No worries, I’ll go to the bakery. I’ve been dying for the Cappomaggi’s world-famous biscotti.”

Kelly smiled. “World famous?”

“In New York at least.” Buzz hopped out of bed and pulled on his underwear and shorts. “Get up, sleepy. You make coffee. I’ll be back in fifteen minutes. And after I devour four or five biscotti, you’re next.”

“I’ll go.” Kelly jumped up and pulled on her panties and bra. She’d walk around her apartment wearing only a T-shirt because it turned Buzz on, but her breasts never left the house

without being properly stowed. She envied women who could go braless. Not that she'd go to the bakery that way. Her grandmother would have a shit fit.

“No need. I know my way.”

“It's not that.”

“He won't know who I am, if that's what you're worried about.”

“Enzo's off on Sunday. But my grandmother will be there. Laurel Park is only a small section of Brooklyn proper. It's basically one long street that goes around blocks. Everyone knows who you are by now.” She pulled on a T-shirt and a long, white, flowy skirt. Her thighs didn't look good in shorts.

Buzz slipped on his flip-flops. When he didn't say anything, she glanced at him. “What?”

“Are you ashamed of me?”

The hurt in his voice turned her already fluttering belly. “No, of course not. It's just...” She lowered her gaze to the floor.

Buzz used his knuckle to raise her chin until she met his eyes. “Having casual sex is one thing, but other's knowing that's what you're doing is something else entirely?”

Kelly nodded.

He sat on the bed and pulled her between his knees. “We're the only ones who know about our agreement.” Buzz scoffed. “Well, except for Nicki and Emily and my bandmates.” He smiled. “But to the outside world, we're two people who look like we're in a hot and heavy relationship.”

“But it's not a relationship, is it?” Kelly held her breath. If he thought it was, she'd have to end it.

Buzz smiled, and something fluttered deep in her low belly. He was so very handsome and sexy, and when he looked at her the way he was now, Kelly felt like the only woman in the world who existed to him.

And she wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Buzz glanced down. “Well, we kinda are.”



THE FEAR IN HER VOICE HAD HIM CALLING HIMSELF A DICK FOR making her feel like he wasn't living up to their agreement. “Sex is a relationship of sorts. And I enjoy your company. But I've put a lot of thought into this, and it's better for you if I take the blame when this ends.”

“Blame?”

Buzz nodded. “I've never had a friend with benefits, and I didn't tell you because I didn't really know how to without you freaking out on me and ending this early. Which is the absolute last thing I want to happen.” His gaze fell. “I guess that makes me a selfish prick.” One of the many accusations Sally had bombarded him with when she'd told him she'd found someone better. *Stronger*. Buzz shook that away. He couldn't let Kelly see him weak.

“B, I know we've only been friends for a short time, but I've learned so much about you, and ‘selfish prick’ isn't even on the radar. You are so caring, and you always put my feelings first.”

Buzz laughed. “Brain still scrambled from your orgasm?”

Her head tilted. “No. I'm perfectly coherent. Why?”

He shrugged. “You only call me ‘B’ after you've come.”

“Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything by it except...”

“What?”

“It's not that I don't like your name, but B”—she looked away, and her throat worked with the effort to swallow—“I guess it's like a little pet name.” Her eyes shifted back to meet his. “You know, 'cause bees buzz.”

Buzz's heart flipped, and he had no idea why such a silly thing would make him feel so...wanted.

“I won't say it anymore.”

He brushed his thumb over her cheek. “Yes, you will. I love it.”

Her smile was the only reward he’d ever need.

Whoa. He needed to knock that shit off right now. He didn’t want a relationship. “Pretty much since the second time I came here, every neighbor I’ve passed on the street has given me a knowing smile, if you get my drift.”

Kelly pulled away so fast she lost a sandal. “Damn it, please tell me you’re kidding?”

She was upset, and he wished like hell he could. “Sorry.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Her face flushed, her hands on her curvy hips, and anger in her voice was warning enough she was pissed.

But it turned him on. Her eyes shot daggers at him, and he figured it’d be better if she didn’t know it was making him hard, so he discreetly covered his crotch with his folded hands. “Well, at first, I thought they were being neighborly. But Mrs. Esposito...”

“What?”

“She said it was about time a nice young woman like you found herself a nice young man.”

Her shoulders dropped, and she flopped on the bed next to him, head dropping into her hands. All four kitties jumped from their perch and wound around her ankles. “Oh man, I shoulda seen this coming. I should’ve insisted we do this at your place.”

“Oh shit.”

Her head snapped up. “What?”

“Nothing. It’s my problem.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I asked what?”

Buzz’s lips pulled in as he stifled a smile. Her clipped tone reminded him of his mom when he tried to avoid telling her something. Even her mom tone was sexy. “Curt sold his place.

I gotta be out by the end of the week. It's not a big deal. I'll go to The Yorkshire."

"But you're sick of hotels."

"Yeah, I am. Elliot and Siobhan offered me a place to stay with them, but..."

"It's too close to your sister?"

He nodded. "Yeah, can't keep avoiding her if I'm only a few blocks away."

"Maybe it's time you dealt with her."

"Not ready to. And my folks would be hurt if I was in town but not staying home. Anyway, we have your issue. So I figured, when our time is up, you'll tell everyone I led you on. I said I wanted a relationship but changed my mind. That way your reputation stays intact, and you won't feel awkward around your neighbors."

"I'm not making you out to be the bad guy here. I knew what I was agreeing to. I just didn't think anyone figuring us for a couple."

"Me either, but Mrs. Espo, as she insisted I call her because everyone in the neighborhood does, said it was clear to her how much happier you've been since we met." So had he, but he kept that to himself.

"Well, how exactly do we fix this?"

"I figured we'd say goodbye outside. It would only take one of your well-meaning neighbors to see it for the rest to hear about it. Then when I don't show up for weeks, they'll figure the rock star was an asshole who used you, and *voilà*, our secret is safe."

"I'm sorry, B, but I won't do that to you." She stood and paced. "I'm a grown woman. I'll tell everyone we were having fun."

When she walked past him, he grabbed her hand and pulled her onto his lap. "No. If you don't like my plan, we'll come up with another. I know you're an extremely private person, even with such caring neighbors. There's a few

busybodies, but most of them aren't interested in gossiping about you. They truly worry. And I won't be the reason that gets fucked up. Whatever the answer is, you need to get used to the idea I'm taking the hit on this one, because it'll be the only way I can live with myself. For all our planning and plotting out our agreement, there are things neither of us considered." A knot formed in his throat.

Kelly smiled, and her eyes held such compassion he glanced away. "B." She shook her head, and a tear slid down her cheek. "That ex of yours sure did a number on you. Breakups are never easy, but I never understood how someone who loved you could turn so nasty." Placing her hand over his heart, she kissed his lips. "You are a good man. And I'm proud to know you."

She said that now, but would she still feel that way when things between them ended?

Kelly stood and put her hand out. "Come on, let's go to the bakery."

He took her hand and stood. "Together?"

"Yup. This is our mess, and we'll find a way out of it. If Mrs. Espo knows, then Grams knows, and if I don't bring you to the bakery, she'll know something's up."

"Couldn't you just be keeping it to yourself until you know it's something more?"

Kelly's burst of laughter warmed him. "You don't know Italian families, do you? There are *no* secrets. Everything is everyone's business. At least that's how it is around here." A sad smile crossed her lips. "We haven't always been super close, but she's still my Grams, and I wouldn't want to hurt her feelings."

"Okay." He bent over and gave each cat a little love. "Let's go."

As soon as they walked outside the building, they were smacked in the face by the oppressive humidity. Not a single green leaf fluttered.

“Ugh.” Kelly took a hair tie from her wrist and pulled her hair up and into a high messy bun.

A few young boys walked toward them, so Buzz stood in front of her to block their view. The pink T-shirt lifted with her arms as she put her hair up, revealing a peek at her belly as the cotton fabric stretched across her breasts.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He smiled. Kelly had an impressive rack, and no way those boys wouldn’t have openly ogled her. It took a guy years to develop the subterfuge needed to check out a woman without her, and everyone else in the vicinity, knowing about it. And even though it wouldn’t last, Kelly was his for now, and he’d protect her from horny-eyed teenage boys.

They walked to the corner and crossed when the light turned. He took her hand, and Kelly glanced up at him with a raised brow. “Gotta sell it.” But he’d already forgotten about that. He wanted to hold her hand.

When they got to the bakery, there was a line out the door. Just like Buzz remembered. The scent of freshly baked bread mixed with the sweet, buttery aroma of the pastries had his stomach rumbling again. “Mmm. Looks exactly the same.”

Kelly greeted a few of the other patrons. “At least some things never change.” Kelly slipped her hand out from his and brushed a few wayward strands of hair off her face. Glancing in the window, Kelly groaned. “Crap.” She turned her back to the glass.

“What?”

“My ex.” Her cheeks flushed. “Someone must’ve called out sick.”

“Do you want to go somewhere else?”

She sighed. “I can’t leave now.”

Buzz leaned down and whispered, “You’re still in love with him.”

She met his eyes. “No. But...”

He nodded. “You still love him.”

“Yeah.” Kelly looked around. “We’d been together for thirteen years. And everyone here knows it.”

“The downside of a small town is the same as the upside, huh? Everyone knows everyone else and most of their business.”

Kelly chuckled. “Yeah. You seem to know a thing or two about small towns.”

“Pine Hill’s the same way. It’s nestled far enough outside Manhattan that it seems like a world away. It’s as comforting as it is disconcerting. Especially with my history.”

Kelly tilted her head.

“I was a sick kid. Had a lot of...medical issues.” They moved up two spots. She nodded and stepped aside to let customers exit.

Her eyes softened, and she touched his chest. “You’re okay now?”

Her concern for his well-being touched him. They hadn’t known each other that long. He should’ve kept his mouth shut, but he’d been trying to show her he understood. “Yeah, mostly.”

Kelly tilted her head but didn’t ask.

Buzz pointed to the door, and they walked in. Behind the counter stood a broad-shouldered, dark-haired guy. When his eyes landed on Kelly, Buzz knew this was her ex, even though there were two other guys behind the counter. He might have moved on, but he was still in love with Kelly. Buzz’s stomach tumbled around. When she’d told him about their amicable divorce, Buzz had been glad for her. But should he be worried? *What the ever-loving fuck am I thinking? We’re temporary. Half over.* Buzz swallowed down rising jealousy. He hadn’t felt like this ever over Sally, not even when she’d called to brag she was engaged. Brag. Yeah, that was what she’d been doing. She’d purposely been trying to make him jealous or feel bad. Or both.

He'd felt neither.

He had no claim on Kelly, so he had no right to feel jealous. But it didn't change the fact he used every ounce of control not to pull her into his side. Or kiss the daylights out of her.

"Kelly!" He came around the counter and lifted her off her feet in a bear hug. "So good to see you."

"Enzo, you look good."

He set her down. "You look amazing, as always." His eyes shone with affection. "And you must be her new guy. It's good to see her smiling again. I'm Enzo."

Buzz shook his hand. Enzo was a few inches shorter than him, but he had a firm grip and a friendly smile. "Buzz."

He beamed at Kelly. "It's good to see you learning how to take a day off."

Kelly nodded uncomfortably.

Buzz didn't know the circumstances of their divorce, but he wouldn't be surprised if Kelly working all the time had played a part.

"Claudia, come meet Kelly's boyfriend."

Boyfriend. That warmed his heart.

A pretty, brown-eyed, plump girl came and stood next to Enzo. "This is my fiancée, Claudia."

"Oh my, you really are Buzz Stewart." She grabbed his hand and pumped it up and down. "I can't believe you're in Brooklyn." She beamed up at him.

Everyone has to be somewhere. You can let go of my hand now. You're pregnant. Since Stone Highway had hit it big, Buzz had met plenty of fans who gushed over his presence. He always tried to remember the time he'd met Neil Peart and babbled on about the weather instead of saying it was great to meet him. He'd embarrassed both of them. Everyone had someone who if they met them, they'd be starstruck. He felt awkward. "Hi." He pulled his hand, but she didn't let go. He

took a breath and slipped into his rock star persona. “Nice to meet you. Would you like an autograph?” He was sure he *sounded* normal, but he felt stupid.

Her eyes widened, and she gasped. “Oh. Yes!” Her voice went up at least an octave.

“Enzo?” A bellow from the back startled Claudia.

“Yeah, Grams?”

Buzz glanced at Kelly, but she showed no signs of resentment that her ex referred to her grandmother by Grams.

“Where is everyone?” She walked out of the back. Her silver hair was mostly tucked under a paper hat, and her apron was spotted with flour. She was short, round, and had an Italian accent, and when her eyes landed on Kelly, she smiled brightly. “*Tesorina*.” She ambled over and embraced Kelly. “You still coming this afternoon?”

Kelly hugged her back. “Of course.”

Her grandmother pulled back and after a single beat said, “What’s wrong with you. Introduce me to your young man.”

Kelly sighed and rolled her eyes. “You didn’t give me a chance. I was still sucking in air after that hug.” She turned to him. “Buzz, my grandmother, Amadea Cappomaggi. Grams, this is Buzz.”

“What kinda name is Buzz, huh?” She turned to Kelly. “Sounds shady. What’s his real name?”

Buzz chuckled. He hadn’t expected to be grilled with a store full of people looking on. Unlike Pine Hill residents, they didn’t even pretend not to listen. “Mrs. Cappomaggi, a pleasure to meet you. Buzz is my nickname. My best friend gave it to me when we were five.” He smiled. “I hope that dispels any shade.”

“You’ve had the same best friend since five, huh?” She nodded slowly. “I like you. Honest. Direct. Not enough of that these days.” She smiled, and Buzz saw a hint of Kelly’s smile. “What did I always tell you, *tesorina*? You can tell a lot about

a man by how he treats his *mamma* and his *amici*.” She smiled up at him. “That means friends.”

“I know. I’ve been to Italy several times. Lovely countryside, amazing history.”

“This one has respect.” Before Buzz understood her intent, he was in a bear hug to rival one of Nicki’s. Considering this woman had to be in her eighties, that was saying something. When she finally let go, Buzz felt he’d gotten her stamp of approval. *Oh shit*. Their uncomplicated arrangement just got way more complicated. Buzz took a breath, preparing for the onslaught of all the reasons this was a bad idea.

None came.

“You come to dinner tonight, yes?”

“Oh, Grams, he has plans.”

“Yes, to come to dinner. Your grandfather wants to meet him.” She turned and yelled, “Back to work,” and returned to the kitchen, mumbling to herself in Italian.

Kelly looked up at him. “I’ll talk to her.”

“It’s fine. I’d like to go.” He sent her a look he hoped conveyed *if you’re okay with it*. Because even though he’d said it low enough to try not to put her on the spot, with all the customers, her ex, and his fiancée hovering, it wasn’t likely.

She nodded, but the topic wasn’t closed.

Enzo and Claudia went behind the counter. Kelly tugged his shirt, and he leaned down.

“Avoiding your sister won’t solve anything.”

Yeah, I’ll go with that. “You’re right, but I didn’t have plans to see my parents tonight, so I’m free.”

When they got to the counter, he signed an autograph for Claudia, took a picture, and offered to do the same for the other patrons. He did his best to channel Jack, hoping to infuse his smiles with the ease that came naturally to his friend.

By the time they left, Buzz was starving.

“I’m sorry. You don’t have to come tonight.”

“Already said I would.”

“You were just being nice. There was no way to refuse gracefully.”

He stopped and turned to her. “If you don’t want me to come, I won’t. If you think I only agreed because your Grams put me on the spot, sorta. After I said yes, I thought it’d be nice. So I’d like to.”

She gazed deeply into his eyes and smiled. “I would like that, but it’s gonna make it harder when our time is up. Of course, that’s your fault.” Her words were stern, but she smiled.

“Really?”

“Yeah.” She turned and hooked her arm through his. “You charmed the crap out of Grams.”

“Guess I have a way with pets and parents.” And kids, but he left that out. Didn’t want her to draw the wrong conclusion.

Buzz took her key and unlocked the door. “Back.” He waited a beat, then slowly opened the door. The four cats sat a foot inside, tails swaying back and forth in time. They waited until the door closed to move in for attention. Buzz kneeled and paid it.

“Traitors.” Kelly walked past and went into the kitchen.

“Oh, no. Sweet kitties. You love your mama, too, don’t you?”

“More like gathering evidence to use against me later.”

Buzz looked up and smiled. “Are you pissed at me?”

“It’s not your fault. I should’ve thought this through more. We aren’t going to get out of this easily. I can’t believe I thought I could have a friend with benefits without realizing everyone around me thinking it was a relationship.”

Buzz stood and went to her. “Don’t worry. We’ll figure something out.” Feeling her warm, soft curves against his body made his heart skip a beat. “Your kitties love you.”

She sniffled. “Nuh-uh. You, they love; me, they tolerate.”

He leaned back so he could see her face. The tears in her eyes stabbed his soul. “Bullshit. They follow you everywhere. When you’re home, they need to know where you are at all times, and once they see you’ve settled in for the night, they come to me. They like me, but they know you’re the one who rescued them.”

Tears welled in her beautiful eyes and spilled down her cheeks.

“Hey.” Buzz pulled her over to the sofa, sat, and tugged her onto his lap. “What’s wrong, baby?”

She buried her face in his neck and cried. Buzz held her close, trying to think of something to say to make her feel better. But he had no idea what he’d done to make her cry, so he rocked her gently and let her. *What a loser.* He should have more figured out about women by now. About life. About himself.

Kelly finally calmed down, but she didn’t move away. She sniffled, and he handed her a tissue.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me.” Her face was only inches from his, and she stared deeply into his eyes. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I really don’t know why I just cried.”

He brushed his thumbs over her cheeks. “I don’t have to go tonight.”

She shook her head. “No chance. You agreed. By now, Pa and half of Laurel Park know I’m bringing someone home. I don’t know how we’ll get out of this, but avoiding it isn’t the answer.”

Buzz sat back. “Is that a dig about my sister?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe. My dad”—she closed her eyes and slowly exhaled—“always said avoiding a problem only made it worse. I’ve never forgotten that, and I’ve always encouraged Jenny and RJ to talk to me about everything. Jenny was easier because we’re both girls. Enzo stepped in a lot with RJ.”

Buzz's heart dropped. He'd bet no woman ever had that look in her eyes when talking about him. "He sounds like a great guy." It wasn't any of his business. They'd agreed to be casual. It was rule seven: "keep it light; don't talk about past relationships." But right now, he didn't give a shit about the rules. "It's clear to me you still love each other."

Kelly turned her face into his chest, but she didn't say anything.

He should've taken the hint, but he needed to know. Buzz went over the rules in his head. Rule one, four weeks only, would take care of itself. Rule two, exclusive, was still intact. He hated the idea of her with another guy. Rule three, as much sex as possible. They'd vigorously adhered to that one. Rule four, no sleeping over, another he'd been happy to break. Rule five, no hotels. Not an issue. Rule six, just sex, nothing date-like. They'd broken that rule right out of the gate because Kelly hadn't been comfortable with it. She'd broken rule seven at dinner when the chef had outed her divorce. But if he asked what he wanted to know, she might kick him out. She'd said they'd had an amicable divorce, but Buzz couldn't think of a single reason why two people who clearly loved each other couldn't work it out. Rule eight, they hadn't broken, but Buzz hoped to. Having her in her office was one of his favorite fantasies. Rule nine, keep it quiet, was now shot to shit.

If he didn't ask, he'd regret it. "So... Why?"

Kelly sighed. "Because I didn't want kids, and he did. We tried for over a year to, I don't know, come to a mutual agreement, but my feelings didn't change, and neither did his. He wants to be a dad more than anything, and it broke my heart, but I couldn't do it again. I wouldn't let him give up on his dream for me. It would've ended us eventually, and I couldn't bear the thought of him hating me. So I did the only thing which made sense."

"You let him go."

Kelly nodded. "And now he's engaged."

"And Claudia's pregnant."

“How did you know?”

Buzz shrugged. “She’s glowing.”

“When he told me, I went off the rails a little.” She looked away and sighed. “I’m happy for him, but at the same time, it’s like I’m going through all the pain I felt after we separated again.”

“And maybe you’re wondering if you made a mistake?”

Her eyes widened. “No.” She nodded. “Maybe.”

Buzz hugged her. “You’re wondering if you tried hard enough to fix it?”

She nodded. “I know in my heart we did. We went to marriage counseling and our priest. Every day I woke up hoping I’d feel some urge to be a mom, but it never happened. Enzo wanted to keep trying, but I felt like I was never going to feel differently, and I was wasting his time. It’s all I thought about every single day for over a year. And I was exhausted and drained, and I wanted...” She buried her face in his neck.

“You wanted to stop thinking about it.”

“Yeah.”

“I get it. It’s like that in recovery. I have to think about it every day. If I stop, I risk relapsing. I’m so grateful to be out of addiction, but at the same time, it’s fucking exhausting. There are no breaks. A buddy in recovery insists it’ll get easier, but so far, it hasn’t. I don’t have the mental capacity to deal with anything else.” Being with Kelly was so easy. He cleared his throat. “Some days on tour, even the band seems like too much effort because I’m so worn down. So I push myself to keep going, because the band, the music, is my life. I love it, and there’s nothing else I’ve ever wanted to be.” Buzz hadn’t meant for this to turn into confession time. He hadn’t even really expressed these feelings to his therapist so succinctly. He felt guilty for letting the guys down when he’d gone into rehab, but he also felt guilty because someday he might have to quit if it ever came down to only being able to focus on one thing.

He had to stay sober at all costs.

It was life or death.

Chapter Sixteen

KELLY EXPECTED BUZZ TO GIVE HER THE “HAVING KIDS WAS natural speech.” He didn’t even flinch when she said it.

“Not everyone was meant to be a parent, and since you spent so much of your life taking care of your brother and sister, I can see how you’d feel like you’d already done it.”

Kelly pulled back. “You don’t think I’m being selfish?”

Buzz scoffed. “I don’t usually express my opinions on this kinda stuff. But I think having kids is selfish.”

Deep down, in places she barely ever looked, she’d felt the same way. “You don’t want kids?”

He shrugged. “Don’t really feel like that’s an option. Don’t get me wrong, I like kids. Elliot and Siobhan’s little boy Jason and I are best buds.” He smiled fondly. “The little guy and I really bonded, and Elliot keeps nagging me to visit because he says Jason misses me. But I got shitty DNA, and I’m not selfish enough to want to risk passing it on to my kid.” A heart-wrenching sigh tore from his lips. “I was a preemie, and it sorta set the stage for my mom being a little paranoid. Understandably so because I had a lot of complications.” His throat worked with the effort to swallow. “To say my mom watched me like a hawk would be an understatement. When I was three, she was convinced something was wrong. She took me to a bunch of different doctors, but they didn’t find anything. They told her it was all in her head.” He blinked slowly. “But my parents wouldn’t take being dismissed, so they kept pushing. Turns out, unrelated to being a preemie, I

was also born with a heart defect. It wasn't life-threatening at the time, but it could've caused serious heart problems when I got older. I had surgery to fix it, and after I recovered, we moved to Pine Hill."

Kelly's heart expanded. His voice shook with guilt. None of it was his fault. "And you met Jack."

He nodded. "Yeah."

His eyes met hers, and she knew there was more.

"My mom was very particular who I was around...because reasons, so I never had playdates or any friends. We didn't really go out much because I had allergies to so many things. Dust, dander, pollen, grass, trees, most of nature, really. Once we moved to Pine Hill, my allergies were so bad I couldn't go to preschool."

"Wasn't there any allergy medicine you could've taken?"

"We tried, but they didn't really give me relief, and they made me so sluggish."

"Oh, that's awful." Kelly's heart flipped. "You must've been so lonely."

"Yeah." A soft smile spread. "My sister was my best friend. She always played with me, but when she was at school, I missed her. My mom was great. She spent hours playing with me, and we had fun."

"But it wasn't the same."

"No." His chest rose and fell. "I didn't really know what I was missing until we moved to Pine Hill. It was the end of June, after school was out. We'd lived in a high-rise, and I could see Central Park from our balcony. I wanted to go there so badly." He sighed. "Pine Hill's the kinda place where kids play outside all summer. And I wanted to go out and play. It was so much worse because I saw and heard what I was missing."

Buzz's melancholy tone tore at her heartstrings. He'd had such a rough start in life. "If you didn't get out to play, how did you and Jack become friends?"

He grinned. “Because Jack, at four years old, was a special kid. One day he came over and asked my mom if he could come in to play.” Buzz chuckled. “Bet no kid ever asked that before. I was playing with Legos and he walks in and says, ‘Hi, I’m Jack. Can I play?’ My mom had...” He glanced away. “Anyway, our moms became fast friends once they realized Jack and I were the same age.

“We played together every day that summer, but Jack went to preschool in September. I couldn’t go, but my mom and I had our own little class. Jack’s mom’s a teacher, so she put together some basic things preschool covers. I felt special, in a good way for once, because I got to have class with my mom. When I turned five in December, I was able to start on immunotherapy.”

“What’s that?”

“Allergy shots. Every week for a year. Then every other week. At least I was able to go to kindergarten. I felt like such a big kid getting on a bus for the first time. The bus stop was on the corner, and all the other kids were by themselves, so I asked my mom and dad to not come. They kissed me goodbye and let me walk with Jack. I know they watched until the bus drove off, but I felt so independent for the first time.” He shrugged. “I’d never been around so many kids at once. It was overwhelming. So many of them already knew each other and Jack, but I was the kid who never came out to play. And I was the smallest boy in the class. I felt like an outsider. Jack hung out with me even when I was too scared to run around with the other kids because I was afraid I’d get hurt and the school would have to call my mom. So Jack and I played together.” He scoffed. “Those first weeks were the only time I was ever on par with other kids my age.”

“How so?”

Buzz shook his head and blinked slowly. “I was never good in school.”

There was more to it, but he obviously didn’t want to share.

“That’s when I got my first nickname.”

Kelly's face scrunched. "Yeah, Fart."

"The only one who didn't laugh was Jack. For the next two months, every chance some kids got, any word that could be added to fart, that was me."

"What happened after two months?"

"It was Halloween, and we got to go to school in our costumes. I was a bumblebee. I've always loved animals. When we lived in the city, birds nested on our balcony. When we moved to Pine Hill, there were squirrels and an owl who lived in the tree outside my window. They were my friends. There was a bumblebee who used to visit outside my bedroom window. I called him Bernie." A rueful smile crossed his lips. "I felt invincible inside my costume. Went the whole day without being called fart. So the next day when I got ready for school, I wore my costume. My parents tried to talk me out of it, but I wouldn't budge. I went next door to Jack's, and when he came out, he said he forgot something." Buzz smiled. "When he returned, he'd dressed in his dragon costume, and we went to the bus stop."

"Oh, that's so sweet."

Buzz nodded. "That's Jack. He's literally the best guy I know."

Kelly smiled.

"All the other kids at our bus stop were jealous and wanted to go in their costumes, too. And that's when Jack called me Buzz."

Kelly covered her face. "I'm sorry I ever thought it was because of drugs."

He sighed. "Don't be. You're not the first, and I'm sure you won't be the last." He kissed her gently. "Luckily, I don't give a fuck what people think." He kissed her again. "Except you. I do care what you think." Buzz looked away. "Anyway, I wouldn't want my kid to go through that."

Kelly sighed. "The night we met, you said you put your parents through hell. At the time, I couldn't imagine you as a

hell-raising teenager, so I thought it was an odd thing to say. This is what you meant, right? Your health was the hell?"

He nodded.

"B, none of it was your fault. I'm sure your parents didn't blame you."

"They don't, but I can't help how I feel."

She nodded. She'd spent the better part of a year trying to feel what Enzo had, searching every inch of her mind, heart, and soul for the urge to be a mom. There just wasn't any, and the day she'd finally understood the only choice she'd had was to let him go had broken her heart into so many pieces no amount of time would ever heal it. Enzo had refused to accept they couldn't be together anymore. For weeks, he'd insisted he'd be happy without being a dad. But she hadn't budged even though she'd thought it would kill her. She had to let him go so he could be the man he wanted to be. The only thing that kept her going was her business. On the day they'd signed their divorce papers, they'd both cried. He'd been a gentleman and waited until the ink was dry before he'd started dating Claudia. She'd told him he didn't have to wait, but he'd said he'd needed time.

Buzz's arms tightened around her. His stomach growled.

"I'm sorry. We should eat. You were starving an hour ago." Kelly slipped off his lap, but before she took a step, Buzz tugged her hand, and she ended up on the couch.

"Sit. I got this." He returned with hot coffee and a plate loaded with the pastries they'd bought. He handed her paper plates and napkins, and they ate in a comfortable silence. "Wow, even better than I remember." Buzz sat back with his arm on the back of the couch. "I gotta run home and get some clothes to wear tonight. You wanna come with me?"

She did. But she shouldn't. That was very relationship-y, and it was a bad idea. "I gotta bunch of stuff to do."

Buzz smiled. "You're a terrible liar."

"I never really thought of that as a bad thing."

He shook his head. “It’s not. But you don’t have to lie to me about anything, ever. It’s outside our rules, and I respect that. Thought I’d ask.”

“What’re you gonna do about a place?” Would it be a bad idea for him to stay here? She liked the idea of seeing him, but it was probably way out of his way to do so. His life was in the city.

“I have an agent looking for short-term rentals. Maybe through early next year. That way, when I’ve got a few days’ break during this run, I’ll have a place to stay.”

Kelly bit her tongue. She’d almost said it. Which was crazy because he’d never want to see her after their time was up. He needed to focus on his sobriety, and Kelly totally understood that. He’d given no indication he’d like to continue their casual arrangement, and Kelly had no interest in doing so. “What about after the tour is over?” Kelly cringed. Why had she asked?

“I wanted a place in the city, but I need more space, a yard with privacy, and a studio in my house. I’m not really sure where I’d start looking. But that’s definitely a problem for another day.” His eyes glowed with lust. “Since we now have plans for dinner...” Buzz moved closer.

Her heart rate kicked up, and heat flooded her body. It always did when his voice held that sexy promise. “Mmm.”

“What time?” Buzz’s arm along the back of the couch closed around her shoulder.

“Uh, four.”

“Mmm. Four.” He leaned in and inhaled deeply. “You’re horny.”

Kelly’s skin tingled. Buzz’s brown eyes darkened when her hand covered his erection. “So are you.”

“How much time do you need to get ready?”

“Not six hours.”

His lips brushed her cheek, nibbled her earlobe.

Kelly arched her back.

“Just trying to figure out how long it’ll take me to run home and back, what time I need to leave here.” His tongue flicked over the sensitive skin behind her ear. “Actually, that’s not true. What I’m really trying to figure out is how many times we can fuck before I absolutely have to leave here to get back in time for dinner at four.”

Kelly’s pussy throbbed. Her lips found his, and Kelly thrust her tongue in his mouth as she stroked his engorged cock. Buzz’s hand snaked under her T-shirt, and he cupped her breast and tweaked her nipple. “Oh.” She pulled back and whipped the T-shirt over her head. “Now. Fuck me now.”

Buzz’s hands caressed around her back and unhooked her bra. She tossed it on the floor next to her shirt. She pulled the hem of Buzz’s T-shirt up, and he pulled it off. Her hands went to his shorts, and within a few seconds, he was naked. When she stood to step out of her skirt, Buzz tugged her panties off.

She straddled his hips.

“You are so fucking sexy.” He fondled her breasts, then held them in his palms. “I have big hands, and I can’t cover your tits.” He took her nipple between his teeth and sucked while his right hand slid down her belly and between her spread thighs. “So wet.” He rubbed her clit, then raised his fingers to his lips, released her nipple, and licked his fingers. “Mmm. Delicious.” His hand returned to her pussy. “I wanna watch you come.” He slipped his fingers over her clit, and Kelly moaned. His hand left her breast and went to her hip. His eyes held hers captive while his finger worked her clit. Slipping two fingers deep inside her, he circled her with his thumb. “Oh, yeah, you’re getting close.”

Her hips moved back and forth as the tension built. She didn’t think she could take much more. Her inner muscles clenched on his fingers.

Buzz let out a throaty grunt. “Yeah, baby, yeah. Come for me.”

Kelly's heart pounded. His gaze pinned hers. His pupils dilated until almost none of the rich brown was visible.

“Now.”

Her orgasm crashed through her. Her hips bucked wildly, and just when she thought she'd pass out, Buzz pulled her closer and down, his thick cock pushing into her, setting off another wave of pleasure.

He moaned as her wet pussy settled on his groin. “Fuck, that's sweet.” He pulled the band out of her hair, and it fell around her shoulders. “Mmm, much better.” His hands thrust into her hair, and he hauled her in for a scorching kiss. “Want me to take over?”

She nipped his tongue with her teeth. “Not a chance, B. After that orgasm, you deserve to be fucked hard.”

“I love it when you talk dirty.” His hands went to her hips. “I need you to move, baby.”

Kelly clenched and released her inner muscles several times. Buzz's eyes closed on a long groan.

“You're killing me.”

“Death by pussy?”

He nodded, his eyes opened, and he grinned. “There are worse ways to go.”

Kelly lifted her body and slid back down. “Ohh.” Damn, but fucking Buzz was her new favorite pastime. She lifted again, this time sliding down slowly.

Buzz's hips raised as he thrust up into her. “Harder, Kel, harder.”

Kelly obliged, sensations flooding her senses, wave after wave. “Come for me.”

“You first.” He slipped his hand between her thighs, and with a single stroke to her clit, Kelly's orgasm exploded.

Buzz growled as he thrust twice more and came. He sank back on the couch, and she collapsed against him. Their naked flesh melding into each other. His lips found hers, and he

kissed her hard while he caressed her back. His heart beat wildly. “Wow, B. That was the most intense orgasm I’ve ever had.”

He grinned. “Yet.”

Since every inch of her body hummed with satisfaction, she’d doubted it could be topped.

But she was willing to try.



THEY GOT TO HER GRANDPARENTS’ BROWNSTONE WITH FIVE minutes to spare. She opened the front door and was greeted by the scrumptious scent of gravy, meatballs, sausage, braciole, and fresh bread. “Hello,” Kelly yelled.

“Damn, smells good.”

“I hope you’re hungry. Grams will expect you to eat at least two platefuls. She’ll also tell you you’re too thin. She’s on a mission to fatten up every man who enters here.”

“I’m starving. Missed lunch.” He waggled his brows.

Her grandfather appeared in the archway. “Ah, my beautiful granddaughter.” Arms spread wide, he took a few steps and pulled her in for a big hug.

“Pa, you look good.” She inhaled the comforting scent of Old Spice and anisette. She pulled back and gave him a stern look.

He put his forefinger to his lips. “Shhh. What she doesn’t know won’t kill me.” Pa chuckled, released her, and eyed Buzz.

“Sir, nice to meet you. I’m Buzz.”

Pa shook Buzz’s hand. “Yes, the one with the nickname name.” He narrowed his eyes. “Kelly is very special.”

Buzz smiled. “Yes, she is.”

“Good. We understand each other.” He turned. “Come into the living room. Would you like a glass of wine? We have red and red.”

“Oh, Pa, uh—”

“No thank you, sir. I don’t drink.”

Pa turned and raised a brow.

Kelly stepped in front of Buzz. But he placed his hand on her shoulder.

“It’s okay, Kel.” He looked Pa in the eyes. “I had a skiing accident several years ago. Doctor prescribed painkillers, and I ended up getting hooked. Totally my own fault.” Buzz exhaled slowly. “I’ve been sober for two years.”

Pa chewed on that. “A man owns up to his mistakes, takes responsibility. So many people blame others.” He shook his head. “Come, have a seat. I want to talk to you. Kelly, go help your grandmother.”

Buzz turned to her. “It’s okay.” He gestured with his chin.

Kelly wanted to argue, but it was pointless. Buzz didn’t want her defending him, and she shouldn’t want to, but she did. “Kay.”

She walked down the hallway. “Grams, what can I do?”

“Ah, good. You’re early. You know how your grandfather hates tardiness.”

Kelly chuckled. Of the two, Pa was the laid-back one, but that didn’t stop Grams from pushing the blame on him. Pa never complained though. “Smells delicious.”

“Here.” Grams put a bulb of garlic on the counter next to the chopping board and knife.

Kelly chopped the garlic and used the mortar and pestle to mash it into the softened butter with a pinch of salt. She spread a thick layer on the long loaves of bread and popped them in the oven.

The front door opened and closed with a slam, and a minute later, Jenny greeted them. “Hey, sis.” She hugged Kelly

then Grams. “Smells so good.” She grabbed a piece of bread and dipped it into the vat of gravy on the stove. “So good. I’m starving.”

“Jennifer, salad.”

Jenny smiled and began chopping the ingredients.

Kelly checked the bread.

The front door opened, and RJ yelled, “Hello.”

Grams checked her watch. “He’s late.”

“Give him a break, Grams. He just got off shift.”

Grams went down the hallway and greeted RJ.

Jenny poked her. “Why’s Buzz here?”

Kelly narrowed her eyes. “Not now.”

“She’ll be gone for at least three minutes. After she gives RJ shit for being late, she’ll check on Pa. Now spill.”

“The neighborhood thinks we’re dating. We stopped in for pastries this morning, and Enzo and Claudia were there.”

“Ehh. How’d that go?”

Kelly’s shoulders relaxed. “It wasn’t terrible. You know Enzo, he doesn’t have a mean bone in his body. He introduced himself.”

Jenny threw her a sideways glance. “Was it weird?”

“Not really. Then Grams came out, and I had to introduce them.”

“You knew she’d be there on Sunday morning.”

“Yeah. Like I said, the neighborhood made us a couple. If I didn’t bring him, Grams would’ve been hurt.”

“Well, that sucks. How are you going to explain when he leaves?”

Kelly shrugged. She didn’t want to think about it. “Buzz said he’d take the hit, but I can’t let him. We’ll have to come up with something else.”

Jenny smiled. “That’s so sweet of him.” A mischievous look crossed her sister’s face. “It doesn’t have to end, does it? Why not keep seeing him, you know, for stud services?”

Kelly shook her head at Jenny’s crude assessment. “Because he needs to focus on his recovery, and I need to return my focus to the boutique. Fashion week is coming up, and we have seventy-five brides coming in for fittings between now and November. It’ll be all-hands-on-deck.”

“Kel, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’ve been handling everything just fine.”

“You are, and I’m so proud of you. But this was a temporary break, which, you were right, I totally needed and deserved, but that’s all it can ever be. He has a tour to finish, and I have an empire to build.”

“Why does—Grams’ coming.” Jenny went back to making the salad.

“Ah, my three lovely ladies.” RJ scooped her into a hug and kissed the top of her head. “Who’s the guy?”

Damn. Kelly had forgotten she hadn’t mentioned Buzz to RJ, and she didn’t have a good answer prepared. It was one thing her sister knew she and Buzz were just having fun, but she’d never tell RJ. “He’s um, my...boyfriend.” She hated lying to him.

“I didn’t know you’d started dating.” RJ’s hurt tone tore at her.

“Well, it’s really new and unexpected. It wasn’t like I went looking.”

RJ smiled down at her. Kelly’s breath caught. He looked just like their dad.

“That’s when love invites itself in, isn’t it?” His blue eyes gleamed with affection.

It wasn’t love. It was only lust. Kelly forced a smile. “It’s only been a short time.” *And it’ll only be a little more. Then he’ll be gone.* Kelly’s chest tightened. How could she have been so stupid? *Everyone leaves me.* Even though the appeal

of her agreement with Buzz was it came with a built-in end date, she had no right to feel...possessive. The thought of him leaving turned her stomach. Kelly stepped away from RJ and sat.

“You okay?” RJ kneeled. “You looked like you were gonna pass out.”

“Yeah, no, I’m fine. I got a lot on my mind.”

“Having a lot on your mind doesn’t cause a person to pass out.” RJ took her wrist and timed her pulse.

“Who’s passing out?” Grams stood behind RJ. “*Tesorina*, you sick? You look pale as a ghost.”

“My stomach’s been off lately.”

Grams put her hand on Kelly’s forehead. “You don’t feel warm.”

“I’m fine, really. I skipped lunch today.”

Jenny handed her a glass of water. “You’ve been working too hard.” She winked.

RJ didn’t know she’d modified her hours to fit Buzz in. “Yeah.”

“What else is new?” RJ stood. “You need to take better care of yourself.”

The pain in his eyes stabbed her heart. She knew what he was thinking. “I’m fine. Really.” She didn’t need her brother worrying about her. He went into burning buildings and Kelly refused to be the cause of worry and split his focus and get him hurt. Or worse.

“Seriously, sis, lightheaded just standing could be a lot of different things. If it happens again, promise me you’ll see a doctor.” He glanced toward the hallway. “Speaking of, how’s Pa really doing?”

Grams pulled him into a hug. “He’s really doing well. His cardiac rehab is coming along nicely. The doctor’s very pleased. Besides.” She stirred the gravy. “He doesn’t get to die without my permission. And I’ll never give it.”

They laughed. If anyone could enforce such a thing, it would be their Grams. She could make Death piss himself.

Grams turned from the stove with a troubled look in her eyes. Her lips pulled in.

Kelly's heart pounded. It wasn't like their grandmother to ever be at a loss for words.

"Your brother called..."

Kelly's brow furrowed "Grams, RJ... Oh, him." Kelly really only had one; she had a few good memories of Frankie from when she was little, but after RJ was born, Frankie hadn't bothered much with his three younger half-siblings. He'd turned thirteen, and her parents had explained that a teenage boy with a new baby brother was a difficult thing to deal with, and that explanation had held until their mom had been killed. He went off to college and pretty much never returned. "What does he want?"

Grams raised a brow.

"Figures," RJ said. "He's an ass—jerk."

Since he hadn't even gone to her dad's funeral, Kelly had written him off. "We'll give him his share and never hear from him again. Good riddance."

"No, you won't." Grams pulled out a chair and sat. "Your father gave him his share before setting up the trust. I'm sure Frankie won't volunteer that, but your grandfather and I aren't senile."

Kelly didn't recall ever seeing anything in the trust about it.

"Your father, God rest his soul, was a good man. He took that boy as his own, and Frankie repays him like this..." Grams sniffled, pulled a tissue from her pocket, and wiped her eyes. "Didn't even come to the funeral. Just like his father." Grams shook her head. "After the settlement came through, Frankie showed up with Giovanni." She slammed her palm on the table. "That man. Abandons his wife and baby, then when money comes in for her death... He was always a piece of shit."

“Grams!” Jenny gasped.

“What? He is. There’s no other way to say it in any language.” She took a deep breath. “There’s a lot you don’t know, *tesorina*.”

“Like what?”

Jenny and RJ sat, both looking as shocked as she felt.

“Like your father still paid Frankie’s tuition even after he got his share. He said Marie would’ve wanted it that way.” Grams lifted the gold crucifix that hung around her neck to her lips and kissed it. “He was right, of course. Marie...” Her voice broke. “Your *papà* never let anger get in the way of doing what he felt was right. I’m not blessed that way.” Tears welled in her brown eyes. “He was so hurt when Frankie turned his back on us, but he didn’t let it stop him from doing what Marie would’ve wanted. He loved my daughter with all his heart.” She squeezed her eyes shut.

Kelly looked down. “I remember.” No one could be in a room with their parents and not feel the love they’d had for each other. After Dad had died, Kelly understood hate. She hadn’t hated Frankie for basically ignoring her, but she did hate him for choosing his birth father, who’d never been there for him, over her father who’d loved and raised him. Her blood boiled at the memories. “What else?”

Grams looked at each of them, ending with Kelly. “It’s all my fault.”

Kelly’s heart broke at the pain in Grams’ eyes. “What is?” Grams was a tough lady, but everything she’d done for her family was always based on love. Even when she hadn’t been able to express her love for them the way she had before their mom’s death. When they’d moved in, Grams had kept them at an emotional distance, and even though she’d only been fifteen at the time, Kelly had understood because she’d done the same thing. It was the only way she could go on after losing her father. She’d had to be strong for Jenny and RJ, and she didn’t have the energy to care that Grams had expected her to handle and be responsible for them. She’d promised her father she would.

“Everything. They met in college because I forced her into pursuing a practical degree. She wouldn’t have gotten pregnant and had to marry him. Wouldn’t have had a job in the Twin Towers. Wouldn’t have been murdered on 9/11.” Tears ran down Grams’ pale cheeks.

“Grams, how is any of it your fault?” RJ asked.

She wiped her eyes. “Your *mamma*, she loved fashion. She wanted to go to FIT. She even got a scholarship, all on her own.” Grams’ head shook. “You”—she gripped Kelly’s hand—“always so much like her.” A sad smile crossed her lips. “And so very, very talented. Like you are.” Her gaze dropped. “But she had brains that I didn’t, and I pushed and pushed and pushed until she agreed a degree in fashion would be a waste of her intelligence. If she’d have gone to FIT like she’d wanted to, she’d still be alive.”

They all had tears in their eyes. Kelly’s throat was so tight she couldn’t utter a word. Mom had amazing style, but Kelly never even considered she’d inherited her talent from her.

“Grams,” RJ said. “You’re not responsible for what happened to mom.” His voice broke.

She nodded. “I’ve made so many mistakes. I pushed. It’s what I always did with your *mamma*. She was so special, so much smarter than me, I didn’t want her to waste it.” She sniffled. “I tried so hard not to do that to you.” She squeezed Kelly’s hand.

Kelly’s throat tightened.

“You took us in...” Jenny sobbed.

Grams blew her nose. “Your *mamma*’s death nearly killed me. I’m ashamed of how I behaved afterward. I pushed you all away when I should’ve pulled you in. But the guilt I felt was consuming me. When your *papà* told me he was sick, my heart broke all over again. I loved him like a son. He asked if we would assume guardianship when the time came. And as had happened before, a strength I didn’t know I had rose up.” She wiped her eyes.

Kelly gulped air. “When it got really bad near the end, you wanted us to come live with you.”

Grams nodded. “A child should never have to see how ugly cancer is.”

Kelly sobbed. “I thought you were trying to steal our last days with him. He was so sick, but I begged him to let us stay. I was so raw when we moved here. I couldn’t process all of it. I was angry. I behaved badly toward you.” A trail of acid followed the words.

Grams smiled and cupped Kelly’s cheek. “*Tesorina*, you were still a child.”

She shook her head as tears spilled down her cheeks. She hadn’t been a child since the day her mother had been killed.

Grams caught her chin with her fingers. “Listen to me, *tesorina*. No matter how much you’d been through at so young an age, you were still only a child. You have nothing to be ashamed of. The three of you had more loss in your young lives than most people do in a lifetime.”

Jenny wiped her eyes. “Everyone loses their parents.”

“Eventually, yes. When they’re adults with their own lives, and the grief’s still overwhelming. But when a child loses their parents whom they still depend on for everything, that’s a tragedy most never know.”

Kelly’s heart swelled. “Like losing a child.”

Grams clutched her fist to her heart. “*Sì*. Nothing prepares you for that. Nothing.”

Chapter Seventeen

KELLY'S GRANDFATHER CONTINUED TO STARE AT BUZZ, AND IT was making him uncomfortable. He hadn't felt this awkward when he'd meet his high-school girlfriend's parents. Maybe because it had been the only other time since Sally had no parents. He hadn't really expected to be under the microscope. He could excuse himself to make an urgent call, but Kelly's grandpa would know it was bullshit. He was astute and sharp.

What Buzz didn't understand was why he cared. In two weeks, he'd leave. He tried to appear unflustered but wasn't sure he was even close to pulling it off.

Maybe he should offer to lend a hand in the kitchen.

"What do you do for a living?"

Buzz barely stopped himself from jumping at the sound of the older gentleman's voice.

"Uh, I'm a musician, sir."

He considered that for a moment.

Normally, silence never bothered Buzz. He enjoyed it. Needed it even. But this silence was unnerving.

"You make good money?"

Buzz nodded.

"Gamble?"

"No, sir."

He understood her grandfather was only looking out for her. Which made Buzz inexplicably glad. He had the growing urge to do the same. He didn't know the circumstances surrounding the loss of her parents, and he'd never ask. She'd never volunteer it. Why should she? They'd be over soon.

“You met Enzo?”

“Yes.” Her grandfather was a man of few words. The total opposite of her grandmother. But it obviously worked for them.

“Did you like him?”

“Yeah, he's a nice guy. And Kelly told me their divorce was amicable.”

“Yes, it was. Somehow, that makes it worse.”

Buzz had thought the same thing. They clearly still had love between them.

“Did you know they were together for a very long time?”

“Since she moved here when she was fifteen.”

“Do you know why they moved here?”

Buzz's throat tightened. “Obviously something horrible.”

“She hasn't told you?”

“No.”

Her grandfather nodded. “She's suffered a tremendous amount of loss.”

“Yes.”

His sharp brown eyes narrowed. “If you're just having fun with her, I suggest you end it soon.”

Oh shit. Buzz couldn't possibly tell him ‘just having fun’ was their agreement. No grandfather or parent or brother would understand his granddaughter or daughter or sister agreeing to such a thing. Buzz didn't want to lie to him. He'd been confident four weeks would be enough, but now he wasn't sure, so he wouldn't technically be lying. “Well, sir, we've only known each other a short time, and I'll be going

back on tour in two weeks. Kelly knows that's my life, and it's never going to change. It can be tough on a relationship. I was honest with her, but thinking you know what it will be like isn't the same as living it."

Her grandfather stood and poured himself a glass of wine. "I appreciate your honesty. Kelly's quite stubborn. And I have no doubt she thought she *knew* what she was getting into when she agreed to that first date."

"Meaning?"

He turned and leveled a hard gaze at Buzz. "Meaning, things change, but she may not see it right away. I trust you will."

"I really don't know what you mean."

"No?" He shrugged, took his seat, and swirled the wine around in the glass. "Do you miss it?" He tilted the glass toward Buzz.

"Not really. I was never really a big drinker."

Her grandfather nodded and took a sip. "Does it bother you to be around people who drink?"

"It was hard at first because I was...scared of relapsing. But it doesn't bother me now. If it does, I leave."

"Kelly's father had a drinking problem."

"Oh. She hadn't mentioned it."

"She doesn't know." He took another sip then placed the glass on the high-polished end table. "When Ray came to ask for Marie's hand in marriage, he told me all about it. He'd been sober for several years, but he didn't want any secrets. Marie's first husband was a drinker." He scoffed. "In fact, he has many vices, and after Marie gave birth to their son, he continued to...indulge his own weaknesses." His eyes narrowed, and his lips curled into a sneer.

Definitely something wrong there.

"The nicest thing I can say about him is he never laid a hand on her." Her grandfather sat forward, and his angry gaze

bored into Buzz's eyes. "Of course, he'd be dead if he had, and my conscience would be clear." He sat back. "He left her with a three-month-old baby and never paid child support. Anyway, Ray wanted me to know he wasn't anything like her ex. He was ten years older, and I'll admit at first the age difference bothered me. But he loved my daughter, and he adopted my grandson. He promised me he'd do everything to make her happy. And he did. I knew she'd met someone even before she brought Ray home to meet us. A part of her which had died after being abandoned by her husband was somehow reborn."

He was making a point, but Buzz didn't know what it was. He nodded.

"Just because I'm old doesn't mean I'm blind or stupid."

"I would never assume such a thing. My grandpa is a very wise man, and I've always listened to any advice he offered. He's never steered me wrong."

"Good. Then you'll think about what I'm about to say long and hard. I see the same thing in Kelly. Something that's been gone since Marie was murdered is back."

Murdered? Fuck. Buzz couldn't imagine the pain Kelly and her family had suffered. The older man's eyes clouded with hatred and anger, and his pain sucked the air from the room.

"None of us are perfect, but Ray was perfect for my little girl. They loved each other so much. When he confessed to his shortcomings and promised he'd love her and take care of her every day, the respect I had for him tripled. He didn't have to tell me. But he did because he was a brave, strong man. I see that in you. You had problems with drugs, but you took care of it. I won't hold it against you. Weak men never admit their failings. Only a strong man does that." Standing, he walked to Buzz. "Their brother is sniffing around. Amadea is telling them now. Kelly will need you tonight. I hope you'll be there for her. She's handled far too much on her own." He extended his hand.

"I will, sir." Buzz stood and shook his hand. "Even if she won't let me."

“Call me Pa. Everyone does.” His warm smile reached his eyes. “My daughter called me that, and Kelly picked it up. It stuck.” His eyes warmed. “She was such a joyful baby. You couldn’t help but smile just looking at her.” His eyes misted.

Voices came from the hallway, and seconds later, Kelly and her siblings joined them.

Buzz turned to her and smiled, but his smile faded. She’d been crying. They all had. Buzz went to her and pulled her into his arms. Jenny smiled at him, but RJ’s eyes narrowed, and his lips thinned.

Buzz kept his chuckle inward. He understood. Even though Stephanie was six years older, he had the same reaction to every guy she’d ever brought home. No benefit of the doubt had been afforded to her boyfriends.

“Grams threw us out,” Jenny said.

Her grandfather chuckled. “So dinner’s almost ready.”

“I’ll never understand why she has to finish it on her own,” RJ said.

“Because she does. And it will never change. Don’t waste energy on things that won’t change.”

Kelly looked up at him, but her smile didn’t change the pain in her eyes. “Was he grilling you?”

He kissed the top of her head. “Not at all. We had a nice chat.”

Kelly relaxed against him.

“So, RJ, you report to Ten House this week, yes?” Pa asked.

“Uh, do you think this is the right time?” RJ eyed Buzz.

“Don’t be rude. He’s Kelly’s boyfriend.”

RJ quirked a brow but didn’t say anything. He exhaled slowly. “Tomorrow.”

Kelly’s sharp breath caught Buzz off guard. Kelly worried about RJ because he was a firefighter, but this was something

more. "I thought it was the end of the week?"

"It was. Got moved up." RJ's eyes narrowed at him. "She didn't tell you?"

He was Kelly's brother, and Buzz would respect that, but he didn't care for the kid's tone. Buzz shrugged.

"RJ, that's enough." Kelly's pissed-off mother tone would've made Buzz laugh if the conversation was at all amusing.

"Wash up!"

Kelly stood and dragged Buzz to the hall. She pointed to a door. "Go."

"Hey, don't use that tone on me. I didn't say or do anything wrong."

"Sorry. It's easier to take it out than it is to put it back." She walked in and turned on the water.

Buzz stood behind her and put his hands in the water with hers, stealing some of the suds off her hands. His eyes met hers in the mirror, and he smiled with satisfaction when her pupils dilated.

"Stop that. No kissing."

"Mmm, there's definitely a kiss coming your way."

"Buzz, not here."

"Why not? The door's open, and I *am* your boyfriend."

Kelly narrowed her eyes as she grabbed a hand towel and dried her hands. She handed it to Buzz.

He lowered his voice. "*Pretend* boyfriend. But there won't be anything pretend about the kiss." He turned her and leaned down. He'd meant for the kiss to be gentle, but as soon as his lips brushed hers, he couldn't help himself. Heat flared throughout his body when Kelly leaned against him. The thudding of heavy-shoed footsteps had him putting distance between them.

"Dinner!" RJ was not pleased.

Buzz fought the urge to scruff the kid's hair. Even though he was twenty-one, he was behaving like a bratty twelve-year-old, but Buzz would treat him like a man. He'd find a chance to talk to him.

Kelly's shoulders went back. "We're coming." As she passed her brother, she said, "Dial it back, baby brother."

Buzz grinned. He'd elicited a similar reaction from his sister when he'd behaved the way RJ was now. He really needed to call Steph.

Grams had prepared a feast. Kelly had said Italians took Sunday dinner extremely seriously.

Her grandparents exchanged a look, then her grandmother pointed to a chair. "Buzz, you sit next to Kelly."

He walked over and pulled out the chair next to his. Kelly smiled at him as she sat and tucked under. He took his seat. "Smells great."

"I hope you're hungry," Grams said.

Large fancy bowls held heaping piles of pasta and meat. The table was covered in an off-white linen tablecloth with a fleur-de-lis pattern. Linen napkins were wrapped around the silver cutlery, and matching wineglasses and water glasses were at each setting. Except Buzz's. His water glass was already filled.

"Buzz, help yourself," Pa said. "There's more in the kitchen."

Buzz picked up the pasta bowl. "Tell me when." He scooped two spoonfuls onto Kelly's plate.

"That's good."

He served himself then passed the bowl to Pa. After all the bowls had been passed around, Buzz took a bite of braciolo. "Wow." The meat practically melted in his mouth. Scooping two penne on the prongs of his fork, he popped them in his mouth and moaned. "This is the best sauce I've ever had."

Kelly nudged him. "Gravy."

“Huh?”

“We call it gravy.”

“Yeah, for non-Italians, *gravy* is brown,” RJ snarked.

Kelly’s eyes narrowed at her brother, and from the way her body moved, she tried to kick him under the table, but RJ was ready for it and moved his leg out of the way.

He and Steph had had their share of quibbles over the years, so Buzz smiled.

Even though everyone was eating, the conversation never stopped. Everyone, including Kelly, talked loudly. And with their hands, but not a single piece of food landed on the pristine tablecloth. Buzz was used to a much more sedate family dinner, but it was nice seeing Kelly with her family.

After dinner, Buzz stood and picked up his plate.

“RJ has that,” Grams said.

“Really? I was like five minutes late.”

“You late, you wash.”

RJ picked up two plates and grumbled as he walked through the doorway that separated the kitchen from the dining room.

Grams stood. “*Tesorina*, I’d like to show you her portfolio.”

Kelly looked at Buzz.

“Go on.” Kelly was excited, and he’d never say no or expect her to babysit him. He would do anything to never see her cry again.

Grams left with Jenny and Kelly.

The phone rang, and Pa answered it. He covered the receiver. “It’s my cousin in Italy. Would you mind?”

“Not at all, sir.”

Buzz picked up two plates and headed into the kitchen.

RJ turned when he walked in. “You don’t have to do that.” His eyes narrowed.

“I thought we could talk while we wash.”

RJ leaned against the counter. “Good.”

Kelly and Jenny looked like Grams. RJ must favor their dad. He was about the same height as Buzz, but based on his stance, Buzz doubted they’d see eye to eye.

“You’re not dating my sister.”

“No. I’m not. But we have an agreement.”

RJ’s hands balled into fists. “Why are you even here?”

Buzz understood. It was sexist, but his sister having friends with benefits with a guy wouldn’t sit well with him either. Guys were funny that way. He’d had plenty of one-night stands, but if his sister ever had casual flings, Buzz wouldn’t like it one bit. And he’d feel compelled to intervene, too. And Stephanie would lay him out if he did. She’d remind him the women he’d slept with were someone’s daughters, sisters, and, someday, someone’s mothers.

And Steph would tell him to butt out. But she’d use a lot more words, some yelling, and possibly a few swears. She’d give him the “women are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves” speech, which was true. All the women he knew were strong and capable, but that wouldn’t stop his primal drive to protect them. “Well, this is more complicated than we anticipated. Her neighbors have assumed we’re dating, and Kelly figured your grandmother had heard. She’d have been hurt if Kelly didn’t introduce me, so we went to the bakery to get breakfast. Grams invited me for dinner. Couldn’t say no.”

RJ’s stance relaxed slightly. “What’s your exit strategy?”

“Well, your sister’s stubborn, but I don’t have to tell you that.”

RJ laughed. “Yeah. Go on.”

“I’m taking the hit. She insists she won’t allow it, but I’m not giving her the choice.” He understood the warring

emotions RJ was experiencing. He shrugged. “This town is... close. I wouldn’t want to harm her reputation.”

RJ’s eyes narrowed. “You care for her?”

“Yes.” The answer just came out. *Whoa. I mean, yeah. She’s amazing.* He understood it was hard for RJ to accept his sister was a grown woman who’d entered into a casual sexual relationship with her eyes open. At least as much as a brother would ever accept his sister doing that.

“Have you told her?”

“No.”

“Yeah, she’s not good at adjusting quickly. She has her mind set, and it’ll take a lot to get her to take her eye off the prize. So to speak.” RJ pushed off the counter and got in his face. “I don’t give a fuck you’re a rock star. If you hurt her, I’ll end you.”

Buzz tamped down on the rising challenge. He had no intention of hurting Kelly, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t. Intentions weren’t worth much. It also didn’t mean he wouldn’t get hurt again. He scoffed to himself. He’d thought exploring their attraction with clearly defined boundaries would keep him from getting too involved, but like it or not, he was.

Buzz took a step back.

He cared about her. A lot. Too much for casual. But there was no way he could have a relationship right now. He had too much at stake to let anything derail his main goal of staying sober. But now was not the time to start analyzing his feelings. “Understood.” If he hurt her, he’d deserve being taken apart.

“Everything okay here?” Pa stood in the doorway.

“Yup.” Buzz walked into the other room and gathered up more dishes.

They put away all the food and loaded the dishwasher in silence.

When the women returned, Kelly held a large leather portfolio. Her eyes glowed with tears, but she was smiling.

She also had a lightness in her step. Odd he should notice such a thing.

“Dessert,” Grams said. “Go sit. You’ve done enough. Jenny, you help.” She ushered the men out of the kitchen. They joined Pa in the sitting room.

“Amadea makes the world’s best cannoli. I hope you left room,” he said to Buzz.

“Always. And I know her cannoli are amazing.” Buzz sat on the couch, and RJ sat on the other side with Kelly between them. “We lived in Brooklyn for two years early in our career.” He laughed.

“Where?” RJ asked.

“Other side. We’d heard about Cappomaggi’s being the best bakery, so we had to taste for ourselves.”

Pa nodded. “How old?”

“We were all nineteen, except for Curt. He’s a year younger.”

“Your parents were okay with that?”

“Mostly. My parents always encouraged me musically. I wasn’t the best student in school, but when I found music, I knew I’d found what I was meant to be.” He smiled.

“Did you always play drums?” RJ asked. In spite of his earlier threats, Buzz sensed he was a fan. RJ got extra points for not letting that fact interfere with his brotherly duties.

“Actually, no. I started on piano. Jack and I took lessons together.”

“It’s ready,” Jenny said.

They went into the dining room.

“Buzz was just telling us how he got started in music,” Pa said.

“Pa...” Kelly sighed.

He waved her away. “What? As the men in the family, RJ and I are entitled to know about your young man.” He took a

sip of his espresso. “Go on.”

“Well, as I said, Jack and I took piano lessons. We were playing outside one day after a storm, and there were all these downed branches. I found these two smaller sticks, and I spent an hour or so with my pocket knife scraping the bark and evening them out. Jack’s dad’s a plumber, and he had all these old buckets in the garage with supplies. I’d gotten a portable keyboard for my birthday, but we’d grown tired of both playing piano. We emptied out the buckets and made ourselves a drum kit of sorts. The second I hit that bucket with the stick, I knew I was done with piano.”

“So you don’t play anymore?” Grams asked.

“I do. When I’m working on lyrics, I prefer the piano, but sometimes I compose on the guitar.”

Kelly’s eye clouded. “I didn’t know you played other instruments.”

Buzz squeezed her hand. “No big deal.” They hadn’t spent much time talking about his work, but Buzz didn’t want her to feel bad. He was on a break, but Kelly worked all the time, so it was natural she brought her work home with her. He liked learning about what she did and how she got ideas for designs. She had a great head for business, and he had no doubt she’d manifest all her dreams into reality. He was quite proud of her.

“So, Buzz, you have brothers or sisters?”

“Grams...”

“What? I’m interested in your young man. Someday when you—” Grams’ eyes closed. “Of course, you already understand.” Grams sniffled. “So?”

“I don’t mind.” He owed it to Kelly to be polite and play the game. He’d gotten her into this mess, and he’d get her out of it. “I have one sister. Stephanie.”

“Are your parents still together?”

“Grams!”

“It’s a fair question. So many marriages...”

Uneasiness had Buzz fighting the urge to squirm. Kelly had said he didn't know Italian families, and she'd been right. At least not like this one. There didn't seem to be a single topic that was out of line for just meeting someone. He understood they were looking out for her, but with every answer, he was digging himself deeper into a hole. "Yes."

He'd have smacked his head if he were alone. Her grandparents were going to be angry; there was no way around it. Buzz would never have to see them again, but somehow, the fake boyfriend story wasn't sitting well with him. He'd lied to their faces, and every word would be another lie because the end was coming. If he were strong and brave like Kelly's grandfather had said, he'd come clean now. But Kelly wanted the pretense, and he'd honor his commitment to her.

But worst of all, he understood, no matter what he did, Kelly would get hurt. He'd leave Brooklyn and had the option to never return, but this was her home. She'd have to deal with the sympathetic looks and behind-the-back whispers of her neighbors and her staff. She'd already lived through that once because of her divorce.

"Is she musically inclined also?"

"Uh, not really. She got the brains. She's a pediatric cardiothoracic surgeon."

"How old is she?" Pa said.

"Thirty-five. She's very driven. Always has been."

"And you are how old?" Grams asked.

What's next, shoe size? "Twenty-nine."

She nodded. "The man should always be older than the woman. Levels the playing ground. Men are much less mature."

RJ snickered. "So I have your blessing to date seventeen-year-olds?"

Kelly's head dropped to her hands.

Buzz kept his laugh in check.

Grams shook her head. “You are not funny, young man. You are a grown man, and grown men don’t date children.”

RJ put his hand up. “Sorry, bad joke.”

Grams turned her steely gaze to him. “Have you dated teenagers?”

Now Buzz wanted to kick RJ under the table. “Only when I was a teenager.”

Pa cleared his throat. “Pediatric surgery. Very impressive. She must be an amazing young woman.”

Buzz smiled. “She is. Any medical discipline comes with the inevitable bad news, but Steph, she has a way about her... it’s special. She’s not afraid to bond with her patients, and she does it in a way that doesn’t cloud her judgment.” Buzz cleared his throat. “She understands what families go through when a child has a heart issue.” He was so proud of his sister. She was the strong one. She always had been.

“You were sick?”

Buzz’s head shot up. He locked eyes with Grams. “I...uh was born with a heart defect. Had surgery when I was three.” Heavy emotions bubbled up in his throat. He was an asshole for letting this situation with Steph go this long.

Grams nodded. “A sick child is so very scary.” Grams blessed herself. “So, she became a doctor because of what you went through?”

“Yes.”

“See how God plans?” She looked at her grandchildren. “Something wonderful came out of something...”

Buzz glanced at her. The tears in her eyes spilled over, and his heart constricted.

Grams cleared her throat. “Buzz, will you still be here on 9/11?”

Kelly gasped and dropped her fork.

Dread churned in his stomach and clawed up his throat. There was only one reason anyone would ask that question,

and when he glanced at Kelly, his heart damn near exploded. “There’s a gig for a local club reopening. We...got our start there.” The air in the room seemed to disappear. “I leave the next day.”

Kelly’s eyes were squeezed shut.

Silence strangled the room.

“We close the bakery, and our priest says a mass for our daughter. I hope you’ll join us.”

Kelly was already shaking her head. “Grams, he’s got things to do that day to get ready to leave.” Her voice cracked.

Buzz’s heart took another hit.

One he would never recover from.

Chapter Eighteen

THE SILENCE WAS DEAFENING, AND KELLY SCRUNCHEd HER eyes closed. Her mind replayed that horrible day. Dad coming to school and collecting them. Complete numbness had lasted for weeks. The stabbing pain in her heart knowing she'd never see her mom again.

How could I have thought dinner with my family wouldn't be a total disaster? This fake boyfriend thing had been the best way to keep her privacy, but it was a monumental mistake. Why should she care what her neighbors thought? She didn't owe anyone any explanations. If she wanted to fuck every guy she met, she was free to do so.

She wouldn't blame Buzz if he dropped all pretense and ran. She should've anticipated the topic coming up. It was the end of August. They'd all been feeling the increasing strain of the anniversary. After all these years, she should be used to it. The sympathetic looks. The behind-the-back whispers. They'd never had privacy in their grief.

At first, the entire country had grieved with them. The world had. But as the years stretched out, more and more people forgot. But she'd never forget. None of her family would. That day had ultimately stolen both her parents. Her mother on the day; her father had died due to exposure to the toxins as he'd worked at the site for months. He'd spent every off-shift day there, helping, digging, hoping. Only now was the true death toll from that day being counted.

Buzz cleared his throat. "Yes, of course."

Kelly turned to him. She hoped her eyes conveyed her thoughts. *You don't have to do this.*

His brown eyes held deep compassion. He reached for her hand and squeezed it.

He was a nice guy, so of course, he'd said yes. What choice did he have? Just like he hadn't any choice about coming to dinner. But she wouldn't hold him to it. In fact, she didn't want him there. Last year, even though they'd been separated, Enzo had been there for her. But this year, she was sure he'd be coming with Claudia, and Kelly wouldn't have him to lean on.

Blood scrambled through her veins. Her stomach turned over, and for a second, Kelly thought she'd pass out. "Excuse me." Kelly walked quickly into the hall bathroom, making it just in time before her dinner came up. Sweat trickled down her temple. She'd better not be getting sick again. She'd cut her hours back so she could enjoy Buzz, but she couldn't afford to take any more time.

After a soft knock, the door opened. Kelly was relieved when Jenny closed the door.

"You okay?" Jenny ran the cold water and grabbed a few paper towels from under the sink. Running them under the water to soak them, she twisted some of the water out and handed the wad to Kelly. "Here."

Kelly dabbed her face. "Does anyone else know?"

Jenny shook her head. "Well, Buzz, but I beat him out of the room. Everyone else was in their own private hell."

"Damn."

"It's never come up?"

Kelly shook her head. "Why would it?" But now she'd have to do something she'd hoped to avoid. She'd actually have to tell someone her mother had been killed on 9/11. She had no doubt her staff knew, but no one ever talked about it in front of her. When they'd moved to Brooklyn, the entire neighborhood had already known. She'd been grateful she'd never had to say it out loud. Dread spiraled through her.

Buzz had respected her privacy, but now, he'd want to know. He'd ask questions.

She should end things now. It would be better for both of them. She was getting too comfortable with him.

“Is he really gonna come?”

She glanced at Jenny. “No. I'm sure he was just being polite. Grams put him on the spot. He couldn't say no.”

“Things are still just...casual between you two?”

Kelly nodded. “Why?”

Jenny half shrugged. “Either he's a really good actor or he really cares about you.”

“Well, I guess that's to be expected a little, right? I mean, sex is personal, intimate. I like him. He's very nice. Thoughtful. Considerate.”

Jenny's head tilted. “So, you *like*, like him.”

Kelly closed her eyes and sighed. “*Like*, like? Really, Jen, what are we, teenagers?”

“Do you, or don't you? Are you gonna be okay when he leaves?”

Maybe she wouldn't be. But she couldn't maintain this amount of time away from her business, and Buzz had other, more important things he needed to focus on. She'd never want to jeopardize his sobriety. And she totally understood why he couldn't do both, not long-term at least. Because she couldn't either. The only reason she'd agreed to this was because it *had* to end.

“Kel, if things have changed, it's okay. I like him. In case you were wondering what I thought.” Jenny chuckled. “And Grams and Pa are clearly charmed. Even RJ.” She laughed. “Once he got over the idea you're having sex with Buzz, he seems to have relaxed a little.”

RJ. She hadn't considered how this would affect him. Even though he was six years younger, the older he got, the more protective he'd become of them. It no longer mattered he was

the youngest. He'd assumed the role of protector. She'd seen it with Jenny and her boyfriends. But this was a new experience for them.

"We better get back out there. If Grams knows you puked, she'll insist you stay so she can take care of you." Jenny hugged her. "You know, it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to keep Buzz around. He's really a sweet guy."

"I wouldn't have been so attracted to him if he weren't."

When Jenny pulled back, her eyes held fear. "I mean, I think you shouldn't... Just because you agreed to four weeks, doesn't mean you have to stick to it." Jenny smiled, and Kelly glimpsed her sister before their lives had been decimated. "You're more relaxed. I don't want to say nicer, because you've always been great to all your employees." Her head tilted to the side. "Yes, nicer. Definitely nicer. To yourself. Putting yourself first for a change."

Kelly scoffed. "What are you talking about? I put myself first all the time."

Jenny grabbed her shoulders. "No, Kel."

"Enzo said so." Tears welled.

Jenny sighed. "People say a lot of things when they're hurt. I'm sure he didn't mean it."

Kelly nodded. "Oh, he meant it all right. He said I put you guys or the business first. And I did. When I opened the boutique, I did that for me. It put a lot of strain on our relationship, and no matter how I tried to cut back, I never did."

"Enzo would've stuck it out."

"I know. But I loved him too much to put him second. The business will always come first, and he'd have ended up hating me for it." She scoffed. "I always thought we wanted the same things, that we were on the same page. But somewhere along the line..." *I got lost.* "I'll never feel that way again."

"What way?"

“In love. Too much has happened. Too much pain. Too much loss.”

Jenny hugged her.

She jumped when a knock broke the moment. “Kel?” RJ said.

Jenny opened the door. She should’ve known it was RJ. Pa would never, and Grams would’ve just opened the door.

“Buzz is doing a good job of distracting Grams. He’s telling her about the time he met Clint Eastwood standing in line at a bank when they were on their first tour in California.”

Jenny and Kelly giggled.

“Grams has a definite crush,” Kelly said.

RJ took a deep breath, and his imitation of Grams doing one of Eastwood’s famous lines was spot-on.

Giggles turned to laughter.

“I hope you’re not laughing at me.” Buzz said. “You okay?” His caring expression warmed her.

Kelly nodded because her throat was knotted. Her emotions were so close to the surface she was in danger of bursting into tears.

“Did she do her impression?” RJ asked

Buzz laughed. “I thought Clint was in the room.”

“I swear she knows every line to all his movies.” RJ looked from Kelly to Buzz. “Come on, sis.” He tugged Jenny’s arm, and they left.

Buzz’s compassion made her heart ache. That had to be it. He was a nice guy and a songwriter, and he’d been able to read her thoughts since they’d met. That was all it was.

All it could ever be.

He looked around the corner and back at her. “You don’t have to say anything. I’m so sorry.” Buzz pulled her into a hug.

Even though she'd repeatedly broken rule seven and Buzz had said the rules didn't matter, she should resist. This was way outside their agreement, but his warmth, his strength, felt so good. She relaxed into him, and his hold tightened.

"It's okay, baby."

But it wasn't okay. It never would be. Until this moment, she'd hoped to live her entire life without having to tell anyone the details of her mother's death. He wouldn't push her to tell him, but she'd fooled herself that she'd never have to tell someone. Buzz's life was too complicated for them to ever really be able to have a non-fake relationship. So was hers, but maybe she wouldn't spend the rest of her life alone. She'd missed the intimate connection of having a partner, not just a lover. And Buzz had filled that hole in her heart so easily. He'd said it was to be expected they'd have some emotional attachment, and she'd needed that even for a hookup with an expiration date.

She wasn't cut out for casual sex the way her sister was, but this wasn't exactly a better option. Emotional attachment would lead to heartbreak, and her heart just couldn't withstand another break. She'd pieced it back together already, and not all the pieces were there. One or two more lost and she'd be permanently numb.

Like Grams.

Kelly would let him off the hook Grams had forced him on.

If she hadn't lied about them being a couple, Grams never would've brought it up to him, so this mess was her fault. How had their simple agreement to enjoy each other sexually spiraled so far out of her control?

She forced herself to pull back, but Buzz didn't release her. His arms allowed her to put some space between them, but his hands were clasped behind her back. Caring, deep-brown eyes shone with emotion. And tears. He sniffled. "My dad worked in the south tower even after we moved to Pine Hill. He'd opened his own firm in Pine Hill six months before the attacks. But on that day, when they made the announcement

over the PA, I forgot for a few seconds. I'd never felt such terror in my life. After I remembered, I still felt the terror inside my body for several minutes. Then I felt joy until I thought about all the kids at school whose parents worked in the towers. Parents who they'd never see again, and I felt bad for being happy."

Kelly stepped closer. "No one could blame you for that."

"I'm so very sorry."

Kelly had many people tell her how sorry they were, but the only ones who ever truly understood were other victims' families. And Buzz. He was a special man. "You don't—"

Buzz put his finger over his lips. "Not here," he whispered.

Kelly nodded. He was looking out for her. But one thing became very clear. They needed to break up before the memorial. She wouldn't share that pain with him, no matter how badly she wanted to. It would bond them in a way she had no right to expect. She'd also have to figure out a way to end their relationship where he didn't take the blame. Kelly didn't want anyone to think poorly of Buzz. It shouldn't matter, but it did.

They returned to the dining room, and she helped Jenny clear the dessert plates. Buzz joined Pa and RJ in the living room. When she entered, Buzz stood. "It's getting late, and Kelly has a lot to do tomorrow."

"She always does," RJ said. "Store's closed Sunday and Monday, but not for her."

If she didn't know better, she'd think RJ liked Buzz. His earlier open aggression had faded, but he was still a little put off. He couldn't know about their arrangement, so she chalked it up to his being concerned. She hugged her brother and kissed his cheek.

"I love you, sis." He pulled back and stared into her eyes.

She hugged him again. This time of year always brought everyone's emotions to the surface. She had to be strong for RJ. If she lost it now, there wouldn't be a dry eye in the house. Grams and Pa had lost their only daughter. They moved on as

best they could, but there was no recovering from the loss of a child. It was compounded by the way it happened, and they shared that day of loss with tens of thousands of others.

“Be safe, little brother.”

He nodded.

She’d never not worry about him.

Buzz waited in the hall. “Ready?” He smiled.

“Yeah.”

They walked back to her apartment in silence. The gnawing urge to confide in Buzz bewildered her. She’d never felt anything like it before. Kelly went up the stairs, telling herself it’d be better not to invite him in. She didn’t want to be alone, but she wasn’t in the mood for sex.

She waited while Buzz put the key in and unlocked the door. “Back.” He made sure her kitties obeyed then ushered her in. He closed the door and leaned his back against it. “Have you decided?”

It was unnerving he could read her so easily. Even Enzo had taken years to develop that skill. “Listen...” They had a sexual agreement. It didn’t include what she needed tonight, and she had no right to ask him for it.

Buzz smiled and brushed a hair off her cheek. “I’d like to stay. I don’t think you want to be alone, and as much as I want you all the damn time, I can control my urges. I’d like to hold you.”

She wanted that too. A strange twinge rolled through her. Sadness? Regret? She wasn’t sure. She’d been focusing on their time together now, which wasn’t her strong suit. “How’d you know what I was thinking?”

“One of the first skills a guy develops is recognizing when a woman *doesn’t* want to have sex with him.” He chuckled, and when she didn’t, he said, “You get this little crinkle here when you’re deep in thought.” He touched her skin next to her left eyebrow. “I know we made this list of rules, we’ve broken some, but if you need something, I don’t want some silly rule

to keep you from reaching out to me.” He kissed her gently on the forehead. “I care about you, Kel.” He held his breath.

She cared about him, too, but she didn’t say it. He might misunderstand and think things had changed, but even though the thought of him leaving left her feeling confused now, she wouldn’t break that rule. “Stay.”

Buzz pulled her into his arms. His strength allowed her to let go of some of hers, and her muscles relaxed. He pulled back. “Why don’t you go get comfortable, and I’ll get the kitties squared away.”

“You’re too good to me.”

Buzz shook his head. “Not possible.”

Kelly went to the bedroom and changed into her comfiest pink pajamas. Since they’d been together, the auto feeder she’d gotten hadn’t been needed. She had to admit getting home before she was totally exhausted had been nice. On her way to the bathroom, she glanced into the living room. Buzz was playing with the cats. They loved the long stick with the feathers he’d bought for them. He had a tender heart, and for the first time, it dawned on her she might end up hurting him.

She washed her face, brushed her teeth, and put her hair in a ponytail. Staring at her reflection, Kelly smiled. She looked pretty damn good. The dark circles and puffiness under her eyes were gone, and since she wasn’t eating as much junk food, her skin glowed. But the most noticeable change was her smile. She smiled all the time. Not the perfunctory smiles she’d been giving everyone for the past two years. Or longer. Even now, she felt the crushing sadness suffusing her being, but she wasn’t being crushed by it.

She went into the living room, and Buzz lay on her floor with four kitties splayed out on him. His hands stroked fur, and their cumulative purring was calming.

Buzz glanced at her. “What?”

“You’re spoiling them.”

Buzz picked up Sadie and held her over his face. “Am I? Am I spoiling you?” He placed her on the floor over his head

and sat up. Chonkers and Squdgy slid to the floor. Mr. Darcy was on his thigh, and Buzz inhaled sharply as Darcy's razor-sharp piranha kitten claws bit into his leg through his jeans. "I'm the one who's spoiled." Buzz stood and tried to brush fur off his clothing.

"Don't bother. Their fur sticks like glue. I have a brush."

"No worries. I kinda like it. It's like they're marking me as theirs. I'm thinking of getting a pet to bring on the road with me."

"How? Most hotels don't allow animals."

Buzz laughed. "The hotels we stay in will let me."

"Because you're a rock star?"

Buzz leveled her with a boyish grin. "It has its perks."

"Well, that's not really fair, is it?"

"Nope. Doesn't mean I won't do it. Do you want to watch a movie?"

Kelly glanced at the TV Buzz had moved from her work room last week. He'd bought a streaming player to access his accounts. They'd actually watched a few movies, which had been nice. She shook her head.

"Okay, bedtime." He walked into her bedroom and kicked off his shoes as he took his shirt off. "Be right back." He went to the bathroom and washed up.

Kelly crawled into bed, and the kitties joined her. Sadie walked up, plopped on her lap, and purred. Sadie hadn't been a lap cat until Buzz. But this was the first time she'd ever laid on Kelly.

When he returned, his jeans were unbuttoned.

Her breath caught in her throat. *Why was a shirtless man with the button on his jeans popped so fucking sexy?*

He shoved them down, laid them over the chair with his shirt, and crawled into bed next to her. "Come on, Lady Sadie, let us get comfortable."

Sadie got off, and Kelly sank under the covers.

“Tell me how you want it.”

“Buzz—”

He smirked. “Cuddling. You want me to spoon you, or do you want to lay against me, snuggled up close?”

“Oh, right. Of course.” Kelly turned into his side, and Buzz’s strong arm closed around her. She rested her head on his shoulder. The cats moved around, finding spots to settle in.

When the tears started to fall, his arm tightened.

“It’s okay. Let it out.” His soft words crumbled the last of her reserves, and she cried. Cried for the loss of her mom when Kelly had been on the cusp of womanhood and for all she’d missed out on. Cried for RJ and Jenny. Cried for her dad. He’d been her rock until he’d died. Even up to the last day, his strength had been there for her to draw on. And his love.

All the while, Buzz stroked her, whispered words of encouragement and caring, and placed soft kisses on her head. It helped ease the ache in her everything. Her eyes were swollen, and her abdomen ached from sobbing. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Do you need some aspirin?”

Her head throbbed. “No, it’ll be a production getting everyone back in bed again. I just want to go to sleep.”

Buzz chuckled. “It’s kinda like having kids, isn’t it? You know, if they were perpetual toddlers who never grew up and think the world revolves around them.”

“Yeah, that’s it exactly.”

Chapter Nineteen

BUZZ WOKE BEFORE DAWN WITH KELLY SNUGGLED NEXT TO him and the kitties still asleep. His heart ached for her and her family. They'd planned the gig for the reopening of The Rock House on 9/11 months ago. They'd shifted a few tour dates so they could be there for the grand reopening. They'd all invested, and Buzz was excited to be part of a New York landmark

Words swirled in his mind. Grabbing his phone off the nightstand, he opened the notepad. Typing was harder than talking, but he didn't want to risk waking Kelly. He'd developed a shorthand, and he'd do his best to decipher it later. He only needed to get the essence of what he was trying to say down.

Kelly shifted in her sleep and rolled onto her back. Her ponytail was a mess, and she looked incredibly sexy. Her nipples showed through the thin cotton material of her pajama top.

She'd needed someone to hold her, and he was relieved she hadn't used their stupid rules to keep him from being there for her.

Kelly turned on her other side, so Buzz spooned her. He liked the feel of her against him. How she fit perfectly. She was amazing. All she'd been through, all she'd survived. All the things she'd done for her family.

He'd had a tough childhood, but nothing compared to Kelly's. Music had been his refuge. The place where he finally

felt like he belonged. It still was. The only reason he'd taken piano lessons was because Jack had, and he'd been terrified Jack would move on without him. He'd still been Buzz's only real friend.

Jack had told him after the first lesson he knew what he wanted to be when he grew up. Buzz had never had thoughts like that. Mostly, he'd wondered if he'd get the chance to. He feared his heart would break again, and he'd need more surgery. No matter how his parents assured him, he lived with the fear of being sick. Of being different. Being broken. He'd been born broken.

His parents had immediately arranged the piano lessons, and the next time Jack went, Buzz went too. He'd finally found something he was good at, and he'd loved it. He'd put all his focus on music instead of fear.

Kelly's butt wiggled against his groin. He hadn't thought she'd be interested in sex this morning, but he was more than happy to oblige her. He kissed the back of her head as his hand traveled up her abdomen until he cupped her breast.

“Mmm.”

“Like that?” She smelled warm and spicy.

“Very much.” She wiggled again.

“Torturing me will get you a prize.”

She wiggled. “I like prizes.”

He plucked her nipple.

“B.” She hissed out a breath.

“Yes?”

She rolled onto her back. Faint sunlight crept around the closed curtains. Her beautiful brown eyes sparkled with lust. Her smile invited him in.

Buzz leaned down and took her lips. She opened her mouth and moaned. He stroked her breast, kneading her firm flesh, stroking his thumb over the hard peak.

“I think I feel my prize.” Her hand disappeared under the covers, and she stroked his dick. “Yup, that’s my prize, for sure.” She pushed his underwear down and curled her fingers around his length. She stroked him from base to tip.

His hips pumped. “Fuck.”

“Yes.”

“You first.” He shifted his hips away.

“Hey, I wasn’t done.”

Buzz shoved his underwear down. “Kitties, off.” He pulled the sheet off her. He undid the first few buttons on her top, stopping when he exposed her breasts. “Lovely.” Her nipples were hard, inviting. Leaning down, he sucked one into his mouth and swirled his tongue around the tight peak. He slipped his free hand down her bottoms and found his prize. Her slickness covered his fingers. “I gotta fucking taste you.” He licked his fingers, but it wasn’t enough. His cock pulsed in anticipation.

Kelly leaned on her elbow. Her thumb stroked over the thick head of his cock. “You are so perfect.” She brought her thumb to her lips, and her tongue darted out and licked his precum.

She knew it drove him wild. Sally hadn’t let him come in her mouth. She’d suck his cock, but she’d always finish with her hand. He’d been fine with it because there was no other choice. He’d never force a woman to do something she didn’t want to, but Kelly didn’t have a problem with it.

She liked it.

Loved it.

Wanted it.

He was in danger of breaking his only sex rule. He wanted her to blow him, wanted to watch as she lapped up every last drop of his cum. Nothing made him come faster than watching her suck his dick.

It made him feel special.

“Lie back.” Kelly sat up and finished unbuttoning her top.

“No. You first.”

She shimmied out of her bottoms, and at the sight of her totally naked and perfect body, Buzz stroked his cock. He needed to come soon. He’d never felt so out of control. “Kel, please.” He couldn’t stop himself. The sight of her full tits, her pussy, her olive skin flushed with desire, and her cream coating her inner thighs had him out of his mind.

Her pupils dilated. “Are you gonna come?”

He exhaled out a slow breath. “Not quite yet. Soon.” Or maybe now. Her eyes followed his hand as he brought himself closer to the edge. “Touch yourself.”

Her lips parted on a soft gasp, and her left hand cupped her breast as her right trailed slowly down her belly and over her mound. She spread her lips, and her clit was distended and wet. She toyed with him, going around and around but not where he wanted.

“Kel, don’t fuck with me. Touch your clit.” His hips thrust back and forth.

“Here?” Her finger paused over her engorged flesh.

“Yeah, there. Please. Now!”

Her head went back as she stroked herself. Her fingers were covered in her glorious juices.

He could practically taste her.

She walked on her knees until her pussy was only inches from the head of his cock. “Come.”

Buzz shook his head.

“Don’t make me ask again.”

Her hand left her pussy and clasped around his dick. “You look like you could use some lube.” Her hand slid easily over his hard cock.

His heart thudded, and watching her stroke him made it hard to breathe. His nuts tightened. Buzz pumped his hips and

covered her hand with his, squeezing. “Tighter.”

She used her other hand to resume pleasuring herself, and that sent him over the edge. He came on her belly. She smiled when his cum splashed on her. Her eyes locked on his, and as he finished, her orgasm exploded, and she cried out.

He pulled her to him and they collapsed back on the bed. Buzz handed her a few tissues. *I’ll never get enough. Whoa. Stop.* He pulled the sheet over them as Kelly snuggled closer. He used to prefer sleeping alone because watching someone else sleep when he couldn’t suck. He also couldn’t do whatever he wanted.

But on the nights he stayed over, he slept great. The nights without her, he’d wake several times and had a hard time falling back to sleep. Some nights, he didn’t sleep much, and he’d come to dread those dark lonely hours. Invariably, his thoughts turned to the past. He needed to examine it in order to move on, but in the dark, the memories taunted him, forcing him to relive his damage.

“Listen, don’t worry about coming to the memorial. I’ll tell Grams something came up.”

Buzz’s heart stuttered. *She doesn’t want me there.* He wanted to be there for her, but he wouldn’t examine why. She’d need someone to lean on, and the very least he could do was to support her. “Why? Because you think Grams put me on the spot or because you don’t want me there.”

She leaned up on her shoulder and cupped his jaw with her soft hand. “Honestly?”

He nodded.

“Bit of both. Last year, even though Enzo and I weren’t together, he sat with me, held my hand. But this year, he’ll be with Claudia. I’m truly happy he found her. She’s so sweet, and she’s good to him. He’s not mine anymore, and I can’t keep leaning on him. He’s moved on, and I have to let him go.” A tear spilled down her cheek, and she brushed it away. “I know you’re too nice to say no.”

“I never considered saying no.” He caught her hand with his and moved it over his heart. “You don’t have to go through it alone.”

She smiled softly. “I won’t be alone. Dozens of our friends and neighbors will come.”

Buzz was hurt, but he had no right to be. “We’re friends.” He should let it drop, but he couldn’t.

She sat up.

Buzz stared at her back. When her shoulders lifted and fell, he sat up and moved around her so she sat between his legs. Her soft sobs tore at his soul. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t push you.”

“It’s not that.” She leaned back into him, and Buzz put his arms around her.

He’d never felt so strong. “What then?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. You’re being so sweet, but I don’t want to take advantage of you. Even though people think we’re a couple now, this is supposed to be casual, and you coming to the memorial wouldn’t be casual.”

He kissed the back of her head. “You’re not taking advantage. I’m offering. But if it makes you uncomfortable for me to be there”—Buzz exhaled the pain—“then I won’t go.” They’d agreed to keep it simple, but simple wasn’t even in the rearview mirror anymore. They’d have to officially break up, and since the idea had been for that to coincide with when he left on tour, which now he knew about Kelly’s mom, complicated the fuck out of everything.

“B?”

“Mmm?”

“I need to break rule seven. Again. I don’t know why because I’ve always dreaded the thought of having to tell anyone.”

Buzz’s heart flipped, and he was honored. Yesterday, everything in her had screamed “don’t ask.” He tightened his arm around her. “Go ahead, baby.”

She moved away from him and turned on her side. Crooking her finger, she said, “Come here.”

Buzz scooted down and faced her. “Like this?”

She nodded.

They shared a pillow.

Kelly took a steadying breath. “My mom worked on the ninety-seventh floor of the north tower.” Her eyes filled with tears, and she scrunched them closed, forcing tears out.

“You don’t have to.”

Eyes still scrunched closed, she nodded. “I want to. I used to think I’d be lucky if I never had to tell anyone.” She swallowed hard. “But this year, I don’t know if it’s because Enzo’s getting married, or because RJ’s at Ten House and I’m terrified for him, but this entire month has felt like I’d explode. I know it’s a lot to ask.”

He wiped her wet cheek. “It’s not. I understand. Really. There’s stuff I’ve never talked about, and it ended up being the reason I so easily fell down the rabbit hole of drugs. For years I told myself it was because of my knee pain, but the emotional shit I was carrying was so much worse, only I didn’t realize it until I started therapy.” He exhaled slowly. “Can I tell you something I haven’t even shared in therapy?”

“Yeah.”

“Part of me knew I wasn’t self-medicating because of my knee. Things in my life were coming to a head. My relationship with my girlfriend wasn’t as great as I thought or told everyone. I felt like I was letting her down. Like I wasn’t strong enough to...save her like she needed me to. I didn’t know how to make her happy, so I ignored things I knew were problems, hoping they’d go away.” His muscles relaxed. “I barely let myself think about it, but saying it to you makes it easier to tackle.”

“B.” More tears spilled over.

“Hey, don’t cry for me. I’m dealing. It’s good to let this stuff out.” He bared his greatest weakness to try to ease her

doubts about sharing, not so she'd cry for him.

"I don't feel sorry for you. I feel sad you didn't realize you deserve someone who supported you as much as you supported her. You were never in a position to save her. She needed to save herself. You could help, but it should never have been your responsibility."

Buzz had never felt more exposed. Not even during family therapy when he'd listened to his parents tell him how scared they'd been for him. And how Stephanie had yelled and cursed at him for being so stupid for getting into drugs in the first place. He'd seen his sister angry, but it had been the first time her rage had been aimed at him. "Okay."

Kelly slowly exhaled. "They said when the plane hit the tower everyone in the impact zone was killed instantly." She let out an openmouthed breath. "She never stood a chance because of the floor she worked on. I know almost three thousand people never made it out alive, but some of them had the chance. By the time I heard about it at school, she was already gone, but I didn't know that yet. They only said the building was struck, so I prayed so hard she'd been out at a meeting or hadn't made it into the office yet. But when they called Jenny and me to the principal's office and I saw my dad and grandma with RJ, I knew. I could see it on his face. We stayed with my grandma and he left to..." Kelly turned her face into the pillow and sobbed.

Buzz stroked her arm, wishing he could take her pain away. "Let it out, Kel. You're safe with me."

She nodded, moved closer, and tucked her head under his chin.

Buzz held her as more tears and sobs wracked her body. After a few minutes, her sobs eased, but he didn't let go. And she didn't move away. He felt like she was gearing up for something else, but he couldn't imagine anything being worse than what she'd already told him.

"I have an older brother from my mom's first marriage. We were never really close because he's six years older than me. My dad adopted him when they got married. Frankie had just

started his sophomore year at UC Berkeley. He came home for the funeral, but by Christmas, he'd reconnected with his birth father. By the end of his third year, he didn't even come home anymore. Even changed his last name back to his father's. I haven't seen him in fourteen years."

Kelly sniffled, and Buzz handed her a few tissues.

"My dad spent months at Ground Zero." She blew her nose. "I remember him coming home covered in ash, smelling of burnt everything. He was amazing. He always said my mom was the love of his life and he'd never been in love until they'd met. Even in his grief, on his off-shift days, he'd go into Manhattan and work the pile. His mom moved in with us, and she was great, but then she got sick and died." She buried her face in his neck again.

Buzz tightened his hold.

"When my dad got cancer, he fought so hard for two years."

"Oh, Kel, I'm so sorry."

"When my dad got sick, nobody really understood the true impact of 9/11. Many first responders were starting to get sick and die. But the powers that be weren't big on acknowledging that causation."

Buzz stroked her hair. "You've been through so much, and then you raised your brother and sister." Kelly was a strong, independent woman who'd built herself a small empire, and she wasn't even thirty yet. Creating art was hard as fuck, but the business side made it seem easy in comparison. There were no shortages of very creative people in all mediums who failed miserably because of bad business decisions. She was smart, funny, sexy, and he enjoyed being with her. Of course, the sex being off the charts didn't hurt. But he looked forward to seeing her when they were apart. And not just for sexual gratification. He had a better understanding of what she'd gone through, and his admiration exploded.

Kelly resting against him made him long for something he'd never thought he'd have. A partner. She could be his

partner. She had her own life and understood what it took to be successful in a creative industry. He loved touring and seeing the world. He'd never thought he'd get lucky and find someone to share it with like his bandmates had. The connection with Kelly had turned amazing casual sex into something so much more.

Kelly shook her head. "We've really screwed things up, haven't we?"

"Yeah." He chuckled, but it wasn't funny. "We were so sure we'd covered all our bases when we made our arrangement. But it truly never dawned on me what other people would think." He sighed. "I guess that's my fault. My friends knew, so I never considered what your friends and family would think."

"Neither did I." She sighed. "I really like Emily and Nicki. Not just because they're spending a fortune on my designs. We've been out a few times as friends." Kelly shook her head. "I didn't really have any friends left. I wasn't the most open person when we moved here, so I never really made a lot of friends, and the few I had either moved away or we lost touch. I didn't really realize how much I missed having friends."

And maybe you'll miss our friendship? A rush of joy surged through him. He wanted to keep seeing her. The last three months of the tour were pretty packed, but he'd already looked at the schedule and he could fly home three times.

She kissed his cheek. "Now that we have to break up, it'd be better if we did it before the memorial. If you come and are all sweet and caring, no one will believe it if we break up the next day."

They'd both been so stupid. But he hadn't known about Kelly's mom. Her heart had been battered enough. The absolute last thing he ever wanted to do was cause her any pain. Not even a little. His heart had been crushed, and Buzz never wanted to feel that pain again.

He had to figure out exactly what he was feeling for her and if he wanted to pursue it. If he was *ready* to pursue it. How far would he go to convince her? Because with every push he

made for what he wanted, he risked her heart getting hurt again. And he wouldn't do it until he was clear on his own feelings. He couldn't be sure, until their time was up, that he wasn't just in the throes of amazing sex. Unbelievable really. Never before experienced. He wouldn't ask her to risk her heart again until he was sure he wanted to risk his own.

Buzz kissed her gently on the forehead. "We have time to figure it out. Let's not rush into any decisions about how to get you out of this. Maybe it'll work itself out."

Kelly gave him an odd look, but she didn't keep pushing to figure out what they'd do.

And that gave Buzz hope.

Chapter Twenty

KELLY STARED AT HER SKETCH PAD. SHE HAD SIX DIFFERENT designs for Buzz's tux, but she couldn't narrow it down. He'd look great in all of them. He'd been no help when she'd shown them to him. He'd said he liked them all and she should pick since she was the professional. Every time she tried, she ended up daydreaming about him. Instead of making a choice, she'd sketched him. Pages were filled with his image. Some of them weren't even dirty. She'd been staring at the headshot she'd drawn for ten minutes. She flipped the page, but that was a mistake.

Naked Buzz.

What the hell's wrong with me? She'd been married for over five years, but she'd never been so distracted by sex she couldn't get her work done. Now it was all she thought about. She took a sip of coffee. She hadn't seen Buzz in two days because he'd been busy, so she missed the sex. And his company. It was nice having someone to come home to and getting home while the sun was still shining. The kitties had gotten used to it, so Kelly left at the same time and finished working at home. She didn't think she was missing him. But he was a nice guy, an amazing lover, and an unbelievable listener. That was all. What girl wouldn't daydream about a guy like that?

"Kel?" Jenny stuck her head in.

Kelly jumped, and her coffee spilled on her white blouse. "Crap."

“Sorry.” Jenny smirked.

“What?” Kelly said with more grump than she’d intended.

“Daydreaming about your rock star?”

Kelly grabbed some tissues and blotted at the stain on her blouse. “He’s not *my* rock star.”

Jenny’s brows waggled. “He never took his eyes off you at dinner on Sunday. Are you sure there isn’t more here?”

She threw the tissues in the garbage. “Can’t be. He’s leaving in two weeks.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you *have to* end things.”

Kelly smiled. “Well, I’m not gonna lie. It’s been amazing, but his life is out there.” She waved her arms toward the front of the store.

“In the accessories section?”

“Don’t be dense. His life is on the road. Which guarantees it can’t work.”

“Can’t, or you aren’t willing to try?”

An ache began in her temples.

“Have you’ve considered the possibility you two could be more?”

“Huh? What are you talking about? He’s leaving for three months.” She didn’t have time for her sister right now because she’d wasted most of the day thinking about how Buzz had been so understanding. And kind. And sweet. And what he looked like naked.

He was still set on taking the hit for their breakup. Whenever she’d tried to talk to him about it, he’d shut her down.

“Yeah, but then he’ll be back. He hasn’t suggested maybe you could continue to see each other?”

Kelly waved her off. “Why would he? We have an agreement. He has his own life, and I have mine. And we have zero in common.”

“Zero, huh? Okay, you’re in a mood. PMS, I get it.”

Kelly sighed. “It’s not PMS. It’s common sense.”

“Not PMS? Are you sure? Because my inner bitch is on speed dial. When I stopped at the coffee shop to get my morning dose of java, you know that cute guy? The one with those striking hazel bedroom eyes?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, we’ve been flirting, but I’m sure I screwed it up today. I literally screamed at him because my first sip of coffee was too hot and the second sip wasn’t hot enough.” Jenny shook her head. “Guys make jokes about PMS, but it’s no fun for us either. It’s like an alien takes over, and I can’t control my emotions.”

A little PMS never stopped Kelly from staying in control. “So why’d you ask if I had PMS?”

“Because it’s a well-known fact when women work together their periods sync up. And we’ve been in sync for the last year at least. In a store like this where women outnumber men, it’s a wonder the place is still standing during that time of the month. It’s like *Clash of the Titans* meets *Godzilla*, *King Kong*, and *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* all rolled into one perfect storm of hair-trigger emotions.” She leaned forward. “I actually feel sorry for the guys.”

Ever since she’d been on birth control, her periods had been light, and her OB had said it was perfectly normal.

“Is that why he’s not been around the last two days?” Jenny’s brow raised. “Or are you already distancing yourself?”

“No. Why would you think that?” They had thirteen days left, and Kelly planned on enjoying every single one.

“Because you’re leaving later and you’ve taken work home with you.”

“I’m not at the mercy of my urges. He was busy. He’s moving out of Curt’s place because it sold, and he has time in the studio with the guys.”

“Oh, really?” Jenny’s mouth pursed. “Where’s he moving to?”

“A hotel.”

Jenny shot up. “Have you lost your damn mind?”

“What?”

“You didn’t ask him to stay with you?”

Kelly shrugged. “Why would I? We’re just having fun.”

Jenny shook her head in a familiar way. The same way Kelly had when Jenny had done something dumb. “He likes you. You like him. Screw your stupid agreement. Can’t you see you have more than a casual thing?”

“You’re wrong. We agreed.” And she wouldn’t break rule one.

“Well, I think you two are perfect together.” Jenny moved to the couch and patted the seat next to her.

Kelly really needed to get some work done, but she always put her siblings first. Sighing, she sat next to her.

Jenny leveled her with a serious look. “You know I love Enzo. He’s like another brother. He was always there for you and for us. He’s still a part of our family.” Jenny’s eyes misted. “And I know you tried to work things out with him, and your breakup was the saddest thing I’ve ever seen. I never thought you’d find someone who was an even better fit than Enzo because you two were perfect for each other.”

Enzo was a once-in-a-lifetime love, and she’d never feel that way about another man. He’d been perfect for her. She was the one who’d let him down. “Buzz isn’t interested in a relationship. He has to focus on his sobriety, and yes, I like him, of course, or I wouldn’t be sleeping with him, but I also wouldn’t want to do anything to jeopardize his health.” She’d have stopped there, but Jenny wanted her to be more sister than parent. “Being with him has been an eye-opener.” *Wow, it shouldn’t be so hard to talk like this with my sister. Maybe I need therapy.*

Jenny moved closer. “In what way?”

Kelly shrugged. “I realize, even though I love what I do, I need to have more of a life outside of here. Or any life really.” Her voice broke. “The first serious fight Enzo and I had was because I was always working. When I opened the boutique, I was responsible for everything. And Enzo was understanding. To a point anyway. He said he wasn’t even on my to-do list. Business came first, and you guys came second, and there was nothing left for us.” Tears welled. “Then that VideoShare star wanted a custom dress, and it was the chance I’d been waiting for to go national. It wasn’t until we started counseling I realized he’d been right all those months earlier. I didn’t want to believe I was the reason we weren’t going to make it. I tried to cut back, but something always came up.”

Kelly grabbed the box of tissues off the coffee table. “He wanted to keep trying to work it out. He wanted to give it another year, but all I could think about was it would be a ticking time bomb. Another year he’d waste if I didn’t feel differently. I started to resent him. If he would’ve just given up on me, then I wouldn’t have had to be the...bad guy.” *Again.* She’d had to be the bad guy with her brother and sister at times, and she’d always hated it.

“So, you let *him* go?” Tears slid down Jenny’s cheek.

Kelly nodded. “I spent every waking minute thinking about it, and it was burning me out. I could barely function. Enzo never would’ve left me if I hadn’t told him to go.” There was no way she’d ever tell Jenny the full story. She’d never want her baby sister and brother to feel bad.

“Oh, Kel.” Jenny grabbed a tissue. “How do you do that?”

“It wasn’t easy.” But it had been her only option. Nothing like no choices to make decisions easy. Even if it was the worst thing for her.

“No. I mean, how do you always put everyone else before you?”

Kelly scoffed. “Believe me, I don’t.”

Jenny touched her arm. “You do.” She dabbed the tissue under her eyes. “I remember the fight you had with Grams

when you won the FIT competition. It wasn't just having a design featured at Clineman Bridal. You also won an internship at Maison Signore in Italy, but Grams said you couldn't go. You needed to stay here for RJ and me."

Kelly's mouth dropped open.

"It was your dream, and you were forced to give it up for us."

"No." Kelly choked back a sob. "I wasn't forced. It was my decision."

Jenny shook her head. "Don't bother lying. I heard the whole thing."

"You shouldn't have been eavesdropping."

"Really, that's what you're gonna say here?"

Kelly shrugged. "I don't know what else to say." She'd come to terms with her decision years ago. Her life was and always would be in Brooklyn because she'd never leave Jenny and RJ. Any dreams of traveling all over the world had faded long ago. Tears ran down her face. This was old news, and she shouldn't be crying about it, but she couldn't stop.

Jenny hugged her. "You're the most amazing sister in the world, Kel, and I love you." Jenny pulled back. "But you need to see this arrangement with Buzz as the gift it is. Don't cut him loose because you agreed to some stupid end date. Why end things if he makes you happy?"

Kelly wiped her eyes again. She looked at the bunched-up tissue covered in black from her mascara. She'd have to redo her makeup. "I have..."

"What?"

"Too much responsibility to not consider everyone here. These people trust I'll keep things growing so they get to keep their jobs."

Anger flared in Jenny's eyes. "So what? I haven't been doing a good enough job?"

“No. No. I don’t mean that at all.” Kelly tucked Jenny’s hair behind her ear. “You’ve been amazing. Even more than I’d expected. And my expectations were high. You’ve outdone yourself. There’s no one I trust more than you.”

Jenny’s eyes softened. “Then why not see if this thing with Buzz could be more? When you ran out of the dining room, he practically vaulted after you he was so concerned. He cares about you. More than a guy would if it was just casual sex.”

Kelly shook her head.

“You’re so damn stubborn.” Jenny groaned. “Kel, do you really think he would’ve agreed to this fake boyfriend bullshit just to keep screwing you for another few weeks if he didn’t care? He could’ve just said ‘later, skater,’ and moved on. Instead, he willingly went to a family dinner where Pa grilled him about his intentions toward you and Grams invited him to the memorial and he agreed to go. Why would he bother if this was just sex?”

“He’s a nice guy, and he doesn’t want people to think I’m a slut.”

“Uh-unh. Not buying it.”

“You said you thought he was a nice guy.”

“He totally is. But I don’t think it’s the reason he’s worried about your reputation.”

“You’re wrong. We’ve talked about it, and he said this being a close-knit community he’d take the hit.”

“You’re so frustrating. Even RJ saw it.” Jenny sighed. “Maybe he’s not there yet either.”

“Where?”

“Ready to admit he’s falling in love with you.”

“You’re crazy. We’re just having fun.”

Jenny blew her nose and stood. “Keep telling yourself that, Kel, and you’ll lose out on a great guy. I gotta get back to work.”

For the rest of the day, all Kelly thought about was her conversation with Jenny. Of course, she and Buzz liked each other. But even love hadn't been enough to keep Enzo. And if love didn't conquer all, then nothing would. Just because at one time she'd dreamed of traveling the world didn't mean she and Buzz would stand a chance. Even if they did give it a shot, it would end eventually. Everything did. Nothing lasted forever. The irony that her business traded in forever wasn't lost on her.

But nothing was guaranteed.

Especially not happily ever after.

Jenny thought she and Buzz were perfect for each other. She'd only seen them together a few times. Jenny was a romantic, and while she'd had her fair share of boyfriends and breakups, she'd never really been distraught over the endings. Not like Kelly had been over losing Enzo. Over not being able to be the woman he'd deserved.

She'd known the day they'd signed their divorce papers she'd never get married again. Kelly would never risk her heart or anyone else's.

She just couldn't.

Chapter Twenty-One

“THANKS FOR HELPING OUT TODAY,” CURT SAID.

Jack clapped him on the back. “No problem.” He pulled Emily in for a deep kiss. “That’s what family’s for.”

“Asking them to help move your shit, well, that right there is a *huge* ask,” Elliot said. He slipped on the baby sling, took Jason from Siobhan, and nestled his eight-month-old son against his chest. He closed his eyes as he sniffed Jason’s head.

“That’s why I’m treating for dinner.” Curt grabbed Nicki and twirled her around the empty apartment. Everything Nicki liked would be moved into storage until they bought a house. Nicki had cleared out the third bedroom in her townhouse so Curt could have a music room, but he had several amps and a dozen guitars that would be staying safely at Elliot’s house. The rest of the furniture had been donated to a local charity.

Buzz’s suitcase, duffel bag, and electric drum kit sat by the door.

“Buzz,” Siobhan said. “Are you sure you don’t want to stay with us? We have plenty of room.”

“I can’t. My parents would be hurt. And Stephanie’s still pissed at me.”

Emily smiled. “I thought you were going to talk to her?”

“She’s not returning my calls or texts. I even sent her an email. Crickets.” It was getting hard not to let his own anger get in the way of doing what he needed to. How could they

work through this if she wouldn't even talk to him? "She's stubborn, and she's not gonna talk to me until she's damn well ready."

"You think that'll be before we leave?" Emily asked.

"I sure as hell hope so. I know my mom and dad are really upset. I shouldn't have walked out that first night, but I wasn't ready to face the music, so to speak."

Elliot stroked Jason's back as the little guy drifted off to sleep. "Life's too short for this kind of bull...crap. You know I love your sister like she's mine, but Steph's stubborn as a mule, and no one's gonna make her do anything she doesn't want or isn't ready to do."

His sister's temper was well-known by all the kids in the neighborhood. "Nope." Buzz lifted one of the kit bags over his shoulder. "Let's go. The sooner we drop this off at the hotel, the sooner we can eat. I'm starving."

"Me, too," Siobhan said, patting her belly.

Buzz tried to stop his grin.

Siobhan sighed. "You guys know, don't you?"

Buzz killed his smile and cleared his throat. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Jack's grin grew, and he turned to hide it. Emily looked down. Curt's and Nicki's smiles grew wider.

"E, we agreed not to say anything yet." Siobhan narrowed her eyes at Elliot.

"Hey, they figured it out. Again."

Siobhan pursed her lips. "Really?" She'd already perfected her "disbelieving mom" voice.

Jack crossed his heart and clapped Elliot on the shoulder. "You're glowing."

Elliot shoved him. "She's glowing."

Emily hugged Elliot. "So are you, my friend. And I'm guessing you found out the last week we were on tour."

“No way, not this time. I’ve been cool.”

Nicki grinned. “You have a tell.”

“Do not.”

Emily touched the sides of Elliot’s face. “Besides the huge grin constantly on your face, you get cute.”

Elliot narrowed his eyes. “I am not cute. I brood. I’m a broody, bad—butt bass player.”

“Not anymore.” Curt slapped him on the back. “You’re the happiest guy I know.”

He mustered a frown. “You guys are nuts.”

“Em was just being sweet. You don’t get cute. You get goofy.” Jack stepped out of range of Elliot’s arm swinging at him.

Siobhan put her arms around Elliot’s waste, careful not to crush Jason. “You’re very cute, my love. And we are blessed to have such wonderful friends.” Siobhan turned to them. “You’ve all been so wonderful about having Jason on tour.” Siobhan hugged Buzz. “And you for babysitting. Jason loves you, and he really does miss you.”

Buzz’s throat tightened, and he hugged her back. This heartwarming moment had envy rising. He was happy for Elliot and Siobhan, and for the first time in his life, a little jealous of their growing family. He’d enjoy being an uncle to his bandmate’s kids and Stephanie’s if she ever had any. He really needed to make things right with his sister. He’d call his mom about dinner on Sunday. If Stephanie avoided him again, he’d go to the hospital and make a scene because this had to end. She’d be pissed. Too bad.

“Buzz, you’re my best friend, but hands off my wife.” Elliot pulled Siobhan next to him.

“Speaking of wives... How’s Kelly?” Nicki asked.

“Dude, really?” Buzz narrowed his eyes at Elliot. “We agreed not to say wife, girlfriend, lover, partner, or together around Nicki.”

Emily burst out laughing. “Ha, you really think that would stop her from asking? Rookie.” Emily shook her head. “She’d have made that transition if he’d said platypus.”

“What does a platypus have to do with relationships?” Buzz asked.

“Absolutely nothing. Haven’t you realized by now nothing, and I mean *nothing*, stops Nicki when she’s got an idea in her head.”

Nicki grinned, undeterred. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Emily turned to her friend. “Nic, not everyone is as open and tell all like you are. Buzz is private, and he’s been very tolerant of your interference, but you need to stop.”

Nicki’s expression turned contrite. “I’m sorry, Buzz.” Even Curt hadn’t mastered how to get Nicki to be apologetic.

“It’s okay. I know you only do it because you care. But I’d appreciate it if you’d ease up. Kelly and I are just having fun.”

“So, it’s nothing more? Yet?” The last word was said hopefully.

“She’s not looking for long-term.”

“But you are?”

“No.”

Nicki stepped closer. “Buzz, you’re a wonderful guy, and I know I never met Sally, but I’ve heard plenty, so I’m just gonna say it. She never deserved you.”

Buzz’s brow furrowed. “Heard plenty from whom?” Not from his bandmates.

Nicki sighed. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Does to me.”

“Fine. People who love you and know what a kind and generous person you are.”

The crew. Backstage gossip was a hazard of the job. Their crew lived, worked, played, ate, and slept together for months

at a time. They truly were a family, and families often felt entitled to opinions on its members. He shouldn't be surprised having spent so many years together their crew had had a bead on his relationship with Sally. She'd visited him several times over the years but never spent more than a week. They'd never had knockdown drag-out fights, but Sally was the queen of passive-aggressiveness. Buzz had grown to hate her way of dealing with her anger at him. He'd always tried to talk to her, but when she was pissed, the silent treatment was her go-to. By the end, he'd contributed his share of silence.

Trying to guess or pull her feelings out of the vacuum around her heart had been exhausting.

Kelly was easy. And not only in bed. If he did something she didn't like or he crossed a line, she'd tell him. Not that they'd done any fighting, but if they ever got the chance, at least it would bring resolution to an issue or, at the very least, attempted resolution. Sally blamed him for everything, and he'd been a sucker to accept that shit.

"Don't be mad."

Curt pulled Nicki into his arms. "He's not. When Buzz gets pissed, he throws shit."

"Like you don't."

Em's brow raised. "Really? I never would've pegged you as a thrower."

Buzz shrugged. "It doesn't happen often and not *at* anyone. Usually my sticks, and always at the floor."

Elliot scoffed. "Dude, you've got the arm strength of a world-class weight lifter. Remember the time you pitched your sticks and Buddy bounced and stuck in the ceiling?"

"Buddy?" Nicki asked.

Buzz chuckled. "Yeah. Buddy and Neil."

Emily burst out laughing. "You named your sticks?"

"Ever since he was nine," Jack said. "You still have those?"

“Sure do.”

Jack smiled. “Original Buddy and Neil took a ton of abuse.”

“Why Buddy and Neil?” Nicki asked.

Emily raised her hand. “For Buddy Rich and Neil Peart.”

“I’ve heard of Neil Peart, but who’s Buddy Rich?”

“Only the undisputed greatest jazz drummer ever.”

“Then why haven’t I heard of him?” Nicki asked.

“Because he died in 1987.”

“Then how did you hear of him?”

“My grandpa’s a huge jazz fan. When I was little, he’d sit me on his lap and we’d listen to his jazz records. He’s a total purist. No CDs allowed in his house. And don’t even mention streaming or MP3s.”

“He’s never heard your music?”

“Of course. My dad played him our first album at our house. Vinyl never really went away. It just got pushed aside for newer technology. But as Grandpa says, ‘newer doesn’t always mean better.’ Since our second album, we’ve always done a pressing of vinyl for the hard-core Stone Highway fans.”

“Oh.” Nicki pulled away from Curt. “I’m sorry for interfering, but I hate to see you alone. You are amazing, and you deserve to be happy.”

Buzz’s heart warmed. “Yeah, I do. We all do. But Kelly’s got an empire to run, and it takes all her time and energy.” He hoped to change that but didn’t share it with Nicki. It was better not to encourage her. He needed to be subtle about it, and Nicki’s idea of subtlety involved a tank and fireworks.

A sadness dimmed Nicki’s enthusiasm. “I know. I was hoping you could show her even though you love your work life needs more balance. She works *all* the time.”

“You thought I’d be good for her, too?”

“Of course. Kelly’s a friend, and I wouldn’t have suggested you two get to know each other better if I didn’t think you’d be great together.”

“Suggested?” Emily said. “I think you need to review the dictionary entry on that one, Nic.”

Nicki stuck her tongue out.

Elliot turned, grabbed a bag, and opened the door. “All right, enough talk about Buzz’s love life. Let’s go.”



AFTER DINNER, BUZZ WENT BACK TO HIS HOTEL ROOM. HE’D had a good time, but he’d missed Kelly. It hadn’t even taken two days. He’d missed her as soon as he’d woken up alone yesterday. Missed her warmth against him and her sleepy first smile of the day. She was so beautiful. And she gave so much of herself to her work family. Since the boutique was closed Mondays, he’d convinced her to take the day off. She’d still had a few phone calls.

If this was how he felt after not seeing her for two days, how would he feel after a week? Or two? Or a month? He didn’t want to find out. And that scared him. “The sex is great, and I like her, but this isn’t love.”

Something nagged at him, but he didn’t know what.

He had a front-row seat to his friends’ relationships, and he now understood he’d never loved Sally that way. After weeks of intensive therapy, he was accepting his love for Sally had stemmed from something other than true love. She’d needed someone to take care of her, and he’d needed to feel strong. She’d been even more beaten down by life than he’d been. He’d felt strong for the first time in his life. And needing that feeling had been his motivation to keep his relationship afloat when it should’ve ended a lot sooner than it had.

Bearing witness to Jack’s ex resurfacing last summer, Emily had not only stood by him, but she’d helped and shared the burden instead of expecting Jack to handle it on his own.

Buzz admitted they'd still be together if Sally hadn't dumped him.

But Kelly didn't need him at all. And he didn't know if that was a good or bad thing.

Unable to fall asleep, Buzz grabbed his phone and opened the speech to text app. Closing his eyes and breathing deeply, he allowed Kelly's image to fill his mind. The words flowed.

Stressed and jaded

Blessed and creative

Missing all the signs

Never taking the time

Take a breath before

The toll chimes

The times that you laugh

The times that you cry

Loosen up the ties that bind

All the things, from then and now

All the things, everything's inside out

All the things coming unwound

Hours later, he woke up still sitting up in bed with his phone next to him. "Shit." He plugged it into the charger and went out on the balcony, filling his lungs with the moist morning air. Yeah, he definitely needed a yard. Pine Hill was a nice town, but after Elliot's latest stories of paparazzi snooping around, Siobhan was warming up to the idea of moving into a house with a gate.

The dull hum of predawn traffic was broken by the blast of a car horn.

After working out in the hotel gym, he showered, ordered breakfast, and called his parents.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No. Why?”

“You don’t usually call so early.”

Buzz checked his watch; it was only seven. “Sorry, been up a while. Didn’t realize.”

“Still having trouble sleeping?”

“Sometimes.” Buzz rubbed the back of his neck. He hated to put his mom in the middle, but since Steph wouldn’t respond to his calls, he had no choice if he wanted to resolve this before he left. “How about dinner Sunday? I’ll bring food.”

“No. I’ll cook. You eat enough takeout when you’re on the road.”

“Mom, I’m inviting myself, at least let me bring dinner.”

“Honey, don’t be ridiculous. You never have to invite yourself. This is your home, and you’re always welcome here. You don’t even have to call. And I don’t get to take care of you like I used to, so I’ll make you your favorite.”

He’d been exceptionally close to his mom growing up, and they still were. “You miss it?”

“What?”

“Taking care of me?”

“Of course, honey. Best job I ever had.”

“You’re the best.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Can’t I just be appreciative?”

“You always have been. A mother couldn’t ask for a finer son. But I know something’s bothering you.”

Buzz paced the room. Feeling claustrophobic, he went out on the balcony. “Steph’s not answering my calls or texts.”

She let out a pained sigh. “I’ll talk to her.”

“No, please don’t. This is between us, and I feel bad enough forcing a family dinner to get her to talk to me.”

A few seconds of silence was followed by a snuffle.

“Hey, don’t cry. I’ll take care of this. I promise.” A lump formed in his throat.

“I’m so proud of you. You’ve worked so hard to overcome...everything.”

“But?”

“No buts. Remember during family therapy when you promised you’d beat drugs and the therapist told you not to promise that because most...”

“Addict, mom. I’m an addict. It’s okay to admit the truth. I have.”

“Most...addicts suffer setbacks.”

Buzz scoffed. “Yeah, I remember.”

“I made a lot of mistakes with you. And—”

“Mom, no. You were the best. You kept pushing until they’d listen.”

“Buzz, honey, I did make mistakes.”

He knew that tone in his mom’s voice. Steph got her tenacity from their mother. “Nothing you did got me involved with drugs. It was me. All me. My choices. I’ve been wrong about so many things, but I’m not wrong about this. You and Dad, you’re the best. I had a great childhood.”

“This is off track.” She blew her nose. “What I want you to know is it’s clear to all of us how much effort you’re putting in.”

“Steph doesn’t think so.”

“Your sister has her own issues, and they’re clouding her judgment. I think part of why Stephanie’s so angry is because this is the first time you’ve ever pushed back. She’s not used to you asserting yourself the way you did. And now, even though

she's being stubborn, you're doing the adult thing and trying to talk with her."

"Mom, I'm almost thirty. I've been an adult for quite some time."

"I know. But your relationship with your sister is kind of stunted. You two need to figure out how to be adult sister and brother."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you're finally in a place where you don't defer to her. She'll always be your older sister, but she needs to learn you're no longer her baby brother."

"So, this is Steph's problem?"

"Honey, not everything's your fault. Other people make choices, and they should own them like you have."

He sat in the chair and put his feet on the railing. "You're talking about Sally."

"Yes."

"Why now? We haven't been together in two years. Why didn't you say something before?"

"Because you wouldn't have listened. She was damaged goods. Understandably, since she was bounced around the foster system until they set her loose when she turned eighteen. That was awful for her. You know your grandparents adopted your dad and aunt. What you don't know is your dad was fostered by them first."

"What? I thought they were adopted as babies."

"Your aunt was, but your dad was four. He...suffered before he went to your grandparents."

Buzz's mouth fell open. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Your father wanted to when you were older, but you didn't exactly respond well when you learned he was adopted."

Buzz's heart pounded. "Aunt Maggie told you?"

After a long pause, she said, “Yes. And don’t be angry with her. We needed to know, and it broke my heart you felt that way.”

His eyes filled with tears as he relived his seven-year-old self begging Jack’s mom not to tell his parents he’d been terrified they’d return him. She’d been the one to figure out he was dyslexic, and she’d been tutoring him in reading. His dad had told him a few months earlier he’d been adopted, and it meant his mom and dad had chosen him to be their son. Buzz had understood for that to happen his real parents had to not want him. He’d lived in crushing fear they’d get tired of one thing after another with him and give him back.

Aunt Maggie had told him his parents loved him and they’d never do that, and it helped ease the terror, but it had taken a while to totally let go of the fear. She’d also told him having dyslexia did not mean he wasn’t smart. It meant he learned differently than other kids. Which of course was just what he hadn’t needed; another way to be different from everyone else.

But his parents had done what they’d always done. They’d supported and loved him and taken him to numerous doctors until he’d gotten the tools he needed to succeed. It had been hard, and it still was. Dyslexia never went away, and it didn’t make him incapable. It had taken a long time for him to no longer feel like less because he was different. He used the tools at his disposal to make his life easier. But he still never told anyone. His bandmates and manager knew, but not the crew. And he’d never told Sally. Which was pretty fucked up because she should’ve been the one person he’d been comfortable sharing anything with. Deep down, that lonely, broken little boy still lived inside him. He’d bring it up in therapy eventually. But his therapist would tell him he needed to stop guarding it as a secret.

Easier said than done.

“If we did anything that made you feel like that, I’m so very sorry.”

“You didn’t. It’s just I was so much trouble...”

“Honey, you’re our child, and we love you. None of it was your fault. It’s just how it was.”

He got the impression she felt it was her fault. Which didn’t make any sense. “I know it wasn’t my fault, but you certainly could’ve had an easier kid. You did. Stephanie.”

“Now, you listen to me, young man. We are grateful you were born, and we never, not even for a second, regretted having you.”

“Mom, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I was the problem child.”

Mom chuckled. “Your sister was a handful. She still is. She’s stubborn, pigheaded, and she has a tendency to think she’s always right.”

“Yeah. But I love her anyway.”

“Exactly. So do we.”

“Mom...”

“What, honey?”

“If you’d known before you had me I’d have so many health problems, would you still have done it?”

“Of course.” She stifled a sob. “When you have kids, you wish for them to be healthy and happy. If they’re not healthy, you move heaven and earth to get them there. You love your kids no matter what. No sickness or disability changes that. You don’t give up on them and you don’t love them any less.” She sniffled. “If anything, you love and appreciate them more because you realize you could’ve lost them. Every day is a gift. Having children is the greatest joy anyone can experience. It opened a well of love deeper than anything I’ve ever felt before. You’ll understand when you have your own.” She exhaled. “And you’ve grown into a kind, intelligent, thoughtful man, and your father and I are so incredibly proud of you.” She cleared her throat. “We’ll make sure Stephanie is here on Sunday.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

KELLY'S CELL TRILLED ON HER DESK, AND SHE PRACTICALLY tripped trying to get to it. "Hey, B." Her heart pounded, and her body tingled in anticipation of seeing him again.

"Hey. You okay? You sound breathless."

"I'm fine. I didn't want to miss your call." She hadn't meant to blurt that out.

"Miss me?"

"Uh, well, yes. Of course." Kelly exhaled. Why shouldn't she miss him? Besides the amazing sex, Buzz was good company. She was comfortable with him, and if she wanted to be honest, she'd admit her apartment had felt rather empty the last two days. Kelly shook that off. Probably because she'd shared about her mom and dad with him. Her emotions were still raw and close to the surface, and they'd stay that way until the anniversary passed.

Kelly had grown to dread the memorial. She didn't need it to remind her what happened or to remember her parents. She thought about them every day. She wished her grandparents would stop doing it like the other families had. But she couldn't not go.

"Kel? You there?"

"Sorry."

"I was about to leave, but if you have things to do..."

"You don't want to see me?" She hated that her voice sounded hurt. She wanted to enjoy him as much as possible.

Buzz laughed. “Course I want to see you.” He exhaled a long breath. “I missed you, too.”

Kelly’s heart skipped a beat, and her skin warmed. *No.*

“Anyway, I’m on my way. Just getting to the subway. I’ll be at your place in fifteen.”

“Okay, see you soon.” Kelly disconnected and stared at her phone. The background picture of her kitties usually made her smile. They were going to miss Buzz, too. The last two nights when she’d gotten home, they’d stared at the door long after she’d shut it. They’d come to expect Buzz would be with her. She’d loved how he paid attention to them. Had allowing it been a mistake? She’d been the one to insist they meet at her place. She had two problems because of it: they had to break up, and she’d have to deal with her pissed-off cats when their time was over.

She hadn’t called Sadie Satan in almost two weeks.

Sadness crept into her consciousness. Another layer of sadness. Even Sadie had been more affectionate with her. They were cats, but Kelly admitted to herself that somewhere in the last few months, she’d come to think of them like her children. She’d never really talked to them so much as at them, but Buzz had since day one. Talked to them like they understood. And they sure seemed to.

He was like magic with animals. One day, she’d been looking for him out her bedroom window. He’d been waiting to cross the street, and a squirrel had jumped off the trunk of a tree and stood on its hind legs in the middle of the sidewalk. Buzz bent down, and the little furry, gray animal ran over to him, and the squirrel allowed Buzz to pet it. He’d told her he had this ability, but she’d thought he was exaggerating. If anything, he’d understated it.

A lump formed in her throat. She’d take the next two weekends off so they could enjoy each other.

She deserved this.

Kelly grabbed her purse. Her desk phone rang, but she ignored it. She’d see Anita on the way out, so whatever it was

would have to wait until tomorrow. She walked down the hallway and out to the showroom floor. All her consultants were helping smiling brides. She waved and as she reached the reception area, she stopped. “What’s up?”

“Oh.” Anita put the phone down. “This lady wanted to see you.”

Damn. She’d assumed it was a phone call. She couldn’t dodge a person. Kelly pasted a smile on her face and turned. The woman had to be in her late sixties, not her usual demographic, but maybe she was here for a vow renewal dress. “How may I help you?”

“Kelly.”

A sense of familiarity skittered over her. “Mrs...”

The woman had a kind smile. “Dodd. I’m sure you don’t remember me. My husband was your father’s last chief.”

“Of course. I’m so sorry.”

“Pish. It’s been almost fifteen years, my dear, and you were only a child. Please call me Helen.” She smiled. “You’ve grown into a beautiful young woman. How are your sister and brother?”

“Oh, Jenny works here. She’s the head of marketing and social media. RJ just transferred to Ten House.”

Her lips turned in as she nodded “He always was the spitting image of your father. Can’t say I’m surprised he followed in his footsteps.” Her smile turned sympathetic.

“Yeah. What can I help you with?” She’d have to call Buzz and tell him she’d be late. Since she’d come from Long Island to see her, Kelly wouldn’t blow her off because she wanted sex.

Helen sighed. “I was wondering if you had a moment so we could talk in private.”

“Oh, of course.” Kelly turned to the receptionist. “No calls.” She started away. “Can you call Buzz and tell him I’m running late?”

Anita nodded and picked up the phone. “You okay?”

“Yes, why?”

“You’ve gone a little...pale.”

Kelly squared her shoulders. “I’m okay.” She led Helen to her office. “Would you like something to drink?”

“No, dear. You were on your way out. I won’t keep you long.”

Kelly gestured to the sofa. “Have a seat.” She put her purse on her desk and joined her on the sofa.

Helen sighed. “I’m sorry to do this now, seeing as the anniversary is coming up, and I’m sure it’s emotional enough, but when I found the letters, I didn’t think it should wait.”

“Letters?”

Helen pulled a bundle of letters tied with brown string from her purse.

Kelly’s blood ran cold. The top letter was addressed “My Darling Kelly on your eighteenth birthday.” She recognized her father’s handwriting. Her stomach turned over, and the edges of her vision blurred.

“Your father was one of the best, most honorable men I’ve ever known.” She pulled out a tissue and wiped her eyes. “He must’ve entrusted these to my husband. He passed two years after your dad. Sudden heart attack...” She inhaled deeply and sighed. “I’ve been cleaning out the house. I’ll be moving in with my son and his family. I’m so sorry to do this now, but I’ll be leaving in a few days for New Hampshire. I thought about sending them to you, but I needed to honor my husband’s promise to your father.” She placed the bundle on the coffee table.

Kelly froze. Her brain didn’t really register the words. She needed to say something. “Um... Thank you. It’s very kind of you.”

They stared at each other. Emotions bubbled just under the surface for each of them. Remembering and missing. Kelly took her hand. “I’m sorry, it’s just such a shock. And I’m sorry

about your husband. My dad always looked up to him.” Her father’s station had provided the transport to and from his funeral. Nine-year-old RJ’s eyes had shown with glee when he’d been allowed to hit the siren.

Helen stood. “You were on your way out, so I won’t keep you. It was lovely to see you again. Your mother and father would be so proud of the brilliant and successful young woman you’ve become.”

Kelly stood and hugged her. Tears ran down her cheeks. “Thank you.”

Helen closed the door after herself, and Kelly sank to the sofa. She could barely breathe. Jenny was at a meeting in the city, but Kelly couldn’t remember what it was for.

Buzz. He was expecting her. He didn’t have a key. Maybe she should’ve given him one, but it hadn’t occurred to her, and he hadn’t asked. She needed to get up, but her body was weak.

A knock sounded on her closed office door.

She couldn’t let her employees see her like this. See her weak. Kelly tried to collect herself.

The door opened, and Kelly turned away. It wasn’t like her staff to barge in.

“Kel?”

Her head snapped around at Buzz’s voice.

“Hey.” He hurried over, sat, pulled her into his chest, and wrapped his arms around her. His warmth was her undoing and tears fell. “Shh, it’s okay, baby. I’m here.”

He was. And the immense comfort that gave her would’ve baffled her if she had the capacity to think. Instead, she leaned closer and let her tears have their say. Minutes after her tears stopped, Buzz still held her. He didn’t say anything, didn’t ask questions she didn’t want to answer, just kept her wrapped in the warmth and safety of his embrace. She had no idea how long they sat like that.

The empty feeling she’d grown used to had been filled weeks ago by Buzz. She was busy, had a thriving business and

more things to do than time, but none of it had filled the hole. He understood the artistic side of her like no one else. He admired her, and for some unknown reason, she liked that. Not wanting to burst into a second round of tears, Kelly tried to pull away. Buzz loosened his hold, but he didn't let go.

She looked up at him. "Why are you here?"

He brushed her hair out of her face and kissed her forehead. "Anita called and said you'd been held up. She said you looked like you'd seen a ghost, and I was worried."

"You worry about me?"

Buzz shook his head and scoffed. "Is that so weird? We're sleeping together. Sure, I worry about you."

"But it's just sex." And for her, that was all it could be. Maybe she should end things now. She'd dismissed Jenny's assertions that she "like liked" Buzz, but she did. Liking was fine, but loving, she wouldn't go back down that road. This couldn't be love. She hadn't fallen in love with Enzo until they'd been dating for over a year. Maybe it was the PMS. Nothing else could explain her emotions being so out of control.

Not even the anniversary.

Anger flashed over his face. "Is it?" His arms dropped to his lap. "Are you saying you have no feelings for me whatsoever?"

Kelly stood. "No. No, it's not like that."

"Then how exactly is it?"

"I just meant you're leaving soon, and..."

"And?" He stood and paced.

"Our time is coming to an end."

He narrowed his eyes. "And does that make you happy or sad? Because I can't tell."

"I like you, okay. You're a nice guy, and we've had..."

"Fun? Amazing sex? A good time?"

“All of it.” She closed the distance between them because she hated it. “You’ve been great and so understanding.” She glanced up at him. His eyes didn’t soften. He looked hurt. She didn’t like that one bit. “We had an arrangement, and I’d be lying if I didn’t say it ended up being more than I thought it would.”

“Ended up? Are you ending it now?”

Before Kelly could speak, she was shaking her head. “No. No.” She was lightheaded. “I mean in a good way.” She turned away because she didn’t want to see his pain. “I really thought this would be just sex. No emotions.” She turned back. “But I’m not the most experienced woman when it comes to relationships. I never even went on any other dates. I expected this to be what we said it would be. But...”

Buzz stepped closer. “But?”

Ending it now would be the best course of action, but she couldn’t. She wasn’t ready to let go of the one person who truly understood her. Now that she’d experienced it, she somehow needed it. “But I look forward to seeing you. I like spending time with you. I don’t know anymore what this is.”

“And you need to define it?”

She shrugged. He wasn’t letting on anything about his feelings, and she felt exposed. She didn’t know what exactly she was feeling because they were all tangled together. “I don’t know. This is all so odd, unfamiliar.”

Buzz nodded and stepped closer. “I like you. Why don’t we stop focusing on how many days are left and just enjoy each day? Just because I’m leaving doesn’t mean—”

“What?” Heat rose. If he was developing deeper feelings, she didn’t know what she’d do.

He wasn’t honoring their agreement.

“Doesn’t mean we can’t still see each other occasionally. It doesn’t have to mean any more than that.”

That fucking hurts. He wanted to keep seeing her for sex. Not for any other reason. Wasn’t that what she wanted? What

she'd just been telling herself? But him saying it still hurt. Which was wildly unreasonable of her. Not like her at all. Her knees weakened, so she turned and leaned up against her desk. She stared at the wall over the sofa. She had no right to expect more from him than he'd already given. Kelly wouldn't change the rules now. Why did she even want to?

“Kel, you're overthinking this.” He leaned next to her. “It's okay we like each other. It'd be weird if we didn't after what we've shared. But neither of us is looking for a full-time relationship, right?”

Whether or not she wanted one didn't matter. She had too much to accomplish to slow down now. “Right.”

“So, we're in agreement. But if this is getting too complicated for you, then we should end it now. I don't want you spending the rest of our time together stressing. This was supposed to help you de-stress.”

“Do you want to end it now?” Had she just ruined what they had?

“No.” He moved in front of her. His brown eyes, so warm and caring, made her heart pound. “I don't want to be the reason you're upset. I don't like it at all.”

Their eyes locked. “You're not.” She sighed. “The anniversary...”

Buzz nodded. “Throw in your ex-husband, who you're still in love with, getting married and a baby on the way, and maybe you're sorry you ended it with him?”

“No.” Kelly shook her head. “I love Enzo. I probably always will. He was my rock when I'd lost everything stable in my life. He was my first love, only love, but I'm not in love with him anymore.”

“You sure?”

Kelly took a deep breath. “Yeah, I'm sure. And I'm truly happy for him. And it's stupid but...”

He brushed his thumb over her cheek. “It makes you unhappy you couldn't give him what he wanted most?”

Dumbstruck, she nodded.

He pulled her into his arms. “I get it. It is sad when two people still love each other but can’t make it work. That’s not how it usually goes, and I think that makes it harder. But you were the one to end it because you loved him so much you wanted him to be happy even if it meant it wasn’t with you. Which makes you the most extraordinary woman I’ve ever met.”

“How did we get here?”

“To the friendship equaling the benefits?”

“Well, that, too.” She pointed to the sofa. “Me bawling my eyes out. Again.”

“Maybe this was the perfect time for us to meet. You needed someone to lean on to get through this month, and I’m glad it was me. I’ve enjoyed every single second we’ve spent together.” He smiled. “You’ve helped me realize a few things, too.”

“Like?”

“Maybe I’m closer to ready to have a relationship than I thought I was. Up until this time together, I was convinced I needed to focus all my energy on staying sober.” He exhaled slowly. “I was afraid. I thought going through rehab was the hard part. And believe me, it sucked, but being in rehab was safe. There was no temptation, and everyone around you is in the same boat. Every person is there to help you. Going out into the real world was terrifying. I’d let everyone down, and I was scared of it happening again. Every day, I wake up and my first thought is ‘You gonna fuck this up today?’ There’s not a lot of room for much else, but maybe when this tour’s over... I don’t know.” Buzz exhaled slowly.

His muscles relaxed.

“Being with you has made me realize I don’t have to spend every single second of the day focusing on sobriety. I can have a little life in there, too.” His arms tightened. “If I’d never met you, I wouldn’t have realized that, so, thank you, Kel.”

Kelly's heart flipped. "I understand living in fear like that. It seems unreasonable now, but back then, I was scared all the time. Scared my grandparents would die, and we'd be left alone again. Terrified something would happen to Jenny or RJ. But Enzo helped me to see I wasn't living, just existing. And barely doing that. First time he asked me out, I said no." She sighed. "I realize now what I was most afraid of was caring about someone new." *And they'd leave me, too.*

Buzz held her, and she accepted the comfort he offered. The letters on the table caught her eye, and she groaned. She wanted to burn them and read them in equal parts. She'd worked hard to get past all the loss. Maybe she'd file them away.

She couldn't bear reading the letters alone. It was a huge ask. They weren't just casual, but they weren't in a real relationship either. Kelly grabbed her purse, moved around Buzz, and took the letters off the table, stuffing them into her bag. "Ready?"

"Yes." He took her hand. "Let's go home."

Chapter Twenty-Three

AS THEY WALKED TO KELLY'S APARTMENT, BUZZ KICKED himself. He hadn't been prepared for the "let's keep seeing each other" conversation. He'd wanted to be sure it was what he wanted before he brought it up to her. When he'd said it out loud, he'd been sure. He hoped she wouldn't cut him loose now. He was most definitely not prepared for that. The thought shook him. If they didn't end things when he left, they would need to move ahead slowly. He'd meant what he'd said about being closer to wanting a relationship, but not yet. This wasn't just about him and his shit. Kelly had her own issues, and he didn't want to spook her by pushing too hard for what he wanted. They had to both want and be ready for it or it wouldn't work.

He wanted it to. More than he'd thought possible.

When they got inside her apartment, the kitties rushed him. Sadie climbed up his jeans until he picked her off and cuddled her. He rubbed his face against her, and she purred loudly. "Miss me, Lady Sadie?"

The other cats wound around his ankles. Mr. Darcy settled on the top of his foot.

Kelly dropped her purse on the couch. "They love you." She scooped up Squdgy and Chonkers, and the cats loved on her.

She didn't sound mad, but something was off. Maybe it was the letters. Buzz placed Sadie on the cat tree and bent over and picked Darcy up and placed him next to Sadie. He took

Chonkers and Squdgy from Kelly and put them on the floor, commanding them to stay. He sat, pulling her onto his lap. The kitties joined them.

Kelly chuckled.

“What?”

“You put Chonkers and Squdgy on the floor because Sadie and Mr. Darcy are faster.”

“Yeah. Gives them a fighting chance.”

She rubbed the back of her hand over his cheek. “You are very sweet.”

“I love animals. Which reminds me. I got you something.” He grabbed the small bag and handed it to her. “Here.”

“What’s this?”

“Open it.” At her hesitation he added, “It’s for the kitties.”

Kelly smiled and peered inside the bag. Her smile turned to a grin. She pulled out one pink harness with rhinestones, three black ones with blunt studs, and two leashes with two clips each. “Buzz, that’s so sweet of you. I didn’t know they made this stuff for cats.” She kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

“I figured we could take them for a few walks together to see how it goes.”

She kissed his lips. “Thank you.” She glanced over his shoulder. “And thank you for being there earlier.” She slid off his lap and reached over and pulled the bundle of letters out of her purse.

Within the bundle were three sets of letters. Two were tied with pink ribbon and one with blue cord.

Kelly ran her fingers over the satin ribbon, and her throat worked with the effort to swallow. When she looked at him, fresh tears filled her beautiful eyes.

His pulse kicked up a few notches. *Please, no.* But he wouldn’t be able to refuse her if she asked. His brain throbbed.

Kelly untied the brown twine which bound the three sets of letters together. Her hand glided over the letter on top of the others and addressed to her. A giant tear landed on her lap and quickly soaked into her skirt. Her body shook softly.

Buzz put his arm around her and shifted closer. A bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face. His pulse hammered in his ears. Old fears clawed in his chest. She lifted the letter to her nose and inhaled as more tears streamed down her cheeks.

Her sadness and pain overwhelmed him.

Her head turned, and her lips were only inches from his. “Would you?” She looked down. “If it’s too much to ask—”

“It’s not.” He prayed it wouldn’t be.

She handed him the letter.

Buzz took it and stared at the masculine handwriting. He blinked slowly and glanced at Kelly.

“I’m sorry. It’s too much to ask.” She tried to snatch the letter from him but he moved his hand away.

“No, it isn’t. I want to. I do.” His blood thrashed through his veins, and his skin heated. She needed this. The fact she asked him to read it to her meant something amazing, and Buzz couldn’t bear it if she thought less of him. Even though he’d been lucky because his parents had gotten him every available therapy and resource to help him, whenever he’d been forced to read in front of class, his anxiety skyrocketed.

The air-conditioning was blasting on high, but he was sweating.

Buzz inhaled deeply, holding it, then slowly releasing. He had to say something.

“Hey.” Kelly’s dark eyes softened. “What is it?”

She’d been brave when she’d shared with him. Part of him wanted to run, but there wasn’t anywhere for him to go because all he wanted was to be with Kelly. She wouldn’t laugh at him or call him names, but the past was crushing his present. He’d been called every name: *stupid*, *idiot*, *dummy*, *loser*, *retard*. He wasn’t any of those things. Fighting down the

waves of old humiliation and shame, Buzz looked her in the eyes. “I’m dyslexic.”

Empathy replaced the question in her eyes. “I know what it is, but I don’t really know much about it.” Her hand cupped his cheek.

“Reading is and will always be a huge challenge. I get by, but I don’t enjoy it because I have to read really slowly. My brain confuses letters like lowercase B and lowercase D and lowercase P and lowercase Q. I find script easier to write than print because the letters flow into each other.”

She brushed his cheek with her thumb. “I can read it.”

He shook his head. “I want to.” She needed this. He hated that his dyslexia was invading her moment. “I can’t read at a normal pace.” She’d asked him because she was overwhelmed and needed his help. He sat back, and Kelly turned into him, bringing her legs over his lap. Sadie walked over his legs and plopped in the space between Kelly’s legs and his abdomen, Darcy nestled on Kelly’s lap, and Chonkers and Squdgy on either side. He opened the envelope, slipped the letter out, and unfolded it.

Kelly rested her head on his shoulder.

It was a single page, and it was short. *Thank God*. Even so, he was still sweating and his heart pounded. Buzz blew out a long breath and cleared his throat. “*Kel Belle*,”

Kelly gasped and turned her face into his shoulder. “Oh, Daddy.” Tears flowed. She wiped her eyes and smiled. “I’d totally forgotten he called me that.” She let out a shuddering breath. “*Beauty and the Beast* was my favorite movie. I wouldn’t watch any other movie for like five years. And he never complained. We must’ve watched it hundreds of times.” Her lips pulled in, and she held her breath, finally letting it out slowly. She nodded.

Buzz closed his eyes and fought the rising anxiety. “It’s gonna be really slow.”

Kelly’s soft hand brushed his cheek. “I really appreciate this, B. I can’t do it.”

He nodded and took another deep breath, exhaling slowly. *I'm doing this.* Buzz opened his eyes and read aloud.

I'm torn. I don't know if I'm writing these letters for you guys or to make myself feel better because I'm going to be leaving you. I'd like to think it's the former, but it's probably the latter, and I'm sorry.

I loved your mom more than life itself. I never thought I could feel that way because until I met her, I never had. She was the sun, moon, and stars all wrapped up with the kindest, most generous heart anyone ever possessed. Nothing ever held her back. She was a force of nature, and again, I'm torn. I'm going to be with her a lot sooner than I'd expected, and my heart is broken because I'll be leaving you, Jenny, and RJ.

Buzz paused to wipe his eyes. He inhaled and exhaled a few times. He cleared his throat and continued.

It's not fair. In fact, it sucks. But it is what it is. The doctor told me today I'm terminal, but I'm not giving up hope because sometimes hope's all we have to hold on to, and without hope, there's nothing. I'll fight to my last breath. But on the off chance we don't get the miracle we've been praying for, I need to prepare for the worst.

He swallowed around the lump in his throat. Kelly's hand stroked his arm. Her small gesture gave him confidence. She really didn't care how slowly he was reading. His shoulders relaxed, and the tension in his body eased. He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and continued.

The enclosed letters for you, Jenny, and RJ won't take the place of me being there on those special days, but I hope they'll let you know I'll always be with all of you, watching out for you. Just like your mom has been doing these past years.

I've felt her.

You've already given up so much of your young life being an adult. I hope my selfishness in needing to write these letters won't burden you further, but I fear it will, and I am so very sorry. I will suffer any pain to get every possible second with you, Jenny, and RJ.

Every second of your life counts. Being productive is a good thing, but take time to stop working and have fun. You deserve it.

I love you, Kel Belle. Forever. All the way around the world and back again.

Love,

Daddy

By the time he was done, his hands were shaking, and his jaw was so tight he thought it would crack. Kelly sobbed softly, and he wrapped his other arm around her. She nestled closer and released all the emotions the letter stirred up.

Sadie sat up, shifted, and leaned up against Kelly's torso. Buzz eased his hold so Sadie had more of her mama. But he didn't let go.

After a few minutes, her sobs tapered off, but she didn't move away.

He could only imagine the pain she must be feeling, and for the second time, it struck him that he was meant to be here with her. To offer comfort during this most horrible time of year.

She sat up and turned her tired eyes to his.

Buzz's heart flipped in his chest.

"Thank you."

"Of course."

She leaned in and kissed his lips. Not a lustful kiss but one laced with gratitude and relief.

Buzz had spent most of his life feeling like the weak link. Kelly knew his secret, and she thanked him. Emotions he wasn't familiar with swirled with the awareness of her. Instead of feeling totally wrung out, he felt strong. She needed to lean on him, and despite his painfully slow reading, she still did.

Knowing her enriched his life in ways he'd never imagined. He needed to find a way to convince her they were good together. That the possibility of getting hurt was worth the risk. But right now, she needed him to be there for her, hold her, soothe her. Her breathing evened out, and he glanced at her. She was sound asleep, and so were the kitties. He grabbed the throw blanket off the back of the couch and covered them. Buzz adjusted to get more comfortable and sighed in contentment. This was nice.

Buzz woke when a furry paw brushed against his cheek. His head snapped off the back of the couch. Sadie sat on the

top of the cushion next to his head. Kelly was still nestled into his side. He blinked a few times to clear the sleep out of his eyes. Sadie poked him again.

“Lady Sadie, stop that. You’ll get your dinner in a few minutes.” If a cat could sigh and roll her eyes, Sadie did. She lay down on the cushion, still staring at him. “Good girl.” Kelly shifted, and Darcy slid to the floor. Squdgy darted out of her way as Kelly’s upper body slid to the cushions. Her legs stretched out over his lap. Only Chonkers remained sleeping. Buzz stroked his thick multicolored fur, and he lifted his head, his green eyes blinking slowly. Chonkers rolled onto his back, and Buzz rubbed his belly.

Kelly shifted again but didn’t wake. Buzz lifted her legs enough until he slid out from under. Standing, he stretched. He ordered dinner, went to the kitchen, and grabbed the cats’ food bag. The kitties wound around his legs.

“*Mrow.*” Sadie rubbed her head against his ankle.
“*Mrow.*”

“Yes, yes, Lady Sadie, so impatient.” He showed her the bag. “I’m getting your food.” Buzz grabbed four bowls and poured some food in each. He stacked them, turned, and sat on the kitchen floor. For being the smallest cat, Sadie ate fast, and she’d try to eat the other cats’ food if they still had any after she finished. Chonkers had tried that with Sadie once, but she’d lashed out and scratched him. Buzz held up the first bowl. “Lady Sadie.” He moved it as far to his left as he could and placed it on the floor.

Sadie ran to it and started eating.

“*Meow.*”

“*Meow.*”

“*Mew.*”

Buzz looked at the kitties. “We’re trying something new. Let Sadie eat first, then I’ll occupy her so you guys can eat in peace.”

“*Meow.*”

“Meow.”

“Mew.”

“Now, now, she’ll be done in a minute.”

Sadie looked up at him as she chewed her last piece of food. Seeing the other cats were still waiting for their dinner, Sadie went and sat with them.

“Are you still hungry?” Except Darcy, the cats had been rescued from a building fire. It wasn’t inconceivable they hadn’t gotten over the trauma or the scarcity of food. Which could be one reason Sadie had escaped. Or it could be she’d been used to coming and going as she pleased. He worried after he left Sadie would go back to trying to escape. Squdgy and Chonkers tried escaping, but they moved too slowly. Darcy was still a kitten, and he now followed Sadie everywhere.

He picked Sadie up and set her on his lap, then placed the other three bowls as far from him as he could reach. Sadie lunged, but Buzz had his hand around her. She looked up at him and meowed. “Not yet.” He looked at the other cats. “Go on.”

He stroked Sadie’s fur. She relaxed against him and allowed him to continue petting her. “It’s okay, Lady Sadie. You have all the food you need here. You don’t have to bully the others to get more. I’ll give you a little more after they’re done eating.” Sadie flopped down on her side and purred.

After the cats were done eating, they trod into the living room and sprang on their cat tree. Chonkers clawed the pole while Darcy and Squdgy bathed. He poured a little more food in Sadie’s bowl, and she jumped off and ate it. When she finished, she joined the others and bathed.

He washed the bowls and refilled their water. Kelly still slept on the couch, and when the buzzer rang, she didn’t stir.

Buzz took the food to the kitchen, put some on a plate, and sat next to Kelly’s bare feet. She turned on her back and snuggled farther under the blanket. She looked beautiful with her hair all messy and a relaxed expression on her face.

He put the leftovers in the fridge. He'd heat it up later if Kelly woke up hungry. Even though she'd told him she was working less during their time together, she still worked long hours. They'd planned on watching a movie, and even though it was one of his favorites and he could always watch it, he'd wait to share it with Kelly. He wanted to enjoy her watching it because she'd never seen it.

Buzz flipped around the channels for a while, finally settling on a documentary about archaeological digs in Egypt. When it ended, he carried Kelly to the bedroom and laid her gently on the bed. She half woke up, and he was able to get her out of her work clothes and into a night shirt. She snuggled under the covers, and Buzz's dick hardened. He had no idea why watching her sleep made him so horny. But he wouldn't disturb her. He washed up, stripped, and crawled into bed, and Kelly turned into his side and moaned as she rested her head on his shoulder.

The kitties made themselves comfortable.

He could get used to this.



KELLY WOKE UP WITH BUZZ SPOONING HER, HIS ERECTION nestled against her butt. She didn't remember going to bed last night or anything after Buzz had read the letter. She didn't want to think about that now. Feeling Buzz up against her with his strong arm holding her was heavenly. She felt protected. Safe. Happy. She smiled. Were they really going to try to walk four cats on leashes? Her neighbors might think it was nutty, but Buzz wouldn't care. She missed having someone to share her day with. She looked forward to telling him all the funny things that happened.

They'd gotten themselves into quite the pickle with their fake relationship.

Her stomach grumbled, but she was too comfortable to move. The kitties were still asleep, so Kelly relaxed. She'd forgotten to tell Buzz she was taking the weekend off, so she

hoped he had no plans. Which was selfish. He was on a break from touring, but that didn't mean he should be at her beck and call for sex. He had a life of his own.

Her emotions were still raw over the letter from her dad.

Buzz stirred behind her, rolling onto his back, so Kelly turned to her other side. He looked peaceful. She resisted the urge to kiss him. It was still really early, and she had no idea how late he'd been up. She wasn't in a hurry to get out of bed. She nestled into him, and his arm went around her. Even in his sleep, he kept her close.

She could get used to this.

Since they'd been sleeping together, she'd changed her alarm to seven, they'd have sex, and Buzz made breakfast while she'd get ready for work. He was spoiling her with his culinary skills. Kelly had made dinner for her siblings when her dad had been too sick to, but she'd never learned the finer points, which in an Italian family was almost blasphemous. Grams had insisted on cooking, and Kelly had been happy to give up that responsibility.

After she and Enzo had moved into the apartment, he'd cooked dinner most nights, and if she'd been home early enough, she'd help. Kelly waited for the melancholy that followed whenever she thought of Enzo, but it didn't come.

It was odd she wasn't antsy to get up. Normally she was out of bed seconds after her alarm went off. Bending her routine these past weeks to accommodate Buzz in her life had been the closest thing to a vacation she'd had in four years.

Had it really been that long since she'd taken a week off work?

Buzz moaned. "Mmm. Morning, baby."

Kelly smiled. She loved his sleepy morning voice. It did funny things to her insides. "Morning, B." He liked her pet name for him. She didn't know why that pleased her so.

Her stomach grumbled so loudly Sadie, who lay on Buzz's pillow, picked her head up and meowed.

Kelly toyed with his chest hair, then stroked down his abs and under the sheet to his morning erection.

“Mmm, that’ll have to wait.” Buzz gently brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it.

“Why?”

“Because you didn’t eat dinner last night.”

Kelly scoffed. “Believe me, I can afford to miss a meal.”

Buzz pulled her on top of him. “Don’t do that.”

She kissed his jaw. “Do what?”

“Put yourself down. You’re perfect and beautiful just the way you are.”

“I know.” When she’d hit puberty, she’d been embarrassed by her blossoming chest. It had taken her years to feel comfortable in her new body, mostly because she’d hated how she’d grown wider instead of taller.

“More ideas for expansion?”

Kelly smiled. “Yeah. How do you always know?”

Buzz rubbed her back. “It’s more of a feeling. You kinda zone out, but I can see the wheels turning. It’s actually quite sexy.”

“Really? How so?”

Buzz’s hand cupped her butt. “Brainy is the ultimate sexy.”

“The outside holds no appeal for you?”

“Fuck yeah, of course, it does. That’s the bait, so to speak. Physical attraction is important. There’ve been girls I was attracted to, but when it went further than looking, the attraction fizzled.”

“So, you didn’t have sex with them?”

“Kel.” Buzz rolled them so he was on top of her. The cats scattered off the bed and jumped on their cat tree.

Her legs wrapped around him.

“A guy’s brain is hardwired to think of sex all the time. I see an appealing girl, and yeah, my first thought is ‘totally want to fuck her.’ But some of us grow up a little more. It’s one of the reasons I’ve been avoiding a relationship. It requires time to get to know someone, and I have too much at stake if I fuck up again.”

Buzz’s cock rested on her thigh, and her inner muscles tensed in anticipation. “So, we haven’t gotten to know each other?”

He smiled.

Her low belly tingled.

“That’s just it. We have. A lot more than I’d thought possible for so short a time.” His lips found hers, and all thought left her mind.

His tongue traced the seam of her lips, and she opened to him. Buzz stroked her cheek as their tongues intertwined. Such a gentle touch sent awareness careening to her core. Her body heated as the kiss deepened. Buzz’s other hand cupped her breast, and she arched into his touch. He kissed down her neck and over her collarbone, and he licked a path to her nipple. When he sucked it into his mouth, she gasped. He moved lower, kissing her belly, her hip, until he finally settled between her parted thighs. He stroked the tender flesh of her inner thigh while he stared at her bared pussy.

“So wet.” He licked his lips but didn’t taste her. Leaning down, he inhaled deeply. “Your scent drives me wild.” His tongue stroked from her center to her clit.

Kelly moaned. “B, please, I need it.” Her pussy pulsed with need. Pulsed in anticipation of his mouth devouring her.

His gaze locked on to hers. “Please what?”

“Eat me. Make me come so hard I scream.”

“Your wish...” His lips opened, and he sucked her hard clit into his mouth. His thumb stroked her flesh while he pushed three fingers into her. Her inner muscles gripped on to them, pulsing and releasing. “I know how much you love this.” His fingers moved in and out.

Her hips moved up. The sweet tension built until Kelly thought she'd pass out.

Buzz's tongue left her, and his finger swirled around her clit. He slid it down, past her vagina, and slipped it into her butt.

"Oh, yes," she screamed. All her muscles stretched tight, and when the wave broke, she screamed again.

Her body fell back onto the bed. Buzz licked her twice more, then kissed his way back up. He settled beside her, wrapping her in the warmth of his body. Her heart pounded a frantic beat.

When she finally opened her eyes, Buzz's shit-eating grin was front and center. "Pretty proud of yourself, aren't you?"

"You bet. You asked to scream, baby, and I made you scream. Twice. Let's hope the neighbors don't call the cops." He didn't look worried.

"Wow."

Buzz blew on his nails and rubbed them against his bare chest. His grin sparkled.

"You're...really good at that." She turned on her side, facing him. "You're really good at all of it."

His brows waggled up and down. "We're good at it. You are quite amazing yourself."

What she had with Buzz, she couldn't even describe with words because none of them fit. They weren't boyfriend and girlfriend. They were lovers and friends, and every time was incredible. Their first night together had been great. But the sex had gotten even better.

Buzz sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. When he stood, she ogled his perfect ass. He stretched, bent, and pulled his shorts up. His dick stuck out the open fly.

"Whoa there, stud. We're not done." She met his gaze, then dropped hers to his still hard dick. Licking her lips, she sat up and walked on her knees.

“We are for now. You need to eat.”

“You can’t go out like that.”

“Not out. Just to the kitchen.”

Kelly sat back on her heels, purposely jutting her breasts in his direction.

His eyes widened, and his dick pulsed.

“You can’t cook like that. You might get burned.”

Buzz closed his eyes. “I love it when you’re horny and wicked. But you should eat, then I’m gonna fuck you so hard you’ll scream. Again.” His brows waggled, and he tucked his dick in and left. The cats followed.

His smug assertions made her wet again. She’d never been so sexually needy. She’d always enjoyed sex, but she was turning into a sex-crazed bundle of nerve endings. More than once since she’d met Buzz, she’d masturbated in her office because thinking of him made her so horny she couldn’t concentrate. Even though he’d just given her an amazing orgasm, she was so ready for another. A few strokes, and she’d make herself come. This was next-level sexual awareness, and she’d never in her life been so bold.

Kelly hopped off the bed, picked up her red silk robe, and slipped into it. She didn’t tie it. The silk teased over her already sensitized skin. She padded into the hallway and stopped at the doorway into the kitchen. Buzz stood at the stove. His shorts were zipped, but the button was undone. Watching him cook for her made her nipples tight and her pussy ache and wet.

Her hand rested on her hip, the robe half off one shoulder. She couldn’t take it. She needed to come again, and since Buzz’s hands were busy, Kelly slipped her fingers between her spread thighs. Her cream coated her fingers as she stroked her clit.

Buzz’s back stiffened, and his head slowly turned toward her. His eyes flashed with lust. “Oh. You are so fucking gorgeous.”

This wasn't the first time he'd watched her pleasure herself, but standing in the doorway of her kitchen while he made her breakfast would be. He didn't speak. Didn't give her directions. She fingered her clit. Cupping one breast, she tweaked her nipple. Buzz's skin flushed. Kelly had never felt more powerful. She had a superhot as fuck rock star cooking her breakfast shirtless while he watched as she stroked her clit.

Kelly eased off. She needed to come in the worst way, but watching him watch her was so erotic, so unbelievably arousing, she didn't want it to end. Buzz's chest rose and fell with the effort to breathe. His tongue swiped over his lips.

Kelly's eyes dropped to his groin. His dick bulged the fabric out.

"How are you going to fuck me?" Her voice was higher than usual. "After I finish, that is."

Buzz finally turned toward her. He unzipped his fly, and his cock burst out. But he didn't touch himself. He just watched.

Kelly exhaled a slow breath. Her fingers circled her clit, the speed increasing as her climax pulsed through her. Her head went back as she came, more fluid gushing from her center.

Buzz turned off the stove, took three steps, picked her up, and carried her into the bedroom. "In the pussy, then in the ass." He dropped her on the bed and kicked off his shorts.

His brown eyes were near black.

Lust raged through her veins.

He grabbed a condom out of the nightstand and rolled it on. They hadn't used them, but he'd left them here.

Kelly rolled onto all fours and shook her ass at him. "Promises, promises. You look like you're ready to come. You'll never make it to my ass."

"Wanna bet?" His voice was deep and thick. Stepping up behind her, he grabbed her hips, and in one hard thrust, he entered her.

“Oh.”

“You’re gonna come so hard and so fast I’ll have plenty of time to fuck you in the ass.”

Her orgasm was building. Buzz fucked her hard. She thrust back to meet him.

An evil chuckle burst from his lips. “Yeah, that’s it, my horny baby. You need it bad, don’t you?”

“Yes. Yes!”

“Say it.”

“Fuck me hard, B, fuck me harder.”

He pumped in and out at a frantic pace.

She couldn’t get enough.

“Come now.”

She shook her head, but her inner muscles gripped his cock, and her orgasm exploded. Buzz didn’t slow down. She was so wet he glided in and out with ease. “B!”

He pulled out, grabbed the lube, and coated his cock.

Kelly’s body tingled with anticipation. He took a few breaths, and she felt the head of his cock at her ass. She relaxed her muscles, and Buzz entered her. The thick head of his cock stretched her. She exhaled, and he sank a little deeper.

Air hissed between his teeth. “Yeah, oh, shit. That’s it.” He slid farther.

She relaxed her inner muscles more. Buzz grunted and pushed deeper.

“So fucking tight, Kel.” He slid out slowly. “You like it, baby?”

“Yes. More. Again.”

“I got all you need.” He pushed back in, the tight fit driving them both crazy. He grunted. “Fuck.”

When she glanced over her shoulder, Buzz’s face was covered in ecstasy. His mouth hung open as his chest rose and

fell with the effort to breathe. His eyes were glued to where their bodies were joined.

He was close. She flexed her muscles, and he grunted again. The primal sound of her man taking his pleasure in her body drove her to the edge. She couldn't believe it when another orgasm pulled her under, and she cried out his name.

A slow, devilish grin curled his lips. He nodded and pumped in and out, over and over. He growled as he emptied his cum into her. "Baby..." Still gripping her hips, he kissed up her spine and nibbled her shoulder and the soft spot behind her ear. "I'll be back in a minute. Don't move." He straightened and gently pulled out.

Kelly's arms and legs ached.

Seconds later, Buzz came back into the room. His hands cupped her butt cheeks. "Kel, that was unbelievable." Stretching out across the bed, he pulled her to him, hearts slowing, breaths easing. "Next time, I won't make you wait." He chuckled. "Or maybe I will. You were so fucking sexy."

"Honestly, I don't know what came over me. I've never been so...needy."

"I love it when you're needy."

"I don't know how you lasted as long as you did."

"Wasn't easy." Buzz threw his arm over his eyes. "What time are you going in?"

"Oh, damn." She sat up. "I forgot to tell you. I took the weekend off."

His arm moved under his head. "Oh."

"You've got plans?"

"Uh, sort of. Nicki wanted to get together for dinner. And tomorrow I'm going to my parents' for dinner."

"Oh. I guess I shoulda checked with you first." Disappointment burned in her chest.

"You could come with me tonight."

“But not tomorrow?” *Why did I say that?* They already had to break up for the benefit of her family, no reason to have to do it for his, too.

Buzz sat up and scooted over until his back rested against the headboard. He held out his hand, so Kelly settled next to him. His right arm went around her, and he clutched her hand in his and held them against his chest, over his heart. The steady rhythm comforted her.

“It’s not that I don’t want you to come with me. My parents would be thrilled to meet you.” Buzz’s smile dipped when he looked at her. “Hey, it’s not you. I’m going to have it out with my sister. She’s still ghosting me, and I don’t want to leave with this still unresolved. I already talked to my mom, and she’s going to make sure Stephanie’s there. I love my sister, but she can be ridiculously stubborn.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’d love for you to come to dinner tonight, but you should be forewarned.”

“About?”

“Nicki will take it as a sign her matchmaking skills are above reproach. She’s relentless when she’s got an idea in her head, and she’ll be a little overwhelming reminding everyone she was right.”

“Well, didn’t you set her straight?”

“Every time she calls me to see how we’re doing. She’s convinced we’re perfect for each other even though neither of us is looking for a relationship.”

“How often does she call you?”

“Every few days. I think she blurs the lines between reality and romancelandia sometimes.” Buzz closed his eyes. “Not everyone gets a happy ending in real life.”

He sounded sad and resolved. Did he think he wouldn’t meet someone and fall in love again? His ex had done a number on him, and it made her inexplicably sad he thought he’d spend his life alone.

Kelly had already accepted her happy ending wouldn't be contingent on a relationship. She had her family and her business, and she didn't have the time or effort to put into another guy. She wasn't even upset about it. Kelly didn't need a man to make her happy. She found happiness in her work, and for her, that was enough.

Her heart couldn't take another hit.

But it didn't mean she wouldn't enjoy every last second with Buzz. Maybe in a few years, she'd find someone like him who lived in Brooklyn. A companion. Someone who understood her time limitations and would be okay with them.

"Do you want to come tonight?"

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"She's gonna take it as a sign and start badgering you."

"I can handle Nicki."

Buzz grinned. "Okay, great." He stood and held out his hand. "I'm starving. Let's eat."

After breakfast, they lazed on the couch with the cats. She was lethargic in a good way. This was nice.

"Hey, wanna watch a movie?" Buzz asked.

"Sure."

Buzz logged into his account and cued up the movie.

Kelly snuggled into his side. "*This is Spinal Tap*. What is a spinal tap, besides a medical procedure?"

"It's one of our favorite movies of all time. It's about a fictional metal band." Buzz grinned. "We watch it all the time on tour. Seen it so many times we know all the lines."

Kelly never understood that. She hardly ever watched TV, and she couldn't remember the last movie she'd seen before Buzz had come into her life. RJ was always quoting movie lines, but they were lost on her.

"We're going to be Spinal Tap for our Halloween gig."

“You dress up?” She hadn’t dressed up for Halloween since her mom died, but she’d gone when Dad had taken RJ and Jenny trick-or-treating.

“Of course.” He looked like a kid. “Every year. Don’t you wear a costume to a Halloween party?”

Kelly shook her head. “I haven’t been to one since I was a kid.”

“Oh, then you gotta come to our gig. We’ll be in Chicago. It’s only a short plane ride.” Buzz’s eyes lit up with excitement.

Had he just invited her to visit him on tour? Kelly had to stop herself from saying yes. “I’ve never been to a rock concert. Or any concert.”

“What? You live in New York. There’s a ton of venues.” He put his hand over his heart, and his face contorted in mock shock. “Don’t you like rock music?”

“I do. I mean, I did, when I was younger. But I never had a lot of time to sit around listening to music.”

Buzz scoffed. “They make these amazing new things now called smartphones, which in addition to making phone calls, you can text, surf the net, listen to music, write a book, and play games.” Buzz raised his brows. “You have heard of the internet, haven’t you?”

She liked when he teased her. “I have.” She swatted at his arm. “I guess I’ve let a lot of things go by the wayside.”

“You opened your first store at what, twenty-five?”

“Yeah. I only have the one store.”

“For now.”

Her heart warmed. He really did understand her ambition. And the amount of work it took to make it happen. “You really think I’ll have more than one?”

He shook his head. “Don’t think it. Know it. You’re amazing, and I have no doubt you’ll make every single dream you have come true. Most people don’t realize dreams don’t

just happen. They take work. A lot of work. Sometimes everything you have for a while. But you have to enjoy what you've built."

Kelly kissed his cheek. "I've never had someone who understood so completely."

"It's easy to get lost in the weeds. But we learned a long time ago, even though we loved music and were blessed to make music for a living, there has to be a time when you stop and appreciate what you've done. Being in a band makes that easier because there's always someone to remind you to enjoy the wins."

"It's easier now since Jenny works with me. She's always had a more playful side. Even though she worked hard in school, she always took time to have fun. Hang out with her friends. I don't really have any friends."

Buzz tipped her chin until she met his eyes. "That's not true. You have me."

Something loosened around her heart. But with the next thought, her heart constricted.

Not for much longer.

Chapter Twenty-Four

BUZZ LOVED THE FEEL OF KELLY SNUGGLED INTO HIS SIDE AS they watched *This is Spinal Tap*. He reveled in the sweet sound of Kelly's unbridled laughter. She'd taken the weekend off to be with him, and it made him glad in parts of his body he didn't know he could feel emotions. He only wished she'd told him sooner. If this wasn't so important to him, he'd consider doing it another night, but he couldn't handle not being close to his sister. He missed her. Missed sending her funny texts and videos of him and the guys doing goofy shit. Missed her stories about the babies and children she helped save. Stephanie had boxes of letters from grateful parents with pictures of their children Steph had helped save.

Even on tour, they always spoke at least once a week. Except the last several months.

Buzz paused the movie. "We use that line probably every day."

"I agree with the interviewer. Why not just have ten be the highest?"

"Because having the option to go to eleven, which no other band has, is hysterical because it's ridiculous. There is that kind of competition between bands, especially at festivals. We all try to outdo each other. Volume, theatrics, extended guitar and drum solos, stuff like that." Kelly's odd expression gave him pause. "What?"

She brushed his cheek. "Nothing. You just look like a kid on Christmas morning. It's cute."

His smile turned to a grin. “Cute, huh? Okay, I’ll take cute. Music is the only thing I ever got really excited about. I love it. All of it. I love being on tour. Love playing for our fans. Nothing beats playing music in front of tens of thousands of screaming fans. It’s a living, breathing entity. All the energy from us and our crew melds with the fans who pay *money* to see us play.” Buzz exhaled a breath. “Even after all these years, just talking about it gets my blood pounding. It’s the best thing ever.” He glanced at Kelly. “Sorry. Got a little carried away.”

“Don’t be. I get it. It’s how I feel about designing. Sometimes when I’m working on a new idea, it’s almost overwhelming, in a good way, thinking how my design will be picked by dozens, even hundreds, of brides. That’s why every detail has to be exactly right. Most brides will spend more on a wedding gown than anything else they’ll ever wear. They deserve every stitch, every bead, or sequin to be perfect.” Her eyes were lit from within.

Buzz’s everything responded to the passion in her voice. His skin warmed, his blood pulsed through his veins, and his dick hardened. And his brain was so tuned in to her every breath, every word. He’d never felt more alive. Not even playing before a festival crowd of a hundred thousand screaming fans. He crushed his lips to hers, and when Kelly opened her mouth, he sank into the most amazing kiss. Her arms went around him, and her breasts flattened against his chest. He couldn’t get enough of her. Couldn’t get close enough. When he finally pulled back, they stared at each other, both dazed. One quick kiss to her forehead and he settled back on the couch, pulling her into his side. She rested her head on his shoulder.

They watched the rest of the movie, but most of his awareness was on Kelly. Up until that kiss, he hadn’t been sure if she was as invested in their time together as he’d become. It wasn’t supposed to happen, but it did, and instead of sending him into a panic, it made him realize maybe he was in a place where he could live sober and be in a relationship. Vince kept telling him the time would come where he’d feel confident enough in his sobriety. He’d be able to invite other things back

into his life. But Buzz hadn't quite believed it because not all that deep down was the fear every recovering addict lived with.

Fear of failure.

Life or death.

Fear was still there, but it was muted. Not the clawing panic that would have him spiraling down or looking for the escape hatch. He felt strong. Stronger than he ever had.

There was no denying he liked her as more than a fuck buddy. He'd never been so comfortable with any woman before. And Kelly inspired him. He'd written a handful of songs since he'd met her. He'd found a long time ago it was easier for him to express his feelings with lyrics than through conversation. He'd never had such an explosion of ideas before. He was sure therapy played a part. He'd already arranged to continue with his therapist by video call. He'd made a lot of progress, and he wanted to continue that trend.

He was ready to move past his addiction and start living life to its fullest.

But Kelly wasn't ready to admit there was more. She hadn't admitted it to herself, and he'd have to be patient until she did. No one could've forced him to be ready, and he cared and respected her too much to push her for his own comfort. It was a risk, but the possible rewards would be worth it. For this to work, they both needed to be ready to make the leap. Maybe time apart would help her realize what he added to her life was enough to offset the time she'd have to take away from her business.

Kelly sat up as the final credits ran. "I have to admit, I didn't think a movie called *This is Spinal Tap* would be so funny. How accurate is it?"

"Well, it's a spoof obviously, but it only exaggerates reality." He laughed. "We did actually get lost backstage once. It was early in our second tour after our first album was released. It was this old, run-down theater, and we'd gone in the back down to the basement, but we were two floors below

the stage. It only lasted like a minute, but that's what makes the movie so funny."

"So wait, you're the drummer. They're not gonna blow you up, are they?"

Buzz laughed. The running joke of the demise of every one of Spinal Tap's drummers was one of his favorites. "We're planning something for the finale, but I won't *actually* explode. The pyro guys will rig something, and I'll walk out of the smoke a little...singed but alive and well."

"I don't think you should. Don't tempt fate."

Her words were calm, but the abject terror on her face was like a kick to the gut. "Oh, shit, Kel, I'm sorry." He pulled her into his arms. "We're just spitballing ideas. I won't do it if it'll upset you."

Kelly nodded, and her arms squeezed him. "Thank you."

Her words were barely a whisper, but they stabbed his heart. *I'm an idiot.*

She pulled back. "I know it's stupid."

"No, it isn't. I won't do it." She was upset, and it tore a hole in his chest. He tucked her hair behind her ear. "Why don't we go for a walk? We can try out the kitty leashes." He smiled, and she smiled back. His heart flipped. "Come on." He stood and pulled her to her feet. "Get dressed. The fresh air'll do us good."

While Kelly changed, he got the bag of treats from the kitchen and sat on the living room floor. The cats crowded around him. "Good kitties. Now, we're going for a walk. All of us." He picked up the pink harness and held it out to Sadie. She sniffed it and rubbed her head against his hand. "Would you like to come with us?" Sadie purred and rubbed her body against his arm. "Good. We love you, and we have to keep you safe." He held the harness in front of Sadie's head. "Put it on."

Her steel-blue eyes narrowed. A snow-white paw swatted the harness.

“None of that, Lady Sadie.” He stroked behind her ears, and her body twisted. “You hate being cooped up in here all day. I get it. You were used to being free. But Kelly rescued you, and she worries, as all mamas do. Put this on so we can keep you safe while you experience the outside world.”

Kelly entered the room, but she didn’t say anything. Sadie sniffed the harness again. Her eyes connected with his. “It’ll be okay. I promise.” Her head tilted for a second, then she put her head through.

“Oh, what a good girl.” He scratched her head and ears. “See, not so bad.” He let Sadie get used to the feel of it. Just like with Kelly, he wouldn’t push Sadie. “May I?” Sadie moved closer and Buzz fastened the harness. She climbed in his lap and lay down.

“You have the patience of a saint.” Kelly sat next to them. “I probably would’ve yelled at her when she swatted it.”

“She just needs time to get used to new things. Once she’s outside, she’ll make the connection this is a way for her to get what she wants, and I think we’ll be good.”

“It’s smart to start with her. She’s a head case.”

Buzz glanced at Kelly. “No, not a head case. Having their only shelter burn down was traumatic. She’d made it her home, and even though she tends to bully them, Chonkers and Squdgy are her family. She’s just looking out for them the best she knows how, and I feel like they understand that.” He petted them.

Darcy pranced over to Kelly.

“Oh, Mr. Darcy, you want pets, too?”

His head dived into her open palm.

“Good boy.”

After a few more minutes, all four cats were harnessed, and Buzz attached the leashes to the harnesses. “Ready?”

Kelly shook her head. “I guess.”

Buzz walked to the door and opened it. “Go on.” Sadie pulled, and the others followed.

Kelly locked the door behind them and met Buzz at the bottom of the stairs. “Are you sure they can’t get out of those?”

“Pretty sure. There are no guarantees in life, but if Sadie gets loose, I won’t rest until she’s safe. I promise.” He crossed his heart.

Kelly’s smile was all he ever needed.

She took a deep breath. “Okay. Let’s get this traveling spectacle on the road.”

Buzz grinned. “Did you say that on purpose?”

“What?”

“*Traveling Spectacle.*”

“I expect to get a lot of funny looks from my neighbors. Why?”

“It’s the title of our third album.”

“Really?” Kelly grinned. “I didn’t know.”

Buzz grinned. He gripped both leashes tightly. “It’s bound to be a spectacle, so let’s go.”

Kelly turned the doorknob and eased the door open. As soon as it was wide enough, Sadie squeezed out. She flung the door wide. “Go.”

Buzz stepped out into the heat. White puffy clouds floated in the blue sky. The air was thick, but a slight breeze wafted by. “Sadie, be good. The others can’t keep up with you.” She turned to look at him and appeared to nod. She eased up slightly. Buzz smiled. He loved animals. Compared to people, they were so easy to understand.

Some kids across the street outside the ice cream shop pointed and laughed. He waved.

They turned the corner, and Buzz smiled as they passed familiar faces. Some smiled, some shook their heads, but they

all stared with shock. A squirrel jumped from a tree branch onto the sidewalk right in front of Sadie. She hissed, and the squirrel pissed itself and flew to the trunk of the tree, scurrying up to safety.

Buzz laughed. "You're terrible, Lady Sadie."

Kelly tugged his shirt, and he leaned down. "I told you she's evil." Humor danced in her eyes.

"Not evil." He kissed her lips. "But she is the reigning queen of the neighborhood. That squirrel won't make the same mistake twice."

Kelly hooked her arm through his and laughed. "She sure is."

They walked around the block and stopped at the entrance to Kelly's building. "All in all, it wasn't a total disaster, only one traumatized squirrel. Poor little guy." He chuckled. "I think it went quite well for their first try."

Beads of sweat rose on Kelly's forehead. "How many total disasters are there really?" She wiped her hand over her brow. "It's hot today." Her white sundress clung to her legs. The breeze had disappeared.

"Done?"

She nodded. "I hate the heat. I don't mind warm, but it's almost one hundred today, and the humidity's oppressive." Her skin was flushed.

"You feeling okay?"

"Yeah, just hot, sweaty, and tired."

Last night had been emotional for her, and even though she'd slept soundly through the night, it wasn't odd she'd still be hurting. "Let's go in."

Kelly nodded in relief and unlocked the door.

Inside, Buzz locked her apartment door and bent to unharness the cats. When he looked up, Kelly stood with her back to him and whipped the dress up and over her head. "I need a shower."

The white thong highlighted her perfect ass. Buzz's dick hardened. She turned around. The matching satin bra and panties stood out on her olive skin. His jaw dropped.

Turning, she walked toward the bathroom. Over her shoulder, she said, "You coming?" Her sassy wink had more blood rushing to his dick.

"Oh, hell yeah."



"Wow."

Kelly smiled. "Just wow."

"Yeah, that's all I got." Buzz took her hand and twirled her around. "You take my breath away. Absolutely stunning." The red, sleeveless dress hugged her impressive curves perfectly. Ending above the knee, the fabric swayed with every step. The wide, deep vee neckline showed off her collarbones, and a long gold pendant ended between her breasts. He pulled her in, dipped her, and kissed her deeply. She clung to him, straining to get closer until they were both out of breath.

Kelly smiled and her pointer finger rotated in the air.

Buzz obliged. He'd known she'd dress up, so he'd worn black jeans and a black, long-sleeve, button-down shirt. He turned slowly to give her plenty of time to ogle him. When he faced her again, she was frowning and tapping her chin with her forefinger. "Something wrong?"

"You look pretty stunning yourself." She toyed with a button on his shirt. "This is custom."

His heart pounded, and he licked his dry lips. Her scent was intoxicating, and going out was now a terrible idea. But she'd gotten dressed up, so he wouldn't disappoint her. Buzz smiled. "Yeah. I had it made last time we were in Italy. My mom hates the jeans and T-shirts all the time, so I got a few shirts made so, when we have dinner out, I don't embarrass her."

Kelly shook her head. “I’m sure she’s nothing but proud of you. She’s your mom. She loves you just the way you are.” A sad smile clouded her face. “Moms are great that way.”

He hugged her. “Do you want to cancel?”

“No. It’ll be fun to see Nicki, Emily, and Siobhan. It’s nice having girlfriends again.”

He liked it that she liked his family. “Great. Let’s go.”

“Since we’re meeting them in the city, you didn’t have to come all the way back here to pick me up.”

“Yeah, Kel, I did.” He’d rented a car so he could do just that. She was a lady, and a gentleman always picked up the lady. Even though they weren’t dating for real, they were lovers, and he’d treat her like the queen she was. She deserved it. And maybe she’d see they could continue. Traveling would always be a huge chunk of his life, so she’d have plenty of time to work when he was away. But he rather liked the idea of having her to come home to.

They kissed the cats goodbye, and Buzz held her hand as they walked to the garage where his car was. He told himself it was for the benefit of the neighborhood, but it was more than that. He’d still take the hit if she didn’t want to continue to see him, and if that happened, he wanted her reputation intact. He cared too much to be the reason her neighbors saw her differently.

Getting out of Brooklyn was always a pain in the ass, so he’d picked her up early enough so he wouldn’t have to stress over the traffic. Once they cleared the Brooklyn Bridge, they made it to the restaurant in decent time. He handed the valet his keys and went around and opened Kelly’s door.

“Hey, Buzz,” Nicki said through the open window of a limo. They got out, and she squealed. “Kelly, you look fabulous. I knew you’d get dressed up. I love your dress.” Nicki pulled Kelly in for one of her atomic hugs.

“I love your dress,” Kelly said.

Buzz made a face when Kelly groaned. “Nic, ease up.”

“Sorry.” She pulled back and hugged Buzz. “You look so handsome.” She hooked her arm through Kelly’s and shot off questions as they walked into the restaurant.

Curt clapped him on the shoulder. “You look happy, brother. Happier than I think I’ve ever seen you.”

Buzz glanced at him. “It’s not like that.” But it was getting there. For him anyway.

“I get it. She’s not on board for more than four weeks yet.”

Buzz’s jaw dropped.

“Yeah, I know, I’m not the sharpest tack in the bunch. But I know you almost as well as I know myself. When Shauna dumped me, I spent weeks going over what I could’ve done. You know, besides not being in a band, or most of the time putting the band first, or never being home, and when I am, still being in a band and playing guitar all day long.” Curt laughed.

“Yeah.”

“But, dude, Sally never deserved you. I know she had a shit deal, but she has a black hole inside her that will never be filled, and it’ll suck the life out of whatever guy she’s with. Just like it was doing with you.”

Buzz shook his head.

“I had a front row seat in those days. You were still damaged from all the shit you went through as a kid, and for a while, your damage matched up with hers. But you, I don’t know, grew up. Or maybe you didn’t let it keep you down.” He glanced away for a second. “I never said anything because you loved her, but she was bad energy, and you need someone in your life who lifts you up. You tried to do that for her, but I think she liked being the victim.” His “Nicki” smile spread. “I know I didn’t always make good choices either with girlfriends. But since Nicki and I have been together, I’ve realized a lot of shit. Mostly how fucking lucky I am to have found a woman who understands being a musician is my air. Without it, I’d shrivel up and die. She never gives me shit for how long I’m working. Being with someone who’s also a

creative, it's just the best. We give each other space. I think Nicki knew what she was doing when she picked Kelly for you." He chuckled. "That sounded way less creepy in my head."

Buzz sighed. "No, man, I get it. She means well, and Kelly's great. But I also know if I asked her to stop, she would. You guys are great together."

Curt grinned. "Man, I love her more than I ever thought it was possible to love another person. I'd do anything for her."

"Let's go in before Nicki sends a search team."

They were shown to the private room they'd reserved. Their girls were sitting next to each other talking animatedly, and Jack and Elliot were standing by the doorway.

"Hey, man," Buzz greeted them.

"Dude, why'd you dress all fancy?" Elliot asked. He hated getting dressed up. T-shirts and jeans made up his entire wardrobe.

"I knew Kel would wear something stunning, so I wanted to look like I'd put *some* effort into it."

Elliot stroked his three-day beard scruff. "Kel? Name shortening is the kinda thing a boyfriend does, isn't it?" He swiped a finger over Buzz's cheek. "Freshly shaved, too."

Buzz knocked his hand away and gave Elliot the finger. "We're just having fun."

Elliot burst out laughing. "Still telling yourself that? Okay. The guy is always the last to know." He clapped Jack on the shoulder. "Except for Jack. He holds the world's record for falling in love at the speed of light. And knowing it."

They all laughed.

"That's a great title for a song," Buzz said as he pulled out his phone.

"Way ahead of you, brother," Jack said. He was already scribbling notes on the small pad he always carried.

Elliot poked him. “Seriously, take it from an old married man. If she’s your ‘the one,’ don’t blow it.”

Curt glanced over his shoulder. “Dude, not so loud. If Nicki hears that, she’ll start planning their wedding.”

“I’d think she’d be busy enough planning your wedding,” Jack said.

“You’d think wrong. She’s loving it. You know how couples always complain how stressful planning a wedding is? Not Nicki. I think she’ll probably be a little depressed once it’s over.” He smiled while shaking his head. “Ever since Nicki saw *The Age of Innocence*, she’s been trying to find a way to wear her dresses for a year after the wedding. Apparently in those days, that’s what brides did.”

Elliot’s lips curled up. “How do you know anything about that movie?”

“I watched it with her. It’s one of her new favorites.” At Elliot’s snarky smile, Curt added, “Like Siobhan hasn’t made you watch *Fifty First Dates* a million times.”

“Hey, that happens to be a great movie. It’s also the movie we saw on our first date.” Elliot sighed. “Siobhan picked it because she knew I loved Adam Sandler movies. She’s the best.” Elliot grinned at Buzz. “Nicki won’t be depressed if she has another wedding to plan.”

“Way ahead of yourselves.” Buzz glanced at Kelly, and his heart flipped. Seeing her huddled with his bandmates’ girls had joy flooding his system. *Like she could be mine.*

“Are you in love with her?” Elliot asked.

Buzz’s head snapped back to his friends. “What? We’ve only known each other for a few weeks.”

“And?” Elliot pushed.

This was so out of character. “Did you hit your head or something?”

Elliot chuckled. “No. I’m just happy to see you happy.” He glanced at his wife. “Sometimes guys are stupid, and we don’t see what’s in front of us. Siobhan and I lost a lot of years

together, and I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did."

"You and Siobhan have been together since you were sixteen. It's hardly the same as us."

"So there is an us?"

Buzz shook his head.

"Dude, ease off. He's not ready to admit he's falling for her," Jack said.

He liked Kelly, but he didn't think he was falling in love with her. "You too?"

Jack grinned. "Sorry, buddy, but I've known you since we were four. I can read you like a book."

Elliot smirked. "More like a pamphlet." He cracked up.

"Dude, you already used that line on me," Jack said.

"Applies to him, too."

"So, the three of you know more about how I'm feeling than I do?"

They all nodded.

"Okay, I like her." *A lot.* "But she's still set on ending it. I don't think she's ready to accept we have more than just sex. She's been hurt a lot, and I know exactly where she is in recovery. Stuck. She thinks if she doesn't get too close to anyone else, she won't lose them. But I think we all know that's not how it works."

"So, you're done using recovery as an excuse to avoid a relationship?" Curt asked.

If he couldn't admit it to the people he was closest to, then he'd never be able to admit it to Kelly. "It wasn't always an excuse."

"Of course not. Hey, we were there, remember?" Jack said.

Buzz swallowed the lump in his throat. "Every step of the way."

“So we get it.” Jack nodded. “When you first got out of rehab, you needed to focus on you. And because life doesn’t like things to go easy, we had to start tour rehearsals. Then it was stay sober and band and tour. Those things are huge parts of your life, and it took all your energy, mental and physical.”

Elliot smiled. “And you fucking crushed it. I’m so proud of you. I know how hard it is being the quiet one.”

Jack and Curt’s faces scrunched. “What’s that mean?” Curt asked.

Buzz shared a look with Elliot. “You and Jack are extroverts. So easy around people. I’ve always kinda envied that about you both.”

“You have?” Jack said.

Elliot nodded. “Me, too. We’re not saying that you guys have it easy, but easier, sure. It’s very stressful being in large crowds. It takes a lot of effort to talk to people, even our fans, but I do the best I can. You know I’m still happier at home or in my hotel room than I am at doing all the press shit, parties, meet and greets. You two are naturals.”

Buzz nodded.

Jack and Curt shared a look and nodded. “Okay, yeah, we get that. But from the outside, you both look natural. You don’t look awkward,” Jack said. “And you both have strengths Curt and I lack.”

Elliot chuckled. “Stop while you’re ahead.”

“Okay.”

“Are you ladies done clucking?” Nicki asked as she wrapped her arms around Curt’s waist. “This is a coed party.”

Elliot pulled Siobhan into his side, and Jack did the same with Emily.

Kelly looked at Buzz. He wasn’t sure from her expression if she was wanting him to follow suit or warning him not to.



KELLY'S HEAD SWAM. SHE'D FORCED BUZZ INTO INVITING HER, but this was a mistake. She did like Nicki, Emily, and Siobhan, but Kelly being there with the other couples gave everyone the wrong impression. She and Buzz were just having fun. They weren't a couple. Not a real couple anyway. It was strictly for show, but from the second Nicki had pulled her into the restaurant, she'd smiled knowingly. He'd warned her, but it still made her uncomfortable.

The fact she enjoyed Buzz's company was a bonus to their arrangement. And while things had blossomed into more than just sex, they weren't in a relationship. They only pretended for her family and neighbors. She needed to focus on the future of her business. Dozens of people counted on Kelly, and with all the ideas she had for future expansion, dozens more would.

But they were here, and after the stress of last night, Kelly would try to enjoy her new friends. She hoped Nicki would stick to hints and not embarrass her by asking questions.

The waiter arrived with their menus, so they sat. After reading off the list of specials, he took their drink order. No one ordered alcohol, which didn't really surprise her. Buzz would've been fine if they had. He hadn't appeared at all stressed about being around alcohol while at her grandparents' house or at Quivers.

Kelly spent more time than necessary perusing her menu. She felt Nicki's eyes boring into her. Kelly sat between Siobhan and Buzz, Nicki sat directly across from her, and Emily sat next to Nicki. She didn't think it was an accident the guys had picked the outside seats.

When Kelly glanced at Emily, she made a face and whispered something to Nicki, and Nicki acted like whatever Emily said was outrageous. Kelly figured Emily was trying to rein Nicki in. Begrudgingly, Nicki nodded, but the wicked sparkle in her brown eyes didn't diminish.

She'd thank Emily later. Kelly truly liked Nicki, but she could be a bit overwhelming. It was also quite clear all her interfering came from love and a desire to see everyone in her circle as happy as she was. It was sweet, but it made Kelly uncomfortable. She couldn't remember the last time she'd socialized where it hadn't been work related. *Did that even count?*

The guys told stories of their early days in the New York City bar and club scene, their first self-funded tour in a van up and down the East Coast, and how they were looking forward to their upcoming gig on September eleventh at The Rock House.

Buzz would leave the next day.

They hadn't discussed him not coming to the memorial. Buzz had been amazing last night. He'd read her the letter, held her, put her to bed, and cuddled her all night without expecting sex. Which probably broke another rule, but Buzz said repeatedly he didn't care about the rules.

"Kelly, our anniversary is coming up, and we were thinking of renewing our vows. We've been blessed with a second chance, and as part of our fresh start, we were thinking it'd be nice to reaffirm our commitment. Do you think you could design a dress for me that is wedding-y but not too extravagant?" Siobhan asked.

Kelly had missed a chunk of conversation. "Of course." She clicked into bridal consultant mode. "Is there a price point we should keep in mind?"

Siobhan glanced at Elliot and back to Kelly. "No more than five thousand."

Kelly had asked hundreds of brides their budget. She understood Siobhan wasn't comfortable spending so much on a dress she'd wear once. "The custom gowns start at ten, but I'd be honored to design something for your vow renewal."

"Oh, no. I can't let you do that." Siobhan's lip pulled in. "I appreciate it though. There must be something...less expensive that would look great from one of your collections."

“Of course, but I wasn’t being nice. I think it’s awesome you want to celebrate your second chance.”

“No.” Elliot stood. “Not a chance. You will design the perfect custom gown for my beautiful wife, and I don’t care how much it costs.” He tugged Siobhan’s hand and pulled her into his arms. “It’ll be worth every penny.”

“E.” Love shone in her smile. “We already had a big wedding.”

“We can keep it small people-wise.” Elliot’s eyes danced with tenderness. “You’re the most amazing wife and mother. You’ve put up with this crazy life of mine.” His eyes closed, and he hugged her tighter. “I’m the luckiest guy in the world. I want you to have your dream dress because I know your mom bullied you the first time. You looked stunning, but I always knew it wasn’t your choice.”

“Oh, E.” She rested her head on his chest. “How did you know?”

“Because I know you, and I knew you wanted something more...princess-y.”

Nicki tapped her water glass with a spoon. “Kiss your wife.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice.” He tilted Siobhan’s face and took her lips in a sweet kiss.

Siobhan glowed. Elliot smiled.

“Okay. You heard the man,” Siobhan said. They sat with their hands clasped.

“When were you thinking?” Kelly asked.

“Well, I’m pregnant again. I’m not sure if I really want to be as big as a house, so maybe after the baby is born.”

“Congratulations,” Kelly said.

“Really?” Elliot said. “I was thinking a Christmas ceremony would be nice.” He placed his palm on her belly. “You’ll look gorgeous.” His eyes glowed with love.

“E.” She kissed his lips again.

Kelly looked away. She'd seen that look in Enzo's eyes, and she missed it. But she wasn't built for relationships. She had too much she wanted to do with her life, and no man would want to be second. The truth was many women did that, but men rarely had to. Their fragile egos were tied to their careers, and having a woman who earned more than they did usually ended badly. Not with her parents because they'd been true partners. Her father had never been threatened by her mom's success.

Enzo was like that, too, though. Her eyes misted, and Kelly blinked. She would not cry in front of Buzz's friends. She wasn't usually so weepy, even at this time of year. She'd built up enough calluses on her heart to get from August through mid-September without coming apart at the seams. Every emotion she was capable of warred for time. Her usual even-tempered nature was nowhere to be found.

"I was thinking something off-white, maybe blush if it doesn't make my skin look ruddy," Siobhan said.

"You could really do any color you wanted. You don't have to stick to whites. If you were going to do it around Christmas, a blue-toned purple would be stunning, or hunter green would look absolutely gorgeous with your coloring."

"Oh, I hadn't thought anything other than whitish. I love purple."

"Me, too," Emily said.

Nicki's mouth dropped open, and her eyes widened. "Em, you could do a purple party gown for the reception."

Emily's eyes closed slowly as she shook her head. "Nic, we've been over this. I'm having one dress. I don't need a reception dress."

"What need? Your uncle can afford it, and he'd be happy to pay for another dress if you wanted." Nicki leaned across Emily's space. "Jack, wouldn't you love to see your stunning bride in a gorgeous purple gown at your reception?"

Jack put his hands up. "Nicki, I love you. You're like a sister to me, but please do not drag me into this. Em only

wants one dress. And whatever it is, I know she'll be stunning."

"Oh, your eyes are gonna pop ten feet outta your head. I can't wait until she tries it on." Nicki bounced in her seat.

Emily smiled. "It's the craziest thing, but she's just as excited for my wedding as she is for her own."

"Of course. You're my best friend." Nicki took a steadying breath. "More like a sister."

Emily hugged her, and everyone's eyes got misty.

Dinner conversation consisted of weddings and babies. By the time they left the restaurant, Kelly was burned out on happy occasion talk. Which pissed her off. Her bread and butter was literally one of the happiest events in a couple's life. She couldn't afford to be bitter. But she felt that way at times. She'd had so much hope and excitement when she and Enzo were getting married. Some people had mouthed off about how they should "come talk to me in ten years" or "to enjoy it while it lasts." The vulgar bitterness those people had in their voices hadn't even put a dent in Kelly's happiness; she'd been sorry for them. But they hadn't made it ten years, and on the day she'd vowed to love, honor, and cherish Enzo for the rest of their lives, she'd been sure they wouldn't end up like those sad people.

And yet she had. She still believed in marriage, just not for her.

She also had her family to think about. Buzz had said she was building an empire, and although she'd never thought of it like that, he was right. She had no intention of being in a position where she'd have to fork over half of what she'd created because a marriage hadn't worked out. Enzo hadn't wanted anything from her even though he'd been entitled. He'd said it was her brain child, and she'd worked her butt off for it. Once he totally bought out her grandparents, Enzo and Claudia would have a very comfortable life. The bakery made a fortune, and Kelly didn't begrudge it to him. He'd certainly put in enough years to have earned it.

Tears welled at the thought of a baby Enzo. If only she'd been able to be what he'd needed, it would've been their baby. Kelly shook herself. She didn't want kids, so why the hell was she thinking that?

Buzz glanced over. "You okay?"

Even at this late hour, there was stop-and-go traffic in the city. Typical.

Kelly brushed the tear off her cheek. This was stupid. This weepy shit was driving her bonkers. "Yeah, sorry."

Buzz squeezed her hand. "Nicki can be relentless. I'm sorry."

"It's not her." She could've let him think that and ended this conversation, but she wouldn't do that to her friend. "It's an emotional time of year. I've been really tired lately. Jenny says I'm like the battery bunny on steroids. A real nasty stomach bug made the rounds in the boutique in early August, and I missed two days of work." She sighed. "I haven't felt like myself since."

"Stress is the number-one facilitator of pretty much any disease. It wreaks havoc on the body."

"Really, Dr. Stewart?" She smiled.

"Right title, wrong Stewart. Steph's the MD, and she talks to me about a lot of this stuff." Buzz sighed. "At least she did when she was speaking to me."

"You're proud of her, aren't you?"

"Hell yeah. She's always been the strong, smart one. Medicine is not for the fainthearted. There's a lot of competition for the choice residencies, and Steph beat out twelve other high achievers when she earned the residency for pediatric cardiology. Pediatric surgery is one of the hardest disciplines, and throw a superspecialization like cardiology into the mix, and the competition is cutthroat. And Steph has always been a take no prisoners kinda girl." He swallowed hard. "She's a great big sister. I really hope I haven't fucked it up beyond repair. My life won't be the same if she can't forgive me."

Kelly was touched by Buzz's connection to his sister. It was as close as anyone else came to how she felt about RJ and Jenny. She understood his pain, because if anything happened to either of them, Kelly wouldn't survive it. Not after losing their parents. She'd made a ton of mistakes raising them, but everything she'd done had been to keep her brother and sister safe, to keep them together. To not lose another person she loved.

"Is your sister dyslexic? I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

"No, she got the good genes. Why do you ask?"

"I read up on it when you went to get ready for dinner, and it's hereditary although it can skip."

"I'm the only one who's dyslexic. My dad's adopted, and he doesn't have it, so one of his biological parents most likely does. It was hard being the only one in my family, and on top of my health, I felt...broken. They never treated me that way, but that's how I felt." Buzz let out a long breath. "Maybe if it had been the only thing, I'd have dealt with it better, but it was really hard having another thing wrong with me. And Stephanie's so smart. She takes after my dad."

"You're smart. Dyslexia's not indicative of a person's level of intelligence."

Buzz squeezed her hand. "Yeah, I am. Reading's something most people take for granted, and I get it's not something anyone who doesn't have it could really understand because reading's so second nature. Jack's mom, my aunt Maggie, she's an English teacher, and she's the one who figured it out when I was seven. She researched it and got training. She tutored me in reading and writing. I was lucky because my parents had the resources to get me all the help that was available. Not all kids do. Most teachers never had any training, and schools lacked the resources to deal with dyslexia, so most kids went undiagnosed or fell through the cracks." He smiled. "Aunt Maggie called it a challenge, but for the longest time, I felt it was a curse. She helped me see I wasn't alone. And that really helped me feel less broken." He

smiled. “I was lucky to have her. Dyslexia is a lot more common than most people think. And a lot of very famous, creative people have it.”

Buzz stepped on the brakes hard, and his arm shot in front of her as she lurched forward. “Sorry. Guy cut me off.”

Buzz didn’t give the guy the finger. Bird flipping was a New York City pastime among the drivers. Even in Brooklyn, it was the same.

Kelly glanced at him. He was a pretty laid-back guy, but his tension had been rising throughout the day. “Do you have a plan for tomorrow?”

“Plan?”

“On how you’re going to start the conversation with your sister.”

Buzz shook his head. “I’m not really sure what I’m going to say. Problem is, I’m really pissed at her for ghosting me. We haven’t spoken in weeks, and I don’t want to leave with her still pissed at me. It’s never a good idea to do this angry, but what choice do I have? She’s my only sister, and we’ve always been close. I know you said when I first went into rehab she was too scared to be angry, but she got plenty off her chest at the family session. She’s not known for holding back, and when she’s pissed, you know it. Steph’s not one of those women who say nothing’s wrong when something’s clearly wrong. That’s assuming you even get the chance to ask. She doesn’t wait to be asked. She comes right out with it.”

“Did you guys fight a lot as kids?”

“Stupid stuff, but never anything serious. Never like this. She always looked out for me.”

Kelly turned toward him but didn’t ask.

Buzz glanced at her. “My mom had two miscarriages before I was born.” He scoffed. “I think Stephanie took it as hard as my parents.”

Kelly touched his arm. “Oh, B. I know you’re hurt and mad she’s not talking to you, but maybe it’s her way of trying

to come to terms with her feelings instead of taking them out on you. Since you've always been close, I'm sure she feels the loss of it just like you do. Maybe she's afraid she'll say something that will affect your connection."

"Sounds like you've got some experience there."

"Yeah." Kelly peered out the window. "I only ever had one serious fight with RJ. When he was sixteen, he wanted to go into accounting, and I thought it was great because then he could come work with me."

"No way."

"What?"

"No way a sixteen-year-old boy wants to be an accountant. Fireman, astronaut, video-game mogul, pro athlete, *rock star*, sure. Accountant, no way."

"Okay, I *thought* he wanted to be an accountant, but he only said it because he was afraid of disappointing me. He's always wanted to be a fireman, just like our dad. And it was the last thing *I* wanted him to be. I wanted him safe." She cleared her throat. "When he was nineteen, he took a year off before returning to college to be an EMT." Kelly drew in a slow breath. "After the year, he told me he wasn't going back to college. He'd applied to the fire academy, and he was going to be a fireman. I didn't exactly take it well, and we had a huge fight. Several. He didn't talk to me for weeks after that."

"I can see how it would be hard for you."

Kelly smiled. Of course, he could. So sweet. So understanding. "I think I always knew he was going to follow in our dad's footsteps. And I'm pretty sure I did everything I could to sabotage it. I almost permanently damaged our relationship because I was scared of losing him, too." Kelly sniffled. Her already raw emotions took another deep cut remembering the rift she'd caused. "Thing is, I can understand how your sister feels. She didn't raise you, *per se*, but she always worried about you. I don't know the stats on addiction, but I do know it usually doesn't have a happy ending."

Buzz nodded. “Yeah. So many addicts end up dying, if not from an OD, then something drug related or suicide. And it’s always there. It’s not like a broken bone that’ll heal. I’ll always be in recovery, never *recovered*.”

“Your sister has probably seen a lot when she was an intern.”

“Probably,” he whispered.

“I’ve lived with a lump in my chest every day since RJ told me he was going to be a firefighter. And I will forever. It’s gotten better, but it’s still there. It’s his life, and his choice, and I know if the worst ever happens it’ll be because my brother was willing to give up his life to save someone else’s.”

Buzz stopped outside the garage where he usually parked. “Am I invited?”

“Yes.” She really appreciated he never took it for granted he was staying over. So considerate. An attendant opened her door, and she got out. Buzz walked over, and she took his hand and turned in the direction of her building.

They walked a few blocks in silence.

“I’m not a fireman. I’m a musician.”

“And you don’t think you’ve helped someone in need? I know for a fact Anita credits you and Stone Highway for her finding a donor.”

“She told me the first day I came into the boutique. But it’s not the same.”

Kelly stopped and Buzz turned to her. “No, not the same, but the pride is. I’m sure your sister’s proud of you and all you’ve accomplished. Proud of how you rose above being dyslexic instead of letting it define you. Of how you’ve grown into a strong, amazing man who has so much empathy and compassion for others.”

A soft wind blew Kelly’s hair, and Buzz tucked it behind her ear, brushing her cheek with his thumb in the process. The gentle touch sent shivers of awareness through her entire body.

He smiled. “You’re one smart lady, Kelly Hoffmann.”

She smiled back.

“Thank you, Kel.”

“For what?”

“Helping me see how she feels. It never occurred to me her reaction could’ve been delayed. And for never making me feel...”

“What?”

“Less.” He pulled her in for a hug, and Kelly’s arms wrapped around him.

They stood in the middle of the sidewalk, two blocks from her apartment, hugging.

“Come on, the kitties are missing you.” Buzz took her hand.

A lump rose in her throat.

They weren’t the only ones who would miss him when he left.

Chapter Twenty-Five

BUZZ'S HEART POUNDED AS HE DROVE THE LAST FEW MILES TO his parents' home. He'd lain awake a good part of the night thinking about the things Kelly had shared about her brother. But with her curled into his side, the clawing he usually felt when he couldn't sleep hadn't been there.

When he'd left to go back to the hotel to shower and change, she'd said if he needed to talk after seeing his sister, to come over. He didn't know why it helped calm his growing unease the closer he got to his childhood home.

He needed to do this. For himself and his parents. They weren't used to their kids not getting along, and Buzz hated causing them more grief. Because he had a better understanding of how Stephanie was feeling, his anger diminished. What hurt the most was her shutting him out. He'd always had her to talk to, and when he was on tour, he looked forward to their weekly calls. He loved being on tour, but it didn't mean he didn't miss his family.

Pulling into the driveway, he cut the engine. When he closed his eyes, Kelly's image appeared. Her smile was everything. Much like Emily, she was wise beyond her years. She hadn't let life beat her. He understood now how his sister might feel more parental toward him. She'd spent thousands of hours playing with him when she could've been hanging out with her friends. She'd chosen him. One of his earliest memories was waiting in front of their apartment door for Stephanie to come home from school.

Buzz exhaled a long breath and got out. He needed his sister back, so he'd fight like hell. She'd always been there for him, and he would always be there for her. She'd never resented him for all the attention he'd gotten. She'd helped. If she'd gone the other way, they wouldn't be so close, and it wasn't outside the realm of possibility that she could've ended up hating him.

His sister had been part of his team.

He glanced up at her bedroom window. Stephanie stood there. Her face bunched up, and she stepped away.

His gratitude wouldn't allow him to pussy out now.

Walking into the house, he went to the kitchen. "Hi."

Mom turned from the stove. "Buzz." She wiped her hands on a towel and hugged him. When she pulled back, her eyes were filled with tears.

"Shh. It'll be okay, Mom. I promise."

"She's gonna be pissed."

Buzz chuckled. "She already is. Saw me out her window."

She pulled away. "I'll talk to her."

"No. This is our issue. I appreciate it."

Dad walked in from the backyard with a plate full of burgers. "Son."

Buzz hugged him. "Dad."

"Well, well, well. Isn't this nice." Stephanie stood in the doorway to the kitchen. "I thought it was going to be the three of us."

Buzz stepped up. "It was, Steph, but my plans changed. I'd have called to tell you, but you're not picking up."

Her chin tilted. "I've been busy." Her eyes narrowed. "You're lying. You should know better than to try to lie to me. You never could."

Mom stood next to him. "I told him you'd be here. Now you will talk to your brother because he deserves better from

you.”

“Right, I forgot. As the oldest, it was always up to me to do the right thing.” Stephanie padded across the threshold into the kitchen. “Meanwhile, Garth Junior gets to go off and travel the world, have a shitty girlfriend who hated us, and get loaded up on drugs.”

“Whoa, Steph, back it up. This has nothing to do with Sally. That ended over two years ago.”

“Yeah, and then you went off the deep end.”

Buzz unclenched his fists. “You’re rewriting history. That’s not what happened, and you know it. I didn’t OD.”

Her eyes narrowed until they were slits. “But Mom and Dad thought you did. Mom thought you were dead! How could you do that to us?”

“Great, another opportunity to bring up how I’m the weak one.”

“Not weak. Stupid.”

“Stephanie, that’s enough,” Dad said.

The controlled anger in his father’s voice had Buzz glancing at him.

She huffed. “I didn’t mean it like that. You’re not unintelligent, Buzzby. But getting involved with drugs was stupid.”

“No argument here.”

“Why do you do that?”

“What?”

“Give in so easily.”

Buzz took a step toward his sister. “Because I was wrong. And I live with it every day. The pain I caused all of you. I’m not the one who has a problem admitting when I’m wrong. I’m not the one who shut out her only brother. I’m trying to make up for what I’ve done, but if you won’t even talk to me, how can I?”

Stephanie's face reddened, and she turned on her heel.

“Go on, run away.” Buzz's chest ached. *I've lost my sister.* He'd worked hard to get clean and harder to learn how to live sober. But if she wasn't going to give an inch, there was no chance they'd be able to fix the damage to their relationship. He'd been incredibly lucky so far because he'd been able to repair all his other relationships. If addiction cost him his sister...

He wouldn't give up on her. If they didn't have it out, it would be months of her dodging his calls and texts, and that had anger rising. “Listen, I can't change what happened, but believe me, I would if I could. Do you think I'm having a good time? Every fucking second of my day revolves around getting through without relapsing. From the second I wake in the morning, it's there. It's the last damn thought before I fall asleep and every minute in between. I know I did this to myself, but you're a damn doctor. Where's your compassion? Or is it just for paying customers?”

Her back stiffened, and she turned to face him with narrow eyes shooting sparks. “Yeah, you did do this to yourself. After all you went through when you were a kid, you should've known better.”

“Gee, sis, I'm sorry I was born. That what you want to hear?”

Stephanie's expression turned to shock. “Take that back.”

“Why? Aren't you sorry? You enjoyed being an only child, didn't you?” It wasn't true, but anger was clouding his judgment, and he let it.

Every day was a struggle, but he was handling it.

Fear rose in his chest. A memory he'd been avoiding was clawing to the surface. He couldn't handle another thing right now, so he lashed out at Stephanie. “You have no idea what it was like to be the broken kid. You had *everything*. Brains, health.”

She grit her teeth. “You're not dumb and you're healthy now. Stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

“Not feeling sorry. Just pointing out that, in this family, you’re the charmed one.”

Stephanie’s eyes flared a second before she rushed him, laid her palms on his chest, and shoved. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. You know shit happened before you were born.”

Buzz’s pulse raced. “Like what?”

Shaking with fury, Stephanie took a few steps back and turned away. “Nothing. Nothing.”

It wasn’t nothing.

The look of fear on his parents’ faces confirmed it. Tears rolled down his mom’s cheeks, and she turned into his dad.

Buzz felt like the odd man out. “Someone better say something.”

Stephanie squared her shoulders.

“Please don’t, Stephanie,” his mother barely whispered.

“We should’ve told him.”

“He didn’t need any more fear or worry.” Mom sobbed. “He got enough of mine!” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Buzz swallowed the lump that threatened to choke him. His earliest memories were feelings of guilt and fear because his parents constantly worried about him. Well beyond normal parental worries. But how had his mother known he’d felt guilty? He’d never told anyone. “What should you have told me?”

“Son, I don’t think now’s the time.” His father’s voice wavered.

“Well, I’m almost thirty. So, what, another thirty years?”

“You want to know why I’m so mad at you for getting involved with drugs?”

Stephanie’s controlled tone set his nerves on edge even more, which he hadn’t thought possible because he already felt like he’d snap in two. “Yes.”

Her brown eyes darkened, and Buzz braced for her anger explosion.

But it didn't come.

Tears welled and streamed down her cheeks.

He'd prepared for anger. But tears on his sister... In all his life, he'd never seen her cry. Not even the time she'd flipped over the handlebars of her bike after hitting a hole. She'd gotten up, brushed off the gravel embedded in her skin, and gotten back on her bike. Cuts, scrapes, and blood had never stopped Stephanie.

When she raised her eyes to his, his heart stopped. Worse than tears was the raw fear in her brown eyes. She'd never made fun of him because he'd been small for his age or because he couldn't read. The big kids never picked on him when she was around. So, when she hadn't been there, it had been yet another thing they'd used against him.

He'd never seen her guard down like this. Had never seen such raw pain in her.

"Because I didn't want to lose another brother."

Air caught in his lungs. He must've misunderstood her. His mom had had two miscarriages before he'd been born, but he'd assumed they'd been early on and they couldn't have known what the sex of the baby was. But Steph had said brother, not brothers. "What?"

"Gary was eight months old when he died," his mom said, her voice hollow.

Buzz turned to his mom.

She took a few steps toward him, her pale cheeks going whiter. "He was a happy baby. Always smiling, giggling." She swallowed hard. "I went in to feed him. He was still. He was never still. He was always awake and looking for me. When I touched him, he wasn't warm." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I grabbed him up and patted him on the back, praying he would cry. I called for your dad. But it was too late..."

“Gary.” Numbness overtook him. This wasn’t like how drugs made him numb. This was in his brain and body and soul. “I had a brother?”

His mother took another step. “They said it was sudden infant death syndrome. If he’d had a medical condition, something treatable, if there’d been any sign, maybe we could’ve done something. I spent weeks going over every minute of his life in my head thinking there had to be a clue, something I missed, something I should’ve just known because he came out of me.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“Because everything that happened to you was my fault —”

“Mom, that’s not true. It’s not your fault I was born premature, and they found my heart defect because you knew something was wrong and insisted on tests they wouldn’t have performed otherwise.” He hugged her. “My allergies weren’t your fault.”

Tears streamed down her face. “After you were born, I was so happy but also completely terrified. I was determined to not let anything bad happen to you.”

She shuddered, and Buzz held her tighter. “Mom, you know the doctor said you didn’t cause my allergies.”

She nodded. “I know. It took me over a year in therapy to really believe that, but sometimes, I still wonder if they’re wrong. I washed the nursery walls every single day.” Her body tensed, and she let out a slow breath. “Science is constantly correcting itself. Things they say are concrete are disproven years later.” She stepped back, looked up, and lay her hand on his cheek. “But it was my fear which caused you to be afraid all the time. My trauma at losing Gary bled into you, and I’m so sorry.” Tears welled in her eyes.

“Mom, I love you. I don’t blame you for anything. It was happening to you, and when you guys realized how it was affecting me, you got help.” He kissed her cheek. Fear was something he understood fully. It lived inside him, waxing and

waning but always there. Fear of disappointing his parents further was at the top of the list. Buzz couldn't believe he'd had an older brother. Miscarriages were devastating enough. He'd seen what Elliot and Siobhan had gone through; it had almost ended their marriage. But losing a child...

Renewed guilt over his stupid, selfish, descent into addiction stole the air from his lungs. But he'd deal with his feelings later at therapy. He wouldn't let his family carry this burden because of him any longer. "You guys did everything for me." He met Steph's gaze over his mom's head. "You were the best big sister a guy ever had. You always looked out for me. And Dad, you taught me everything I know about being a good man."

He hugged his mom tighter. After his heart surgery, he'd sensed his mother's fear, which had him more terrified that his heart was just bad and would break again. "You're the best mom." He swallowed the lump in his throat.

Mom smiled through her tears. "I'm so proud of you. You had a rough start in life, and I didn't make it any easier on you. But you grew into an amazing man."

"When I went into rehab, I was so...angry. I was pissed at myself and pissed I couldn't use drugs anymore." He sighed. "I was embarrassed you knew what I'd been doing. I didn't really want to be there even though I knew I had to do it." Buzz allowed his feelings to surface. "You went to therapy all those years, and I know you hated it sometimes, but you took responsibility for your feelings and actions. I wanted to be strong like you."

"Oh, Buzz." Her eyes brightened as her smile spread even though tears still fell. "You are, honey. We're so proud."

Dad embraced them. "Stephanie?"

Buzz glanced at her. Tears streamed down her face, and her body shook with silent sobs. He put his arm out, and she walked to him. When her arms encircled him, tears welled in his eyes. "I'm so sorry." Not that he needed any more reasons to fight the fight every day to be sober. Knowing the loss his

family suffered when his brother died renewed his dedication. There was more at stake here than just his life.

The survival of their family.

“Stop apologizing,” Stephanie said. “I know I haven’t said it, but I’m proud of how you’ve fought your way back from addiction. I do understand how hard it is.” Stephanie’s gaze dropped. “And I’m ashamed of how I’ve behaved.” She met his eyes. “It’s no excuse, but I’ve been going through so much, and it was easier to take my anger out on you.” Stephanie sniffled. “I know what you went through when you were a kid played a huge part in your descent into drugs.” She sighed. “But I’m a doctor. I should’ve seen it.”

“You couldn’t have stopped it.”

“I know.” She shrugged. “Maybe. I’m sorry I’ve been such a bitch.”

Buzz kissed the top of her head. “Sorry enough to take my calls and respond to my texts?”

“Yes, you big dope.” She smiled at him. “I love you, baby brother.”

“I’m a grown man.”

She chuckled. “Doesn’t matter.” She went on tiptoe and scuffed his hair. “Even when you’re sixty, you’ll still be my baby brother.”



“Wow,” KELLY SAID. “THAT’S A LOT TO PROCESS, ISN’T IT?”

Buzz sat next to her on the couch. “Yeah. It’s surreal. But it explains a lot.”

Kelly took his hand in hers. “I’m glad you and your sister worked things out.”

When he’d left his parents’ house, he’d called Kelly and said he needed to see her. Normally, he’d have gone over it for a few days before sharing it with his closest friends, but he’d

needed to talk to her. She'd given him so much insight into how his sister could've been feeling that it had helped him ball up and confront her. "Thanks for letting me come over. It's late, and I know you have a full day tomorrow." He wanted to stay. Not because of sex, but he wanted to feel her next to him all night. If he went back to his hotel, even though he was tired, he'd never sleep well.

Kelly's eyes filled with compassion, and in that moment, he knew he was falling in love with her. His head filled with images of him coming home from tour and Kelly greeting him with her beautiful smile and an intense kiss as the kitties welcomed him by climbing his pants to get his attention. He waited for the panic. For why he couldn't do this. But all he felt was a complete sense of rightness.

There was a lot he needed to figure out first. And he'd need to convince her continuing their relationship wouldn't keep her from her business. She'd said her sister had really stepped up. If she came with him on tour sometimes, her dreams of traveling the world could come true. He actually had something to offer her. Maybe she wouldn't be with him all the time, but he'd take whatever she'd be willing to give.

Buzz had never wanted Sally on tour. In the early days, none of them even considered bringing along girlfriends. They'd been all about the gigs and fans, and even after they'd earned enough money to pay for the flights, visits had been short and few and far between.

Everything had changed for them. They were moving into a new phase in life. And they had the means to bring their growing families along with them.

He was getting way, way ahead of himself because Kelly still expected their time to end.

"Hey, you okay?"

"What? Oh, yeah. Sorry. Lost in thought."

"Do you want to stay?"

His heart flipped. "Yeah, I'd love that."

Even in her pink pajamas, Kelly looked stunning. Her hair was in a ponytail, and her face was devoid of makeup. “Come on.” She stood and took his hand, and they walked to the hallway.

“I’m gonna wash up.” He went into the bathroom, brushed his teeth, and washed his face. When he entered the bedroom, Kelly was propped up with her sketch pad on her lap and four kitties nestled up against her. He stripped out of his clothes and climbed into bed. When they’d first started sleeping together, the cats would spread out over the whole bed. But now, they left his side open until he got in. Sadie walked over Kelly’s legs and nestled next to his head on the pillow. “Whatcha working on?”

Kelly smiled. “Got a few ideas for Siobhan. I gotta say I’m loving the idea of her wearing a deep purple.” She tilted her sketch pad. “What do you think?”

“Wow.” The dress was a full ball gown with a beaded satin bodice and a velvet skirt.

“Yeah? I know Siobhan said not too wedding-y, but why not? Her first dress was a mermaid, and she looked beautiful in it, but I gotta say every bride should try on a ball gown. People don’t dress up like they used to. For fancy events like the Grammys, you’ll see a more fitted gown, mermaid or trumpet, even A-lines, but probably not a ball gown. A wedding is the one time a girl can be a total princess. Unless you’re the queen or an actual princess. I encourage all my brides to at least try one on just to experience the majesty of the dress.”

“Did you wear a ball gown?” Buzz sighed. “Sorry, none of my business.”

Kelly waved him off. “Don’t be silly. It’s a normal question. No, I didn’t like how it looked. I was self-conscious. I wore a soft A-line.”

“Did you design it?”

She shook her head. “I got it at Clineman’s because that’s where my mom got hers.” She smiled. “I wanted to feel

connected to her even though she wasn't there to shop with me." She wiped her eyes. "Besides, I didn't have the resources to get it made like I do now. I was still working there."

"If you got married again, would you design it? On the offhand chance you change your mind."

Kelly shrugged. "I'd love to design my sister's dress when she gets married. And for RJ's future fiancée, too, of course. If she wanted me to."

"I didn't realize they were in relationships."

"They're not. At least Jenny's not. RJ will be twenty-two on the twenty-first, but he's still fishing the waters." Kelly exhaled slowly. "I hope they both meet someone who lives in Brooklyn. Even though RJ's at Ten House, he's still gonna live here because the rents are cheaper."

Buzz put the pad on the nightstand. "It's okay, Kel. I get it. They're your family, and you're afraid they'll move away. You did everything to keep the three of you together, and you did an amazing job. But if they do move to the city, it's just across the river."

She nodded. "I'm more afraid of them moving to another state. That's why I wanted them to work for me. Then they'd have to live here. I know it's selfish. Can't help it."

He hugged her. "What it is, is totally understandable. They don't strike me as the looking to get out of where they grew up type. I think Jenny and RJ are just as concerned about staying close as you are." Buzz chuckled. "They love you and worry about you, just like you do to them. And worst-case scenario, if one of them does move to another state, you can still see them often because you have the means."

She nodded. "I've already thought of that. I'm lucky because I can afford to travel to them often if I had to. I hope I don't, though."

He smiled. "Not luck. You're really smart and totally driven, and I'm sure some luck was at play, but luck rarely replaces hard work as the driving force."

She laughed. "I bet you get that a lot, huh? Being lucky?"

“Yeah. Some articles still say we had overnight success. If by overnight, they mean four years of playing gigs at bars and clubs and traveling all over the country and sleeping in our van, then yeah, totally overnight. We definitely had luck and a shitload of help, but we’ve worked nonstop for over eleven years. I’m looking forward to the break at the end of this tour. We’ll take off until May or June, then we’ll head back into the studio. Our next tour will have shorter runs and longer breaks. Curt and Nicki finally picked a September wedding date, and Jack and Emily will be getting married next October.” He laughed. “Emily says they picked September because she and Nicki had a bet on who’d get married first.”

“What did they bet?”

He shrugged. “Beats me. I don’t even know when they made it because Emily was three weeks away from getting married when her ex cheated on her.”

Kelly gasped. “I had no idea.”

“You don’t read the tabloids, do you?” He scoffed. “Emily’s having to deal with her life being picked apart after the horrible shit that happened last year.”

“I’d hate that.”

Buzz’s heart dropped. If Kelly had managed to be a rising star in the bridal industry without her family’s tragedy being laid out, then she was lucky. But if they started dating for real... “Things have settled down, but for a while, they couldn’t go out without getting mobbed by reporters. And the story of Emily’s broken engagement was totally over the line. Jack threatened to cut off any interview if they brought it up. He’s the celebrity, and they had no right to dig into Emily’s past. Unfortunately, it didn’t stop them from reprinting the nightmare of the car accident when she lost her family when she was seventeen.”

Kelly sighed. “Yeah, she told me about it.”

Buzz smiled. “Did she? It’s been hard on her being pulled into the spotlight so much, but she’s a strong woman, and she’s

not gonna let some asshole reporters ruin what she and Jack have. It's truly special."

"Don't you want that, too?"

Buzz mentioned Emily's stuff to gauge her reaction. She valued her privacy as much as Emily used to, and if she agreed to keep seeing him, she needed to be aware she could be pulled into the spotlight.

He brushed his thumb across her cheek. "She'd have to be one amazingly smart woman who understands the pitfalls that come with dating, let alone marrying, a musician in a band. Touring is our life." He sighed. "I can't blame any woman for not really understanding what she'd be getting into, because thinking you'll know what it's like and the reality of living it aren't the same thing. And dating is different from marriage. Especially when kids come along."

"But you guys have solved that, haven't you?"

"For now. But at some point, we'll have to change our touring schedule even more. Once Jason's school-age, Siobhan won't be able to travel with us. Or maybe she will. She mentioned homeschooling, so who knows. But we've had a few conversations, and we're all on the same page."

"Won't that hurt your career?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Who knows where technology will be in five or ten years? Maybe all concerts will be holographs of the bands."

"You're kidding?"

"Probably not that, but either way, we'll make adjustments."

Chapter Twenty-Six

IT WAS THEIR LAST FULL WEEK TOGETHER, AND SEPTEMBER eleventh was right around the corner. Kelly wished she could stop time. She wished 9/11 could be wiped off the calendar. She wished Buzz wasn't leaving.

Kelly was crushed by sadness. For the first time in her life, she wasn't so sure what she wanted anymore.

Jenny had done an outstanding job with her new responsibilities. Kelly had never intended it to be permanent, but in the back of her mind, she'd seen it as a kind of test. She'd known Jenny would do well, but her expectations, as high as they'd been, had been exceeded. She hadn't taken a vacation in years. Or really any time off. If anything, after her separation from Enzo, she'd put in more and more hours. Leaving earlier because sleep had eluded her and coming home later because their empty apartment was a constant reminder of her failure at being a wife. When she'd adopted the cats, she'd been forced to make changes, but she'd still worked well past closing. She'd looked forward to going home at night to see them. They needed her. And they'd helped fill a hole in her life.

And then Buzz happened. And she'd made room for him, too. He'd been very understanding of the limitations she'd put on their time, and he'd made himself available around her schedule with few exceptions. His willingness to be the flexible one and his understanding of her drive to keep her business growing made him a great partner.

Whoa. They weren't together like that. His life demanded he be on tour for weeks and months at a time, but things were changing, and they were moving with the changes instead of fighting them.

Kelly hated change. In her life, it had always been attached to loss. Her mother. Grandmother. Father. Their deaths had brought catastrophic changes to her life. And more responsibility. Because she'd been the oldest, she'd been compelled to make sure her younger siblings had the best childhoods they could possibly have under the terrible circumstances.

Except she wasn't the oldest. Frankie had all but abandoned them, so she'd been forced to step up. How different would things have been if he'd come home, gone to college locally, and shouldered some of the burden? She'd refused to admit how much it had hurt at the time because she couldn't handle any more pain. But now, almost two decades later, she allowed the pain to come. She'd looked up to him. She'd followed him around like a puppy, always trying to get his attention. And the few times he'd paid it, she'd felt special.

It was more than he'd ever shown to Jenny, and RJ had no memories of him at all. There had only been a few family pictures of them all together. Jenny and RJ considered Enzo their older brother, and Kelly would never get in the way of that. Enzo had three older sisters, so it had filled a need in his life as well. Frankie hadn't always shunned her. In her parents' bedroom, there'd been a picture of him holding her as a baby. He'd looked happy.

She had no idea what had happened to change his feelings. Maybe one of her father's letters would give her the answer, but she was in no hurry to read them. She still had to tell Jenny and RJ about theirs. She'd wait until after the memorial, after the pain tornado dissipated.

Kelly forced the memories away and went over to the racks in the corner of her office that held all the fabric samples. Siobhan had described her perfect dress as nothing too extravagant even after she'd agreed on no budget. Kelly designed a floor-length gown with an empire waist with an

illusion top and long sleeves. But Siobhan would rock a ball gown, so she'd designed a second choice. Kelly had gone a little overboard on the design that included crystals and beading over the bodice with a matching velvet cape and a tiara headpiece.

She felt all the fabrics and picked a silk velvet for the skirt and silk charmeuse for the bodice of the ball gown and a softer silk and handmade lace for the empire gown, which Kelly pictured in a deep green.

Her office phone buzzed. She picked up, expecting Anita to say Buzz was here. They'd be having lunch today, and she was excited to see him. But when she glanced at the time, it was only eleven. "Yes?"

"Your brother's here."

"Since when do you announce RJ?"

"Not RJ," Anita whispered.

Kelly's heart pounded. Grams had warned her Frankie was sniffing around for more of the money the family had received from the Victim Compensation Fund. "Send him in."

A weird sense that somehow thinking of him had sparked him to come here set her nerves on edge. She'd been expecting a phone call, so this was quite unexpected.

After a quick knock on her door, the store security guard popped his head in. "You sure, Kelly?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes, it's fine. Thank you, Simon."

He stepped aside, and Frankie strode in like the king of the world. He probably heard trumpets in his head wherever he went. Same cocky attitude, same high opinion of himself. Grinning, he opened his arms to hug her, but Kelly stopped him. "You're kidding, right?"

"I haven't seen my little sister in years, and you can't even give me a hug?"

He'd always had a way of turning things around to make him look like the wounded party. "You haven't seen me

because you didn't bother coming home. You knew where we were." She wasn't a kid anymore.

He laughed. "The kitten has claws."

Kelly ignored that. She wouldn't let him rattle her. She would make it as uncomfortable as possible for him. She'd make him say it. Make him work for the "no" he'd be getting. She smiled sweetly. "Have a seat. Would you care for anything to drink?"

His shoulders relaxed, and he smiled and sat. "Coffee."

Bastard doesn't even say please or thank you. Typical. Kelly buzzed her assistant for the coffee. She smiled again and took a seat behind her large desk. "What brings you to Brooklyn?" His cologne disrupted the air.

"What, a guy can't just come home to see his family?"

Brooklyn was never your home, and we haven't been family since Mom died. Kelly had spent almost a decade dealing with brides. Frankie was an amateur compared to them. "Of course." Resentment she'd long thought gone resurfaced. Her fifteen-year-old self had once hoped her twenty-one-year-old brother would come home to Long Island after their father had died so they wouldn't be forced to leave their home and friends to move to Brooklyn. He hadn't even called.

Her assistant entered with the coffee, and Kelly gestured to her desk. She wasn't going to give up her position of power. "Cream or sugar?"

"Just sugar. Surprised you don't remember."

"Really? I don't remember you drinking coffee." *I don't remember much at all. Asshole.* He was trying to get a rise out of her.

He'd be disappointed.

And she'd enjoy it.

He shrugged, but he'd clearly expected her to be the puppy again. There had been a time when she'd have done anything for the smallest drop of his attention. Silence hung thick in the

air. He shifted uncomfortably. “You’ve made quite a name for yourself in bridal. My wife wore one of your designs.”

“How nice.” Flattery wouldn’t get him anywhere. *You’re going to try to play on my sympathy when you ask for money. Go ahead.* A wry chuckle escaped. “It must’ve been almost like we were at your wedding.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Brenda wanted to keep it small.”

Sure, blame your wife. Dick. Never taking responsibility for anything. My dad was too good for you. “Small weddings are so *intimate*.” Kelly took a sip of her coffee. She had nothing to say, so she left the conversation up to him.

“Yes.” He looked around her office. “Very nice. Elegantly decorated.”

And elegant equals expensive. If I can afford an elegant office, surely, I can afford to give you money? “Thank you.”

He shifted in his seat. Clearly, he’d expected her to expand on that. “How are Jennifer and Raymond?”

Like you fucking care. You never gave them a second thought even when Mom was alive. With effort, Kelly smiled. “They’re amazing. Jenny graduated with double majors in finance and marketing and completed her masters in finance. RJ got certified as an EMT, and now he’s a firefighter. He just transferred to Ten House.” Kelly leaned forward. “You probably don’t remember, but it was my dad’s house. It’s how he met Mom.”

His jaw clenched, and his face reddened. “I was there.”

“Oh, my bad. Of course.” *Right, because your father abandoned you three months after you were born and left my mom to raise you until there was something he could get out of it.* Intense dislike prickled over her skin.

Frankie was holding back his anger.

She smiled and sipped her coffee. When Grams had told her he was sniffing around, anger had risen, but now that he was here, she was rather enjoying herself. He was a stranger.

She knew nothing of his life and had zero interest in finding out. If he'd come here to truly reconnect, for her mother's sake, she'd give him a chance.

"I spoke to Grams and Pa. They're well."

"Yes."

"They told me they're selling the bakery to one of their employees."

Grams was a smart cookie and would've never revealed the employee was her ex-husband. "Yes."

"So, none of you wanted in?"

"No. We all had our own dreams."

He scoffed. "And Grams was okay with that?" He laughed. "Everyone knows she wears the pants in their marriage."

Her grandparents weren't perfect, but Frankie had no right. "Grams does like to be in charge. Luckily for her, she married a man who isn't threatened by her strength. People *can* change." *But you haven't. Unless getting worse counts.* The cockiness he'd walked in with was fading. He'd thought she'd be easy pickings, and now he knew she wasn't, it was clear he didn't have a backup plan.

Her phone buzzed.

Kelly picked up the handset. "Yes?"

"Buzz's here."

Kelly smiled. Her employees really were a family. She glanced at the time. They'd planned on lunch together, and Buzz usually got here a little early. But this was really early. Her heart was light, and she smiled. "Send him in." She hung up. "My lunch date is early."

Frankie's eyes darted to the door. They were about to lose privacy, and he was in a panic.

She stood, and as she took a few steps toward the door, Buzz walked in without knocking. She smiled at him, and he winked and smiled back. "Buzz."

He closed the distance and pulled her in for a kiss. A deep kiss. One which would've embarrassed her if it was in front of Jenny or RJ.

Frankie cleared his throat.

"You're early." She playfully swatted his arm.

"Am I?" He checked his watch-less wrist. "I guess I couldn't wait to see you."

Frankie cleared his throat again.

"Oh, sorry." Her fist still bunched Buzz's shirt.

Buzz smiled. "I'm sorry, baby. Didn't realize you were in a meeting."

Frankie stood, and from the expression on his face, he recognized Buzz. "I'm her brother."

"Oh, I didn't know you had another brother. RJ's a great guy."

Kelly's heart somersaulted. Buzz got it. He was going to rub it in, and she loved him for it. *I don't love him. Love that he'd support me. Yeah, that's it.*

Frankie was totally thrown off. He took a few steps and extended his hand. "I love your music."

It sounded awkward. Kelly had recognized his type of charm the moment he'd walked in like he owned the place. He was used to being the best-looking guy in the room. There wasn't a single genuine thing about him, and she had a hard time reconciling they had the same mother. She was sure he got his attitude from Giovanni.

Buzz shook his hand. "Thanks."

She'd seen Buzz with fans, and he always gave them his attention. But he'd just dismissed Frankie.

Buzz turned to Kelly. "I know we had reservations, but I thought it'd be nice to eat lunch here. I know after our long weekend you have some work to catch up on in addition to your usual super full day."

She touched his cheek. “Always so thoughtful.” Buzz had sensed the same thing she had. Frankie was one of those people who always looked for shortcuts to success. “That’d be great, B.”

“Our usual place?”

“Yes.”

“Caesar salad, grilled chicken, and sparkling water? Or would you prefer the grilled salmon?”

“I’ll have the salmon today.”

“Okay, I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.” Buzz kissed her again and pulled his phone out as he nodded goodbye to Frankie.

He placed their lunch order as he walked down the hallway.

Kelly smiled. Buzz had shown up to support her, but he’d known she could handle it. Even Enzo, being one of the best men she’d ever known, would’ve rushed in here to save the day. But she didn’t need saving, not anymore. Enzo had been her salvation, and she would love him forever for it. It had been exactly what she’d needed. Someone she could relentlessly depend on. He’d been her knight in shining armor.

And now she understood why their marriage truly failed. It wasn’t only that she hadn’t wanted to put her life on hold again to raise kids. Enzo needed to be needed that way, and there was nothing wrong with it. But Kelly had grown out of needing him to save her. If children hadn’t come up, that would’ve ended their marriage eventually.

“Kelly?”

She turned to Frankie. “Sorry, forgot you were there.” She enjoyed his shock. “Buzz has that effect on me.” Whenever they were together, it was as if no one else existed. She went to her desk and sat on the edge in front of him. Buzz would be back in less than fifteen minutes. Neither had offered Frankie to join them, so the clock was ticking.

He shifted again in the chair. He didn't like being looked down on. Kelly smiled. "Well, this has been...nice. Buzz will be back soon." She thought of bluntly asking what he wanted, but settled on "Will you be in town long?"

His face reddened. "Uh, no. I have to get back home. My dad's sick."

A lifetime of bad choices will do that to a person. Kelly felt nothing for him or his dad. The fact he called Giovanni "dad" sickened her. Technically, he was, but he'd been absent from Frankie's life for nearly twenty years. According to Grams, he'd never paid a penny in child support, and when Mom had finally tracked him down because Ray wanted to adopt Frankie after they married, he'd signed away his parental rights without a second thought. Grams had said Mom had hoped Giovanni had changed and wanted to be part of his son's life. Frankie had been happy to finally have a dad.

Kelly had no idea why that had changed. Her dad never got over Frankie turning his back on them after Mom died. Kelly was at least glad they hadn't heard about Frankie taking his father's name again until after her dad passed. It would've crushed him because he'd loved Frankie.

She couldn't muster any sympathy. It probably made her a bad person, but she wouldn't lie. "That's too bad." *When our dad was sick, you were nowhere to be found.*

"Yeah. It's been hard. My kids love him."

Kelly swallowed the bile that rose in her throat. *Do you really think that's helping your case?* Frankie was thirty-four now, and she was a little shocked he was married and had children. Giovanni getting to play grandpa when her mom wasn't around to be grandma sent rage coursing through her.

"He lives with us. Makes them breakfast every morning." He wiped a tear. "He needs a bone marrow transplant, or he'll die." His voice broke.

She couldn't stand being so close to him. Even his pungent cologne couldn't cover the stench of his selfishness. A tiny part of her felt bad anyone was in poor health, even if they'd

been the cause of it. But only a tiny part. The rest of her seethed with rage at how Frankie hadn't given a single fuck when her dad had been diagnosed with cancer. He'd asked Frankie to transfer to a university closer to home, but he'd refused.

"Pa told me you're in control of the family trust now."

"Yes, that's right." It took all her willpower not to tell him to fuck off. He'd expected her to offer him money. "You're not a match?"

"I have asthma, so I can't donate, and my wife's not an HLA match."

"No other children?"

His eyes narrowed. "I have a sister from his third wife, but she's deployed overseas, and I haven't been able to get in touch with her. He's running out of time, Kel."

Don't call me Kel, like you love me or even know me. Kelly nodded. *Maybe he's not after money.* "She's in the military?"

"A Marine."

"Impressive." *Must take after her mother's side of the family.* Kelly took a deep breath. "Well, I can get tested if it will help. And I'll see if Jenny and RJ are willing."

Shock covered his face. "You'd do that?"

"Anita, my receptionist, is only alive today because good people, strangers really, were willing to help. I'll get tested as soon as possible."

"Thank you." His face relaxed.

Even though Frankie had done nothing to deserve her sympathy, she was sorry for thinking he was after money. Her grandparents had thought that, too. Kelly called her doctor, and after explaining the situation, she got an appointment for the next day. "Jenny's in the city all day at meetings, but I'll talk to her tonight." She wouldn't say she was sure Jenny or RJ would volunteer. She wouldn't blame them if they didn't. But for her, it was the right thing to do. She pushed off the edge of her desk and walked toward the door.

“Uh, there’s something else.” Frankie’s confidence returned. “It’s gonna cost a lot.”

And there it is. “He’s only what? Fifty-seven?” *A year older than my dad was when he died. You’re so damn lucky to have had all these years with him.* “He must have a job. Insurance.”

Frankie looked away. “Well, uh, he had to quit because he’s too sick to work.”

Kelly barely contained her scoff. Grams had told her Giovanni had been a high-stakes gambler, among other things. “You look like you’ve done well for yourself.” He wore a vintage, gold Rolex, and even though his outfit was casual, it was high quality. “You could probably sell your watch for a fortune. The resale value is astounding.”

He hesitated for a second. “It’s a knockoff.”

Kelly scoffed but nodded. It wasn’t to her eye, but she could be wrong.

“Buzz, so nice to see you again,” Kelly’s assistant said loudly. Since she was as soft-spoken as they came, it was to move this along. Buzz might have overheard some of the conversation since her door was still open.

Frankie’s head snapped to the door, and he stood. “Look, I need my share of the trust.” Sweat beaded on his forehead.

“You already got your share.” She might have said it a little nicer if he hadn’t acted like he was due.

“Did Grams tell you that? Well, she’s wrong. Your father gave me some.” The anger in his voice had the little hairs on the back of her neck standing up.

Buzz stood in the hallway with clenched fists. Frankie couldn’t see him because of the partially closed door. “She did. But since you’re basically calling her a liar, I’ll call the attorney who handles the trust. I’m sure he’ll tell me the truth.” She reached for her phone.

“Don’t bother. But unless you blew it on starting your business, there’s got to be millions in there with all the interest

that's accrued."

"Our millions, yes."

"My father needs that money!"

Kelly took a deep breath. Simon stood next to Buzz. "Our father needed you when he got sick. We needed our older brother. But you turned your back on us. I know you never cared for us, but my dad adopted you. He loved you. Giovanni abandoned you."

His jaw tightened. "You don't know anything about it," he sneered through clenched teeth.

"I know everything. My father told me the entire story before he died. Just in case he ever returned one day with rewritten history."

"Oh, I'm sure *your father* had nothing good to say."

"He was your father too until you turned your back on him. My dad was an honorable man, so he only told me what happened. He kept his feelings to himself." Kelly moved closer to the door. Buzz and Simon backed away.

"What about her life insurance money?" Frankie's voice dripped with desperation.

"It went into the family trust as well." Kelly pierced him with her gaze. "If the payout you already received didn't include it, I'll have a check cut for your quarter share."

"How much did she have?"

"If memory serves, five hundred thousand."

"That's it?" He paced. "I know she made a lot of money." His eyes narrowed. "More than *your father*."

Kelly knew the exact amount. She exhaled the hate that threatened to destroy her resolve to remain calm. It annoyed him she wasn't losing her temper. "What happened to the money you already received?"

"I used that money for school and living expenses when Dad and I went into business."

Kelly shook her head. “My father paid for your entire education from the college funds they’d set up. As you said, Mom earned far more than my dad, but he still contributed to *all* our educations.”

“So, you’re telling me Jenny’s education didn’t cost more than was in her college fund?”

“No. I’ve tapped into the trust to pay anything over for her education, and Grams and Pa did the same for mine. There was no reason for us to take out student loans when we had that money. After all, it’s what its intended use was. To care for the children of those lost.” *Not ex-husbands who only cared about themselves.* Kelly thought Giovanni’s return into Frankie’s life had been due to his inheritance.

He scoffed. “And what about you?”

“Meaning?”

Frankie’s arm waved out. “This place must’ve cost a fortune to rent. You have the whole building. And the decorating. You expect me to believe you didn’t raid the fund to pay for all this?”

“Whether I did or didn’t isn’t your business. But I’ll tell you anyway.” She took a step closer. “Hard work and baby steps. Eighty-hour weeks and no time off. Never giving up.”

“My dad needs that money!”

“If there’s money due, I’ll make sure you get it. But you got your share before my father died, and I’m sure he included the life insurance, but I’ll look into it.”

“What about Ray’s insurance and pension?”

Kelly took a deep inhale and slowly shook her head. He had to be kidding.

“What? He adopted me, so I’m entitled to my share.”

“He didn’t leave you a share. And before you ask, the sale of the house went into the family trust as well.”

He grabbed her arm. “Kelly, please.”

She shrugged free. “I’ll still get tested because I said I would, and if you leave your number with my assistant, I’ll call you with the results. As for any money, even though I’m the trustee, it’s not only up to me. I’ll talk to Jenny and RJ. I’ll let you know what we decide.” She swung the door wide-open. “But I wouldn’t hold your breath. You clearly have money of your own.”

“I also have a wife with expensive tastes and three kids to put through college.” His eyes darted back and forth. “And I’ve made some bad investments.”

“Well, then I guess you’ll have to tighten your belts.” If he thought she’d take pity on him, he’d been wrong.

His eyes narrowed, but he didn’t say what he was thinking.

She could read “bitch” in his eyes. “I’ll call you.”

“Yeah, you do that.” He brushed past her and walked out.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

BUZZ'S HEART POUNDED. HER OLDER BROTHER WAS A FUCKING asshole. He'd asked her assistant to get their lunch because he had no intention of leaving Kelly. One look at Frankie was all Buzz had needed to get a read on him. Selfish. Narcissistic. Asshole. Buzz didn't trust him not to try to intimidate Kelly, but he'd known she wouldn't be intimidated. A woman didn't make it as far in business as she had without being astute, intelligent, and fierce.

So fucking fierce.

And by all that was holy, fierce was an understatement. He'd never seen anything like it. She'd been through horrible tragedies. But they hadn't beaten her. She'd risen above, and he was so motherfucking proud of her. His heart was light. A tiny part of him had hoped Frankie wouldn't have let her shake him off so easily when he'd grabbed her arm. From his vantage point in the hallway, he'd been able to see everything in the glass reflection in the huge print behind Kelly's desk. Buzz would've enjoyed taking him apart. Down to his empty core. There wasn't a single similarity between brother and sister. He was weak. Easily rattled. And perhaps the worst trait: blaming others. Never owning up to his mistakes.

Kelly's grandfather had said a strong man took responsibility for his actions. Buzz had been taught that, and he always tried to live up to it. He'd actually felt like Pa had been proud of him for owning up to his addiction.

"I'll call you," Kelly said.

“Yeah, you do that,” Frankie replied.

Kelly’s office door swung open with such force it hit the wall. Buzz kept his casual stance, leaning his shoulder against the wall. Frankie’s eyes bulged, and his face flushed bright red. He had the same olive skin tone as Kelly, but Buzz recognized hard living when he saw it.

Simon, the boutique’s security guard, stood behind Buzz. He was a six-foot-three behemoth with jet-black hair and eyes. As Frankie shouldered past Buzz, he turned to see Simon level Frankie with one of the vilest glares, outside a supervillain in a comic, Buzz had ever seen.

“Get out of my way,” Frankie roared.

Frankie was sandwiched between them, and Buzz enjoyed Frankie’s obvious discomfort. *“You don’t ever talk to her like that again,”* Buzz whispered.

Frankie jumped, and his head turned so he could see Buzz’s face.

Buzz narrowed his eyes and gave him an almost feral grin. *“That’s if she ever even allows you in her presence again.”*

Frankie scoffed. *“You’re acting like she’s some kind of queen.”*

Buzz stepped around Frankie. *“She’s a fucking lioness, and you ventured into her pride. You’re nothing more than a field mouse scurrying around for crumbs.”* Every drop of testosterone in his body demanded Buzz annihilate this shithead.

“You talk tough with a giant at your back.”

Simon’s laugh rang out so loud heads popped out from several doorways to see what was so funny. *“You’re a fool. He doesn’t need any help. Look at him. One wrong move and he’s going to shred you. Go on, take a swing at Buzz.”* Simon laughed again as he walked toward the front of the store.

Buzz eyeballed Frankie as he visibly weighed his options. Buzz knew Frankie wanted to punch him. But he wouldn’t. He knew he was outmanned. Buzz could egg Frankie into taking a

swing at him, but women could be funny about that kind of thing. He was sure she wouldn't give a fuck about Frankie getting hurt but not in her place of business. Buzz exhaled some of his pent-up anger. "Get out." He smiled.

Frankie, not being as stupid as he looked, walked around Buzz and double-timed it down the hall.

"She'll call you." Buzz turned and sucked in a breath. Kelly stood in the doorway to her office looking gorgeous. His anger turned to raging lust. She was fucking amazing. Her eyes were bright and held not a single tear. She crooked her finger at him, and Buzz walked into her office. He figured she was going to give him some shit for threatening her brother, but it was worth it. Frankie needed to know Kelly had men in her life who'd protect her even if she did a fucking awesome job of it herself.

Buzz stared at her ass. *Fucking beautiful.* Her bright turquoise, flared skirt hugged her curves. Curves he knew well. Curves he wanted to touch right now.

She turned and faced him. "Up here, please."

Buzz's head snapped up. He wouldn't apologize for appreciating her fine ass. He exhaled a slow breath and waited for her to rip him a new one.

"Close the door."

Buzz reached behind him and swung the door closed.

At the sound of the *click*, Kelly took two steps, put her arms around his neck, and pulled him down for one of the most passionate, hottest, dick-hardening kisses he'd ever had. She took his mouth with a fierceness that ripped a groan from his chest. He lifted her, and her legs wrapped around his thighs. His brain shut off. His heart took over. His dick throbbed. He was glad he'd worn loose-fitting shorts.

Her glorious tits were pressed so tightly up against him they bulged out the top of her lavender blouse. He wanted to rip it open and suck on her nipples. He wanted to bunch her pretty skirt around her waist, push her panties aside, and fuck her until she screamed.

Kelly bit his lower lip, then traced her tongue over his jaw to his ear. “Aren’t you getting tired?”

He panted for air. “Tired? I’ll never tire of kissing you.” He smiled. “Or you kissing me.” She was the one in charge here, and he’d do anything she wanted.

Her beautiful eyes captured his. “I meant of standing here holding me. I’m not a lightweight.”

“You’re fucking perfect.” He knew and loved every inch intimately.

“You really think that, don’t you?”

He nodded. His heart still pounded, and so did Kelly’s. “I love you just the way you are.” Buzz nuzzled her with his nose.

She grabbed his face between her hands and took his lips again. He let her lead. Sex in her office was the second to last of the breakable rules they hadn’t yet broken. As much sex as possible and exclusivity were two to keep. He wanted to fuck her but not in the middle of the day. He’d planned on dropping in one night this week just before closing. In case she’d changed her mind.

The final rule, not going past four weeks, he’d ease into the idea of bending little by little.

Their last full week together.

She tore her mouth from his. Her breathing was erratic. “I need you.”

Buzz’s mind spun. He’d just been thinking about it. Yeah, that was it. No way she green-lighted sex in her office.

Her brown eyes darkened with lust. “Now.”

Buzz glanced at the closed door. It was a pretty solid door. *No*. She’d been right. This was her place of business, and she needed to keep the respect of her employees. She’d been through something very emotional even though she’d handled it like a fucking boss. Buzz tried to lower her, but her thighs squeezed tighter around him. “Kel...” He had to be the clearheaded one. But considering he’d already imagined at

least three places in her office where he could fuck her, clear thinking wasn't happening. His dick screamed at him to not be a dick.

“Are you sure?” He wanted her. If they left right now and took a cab, they could be at her place in mere minutes. He'd be inside her within two more, but he didn't want to wait until they got to her place. His cock throbbed with need.

The gold flecks in her brown eyes sparkled. “Yes.”

His entire body thrummed with anticipation. No. This was a bad idea. The best worst idea he'd ever had. He took a few breaths, trying to calm his racing pulse. She'd come to her senses, but not while her body was wrapped around his. He walked over to her desk and set her on it.

She still didn't release him.

“You're making it impossible for me to do the right thing here.” He'd run out of room in his baggy shorts minutes ago. He couldn't leave her office like this, and staying locked together guaranteed his dick would remain hard.

Kelly found the hem of his T-shirt and pushed it up to his neck. “Take this off.”

“I want you so bad it fucking hurts. But we can't.”

Her brow arched elegantly. She pushed his shirt up farther and took his nipple between her teeth. “Can't?” She flicked it with her tongue.

“Shouldn't.” Sensations shot to his dick. “Kel, please.”

“Why are you being so stubborn? You want this as badly as I do.” She palmed his cock and stroked him through the confining fabric. “*He* definitely wants to. I can feel every inch of his...need.” She popped the button and lowered the zipper.

Buzz stepped back, dragging air into his lungs. “So beautiful.” Her blouse was untucked, and somehow, a few buttons were undone, and he got a peek at the white lace of her bra. He didn't remember doing that. Her thighs were spread as wide as her skirt would allow.

One of her tan leather heels slipped off her foot and hit the floor. The other followed. Another button came undone.

Buzz shut his eyes, which allowed his mind to picture fucking her against the wall. Her straddling him on the couch as he sucked her nipples. Bent over her desk as he thrust into her pussy from behind. "Shit." His eyes shot open.

Kelly's blouse was totally open, and it hung loosely off her shoulders as she leaned back on her hands. Her breasts thrust toward him. While he had the strength and self-control not to fulfill his needs, he didn't have any when it came to fulfilling hers.

Buzz took a deep breath. "You were fucking amazing. I don't know if it makes me a sick fuck, but watching you handle your asshole brother fucking turned me on."

A slow smile spread on her kiss-swollen lips. "Watching you not take him apart made me wet. I know you wanted to. I've never seen anything sexier than a man with immense strength and power have the mercy to not use it."

Something tight around his heart loosened. Something that had always been there. "Stand up."

"Finally." Kelly hopped off, hands on hips, sex appeal drawing him in like a dog on a leash.

Buzz closed the distance and dropped to his knees. He ran his hands up and down her silky calves. He picked up her foot and slipped the heel on. Then the other.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm taking care of you." His hands stroked gently up her legs, and when he reached her skirt, he slowly pushed the fabric up until her white silk panties were exposed. He inhaled deeply. His cock throbbed in acknowledgment of her spicy, sweet scent. He willed himself to calm down. This was for Kelly, his lioness, returned from battle to enjoy the spoils. And Buzz would spoil the fuck out of her. He slipped the silk aside and stroked her mound with his thumb. Leaning in, he buried his tongue in her sweet pussy.

Her sharp gasp turned him on. "B."

His heart flipped whenever she called him that. He could do better than this. Lapping at her with a thirst he never thought would be quenched, he cupped her ass with one hand while bunching her skirt up over her hips with the other. He tugged her panties down and off. "You're so wet." His thumbs slicked over her cream-coated inner thighs.

Buzz stood and lifted her onto the desk. He took her lips, his tongue tasting every soft inch of her mouth. He pulled back and stared into her molten brown eyes. "I'm going to make you come." Dropping to his knees, he wasted no time delivering on his promise. Pulling her hips forward, he opened her, and his mouth devoured her.

"Oh, B, yes." Her hands thrust into his hair, and she pulled his head closer.

He sucked her hard, distended clit between his lips and teased it with his tongue.

Kelly's gasps and moans drove him nuts. He licked her lengthwise from her vagina to her clit, and her body tightened. She panted for air. Kelly's body shuddered as she came, and one hand left his hair to cover her mouth.

Buzz didn't stop until he'd licked every drop of her sweetness.

He stood, scooped her off the desk, and carried her to the couch. Cradling her on his lap, he kissed her gently as her breathing slowly returned to normal. She rested up against him, and Buzz felt like the most powerful guy in the world.

For several minutes, he held her, loving the feel of her soft curves pressed against him. Loving that he'd made her come so hard he was pretty sure she'd dozed off. His own need still pulsed, but that had been the most intense orgasm he'd given her so far, and he'd almost lost his load over it. He took immense pride and pleasure in giving his partner gratification. With Kelly, every kiss, every caress, held so much more. He'd given up pretending he'd be able to walk away from her. It would leave a wound that would never fully heal. But if that was what she needed, he'd do it. She deserved everything she wanted, and if it wasn't him, he'd go.

But he was forever changed.

Four best weeks of my life.

Kelly stirred, and her eyes opened. Her smile grew wide, and her fingers gently stroked his cheek. Her eyes glistened with emotions, and she was as relaxed as he'd ever seen her in the boutique. "Thank you."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "No, thank you."

Her eyes blinked slowly. "But I didn't take care of you."

"You came hard enough for both of us."

"It doesn't work that way." She stretched, and her breasts were level with his eyes. "That was some orgasm. It's like I can still feel it."

Buzz kissed her breast. He wanted to do more, but he wouldn't let this go any further. "Mmm, that would be the naughty factor. It amps up everything."

"Naughty factor?"

He nodded. "In your office, on your desk, with a store full of employees and customers. It doesn't get much naughtier than that."

"Except maybe backstage after a gig?" Her eyes glowed.

"Yeah, that's a recipe for some superhot sex."

"So, you've done that?" Her voice was playful, but something in her eyes had turned serious.

"Are you really asking?"

She nodded.

"Once. Probably the best sex my ex and I ever had."

"Just with your girlfriend? No...groupies?"

He shook his head. "Groupies have their own agenda, and I'm not one of those guys who is looking for high numbers. I need a connection even if it's just a nice smile and a cute laugh."

Kelly tilted her head. “Why only once with your ex? If you liked it so much? Sorry, none of my business.”

He brushed her hair over her shoulder. “She didn’t. I mean, at the time she did, but afterward, she gave me shit over it because we coulda been caught.” Sally had stopped short of saying he’d forced her, which he hadn’t even come close to doing. Classic Sally to have regrets over a choice she’d made and blamed him instead of owning her decision.

“But you wouldn’t let that happen.”

“Course not. I made sure we were in a private area.”

“She didn’t trust you to protect her?”

He shrugged. “She wasn’t great at communicating. When she was pissed at me, I knew, but she’d never admit it. She’d always say nothing was wrong. After years of that, I stopped asking.”

“Why did you stay with her so long?”

It had taken him a long time to figure that one out. “She was familiar. I know we were in love at one time, at least I was, but she’s a very negative person, and when we met, just being with her made me feel like the positive one. I felt strong for the first time in my life because she looked to me for everything.” No matter how hard he tried to stay positive, a part of him was still the small, sick, scared little boy with the defective heart. Sally had reinforced his insecurities, until she’d found someone better, then she’d used them to crush him.

“She didn’t deserve you.” Kelly kissed his lips. “You are a good man, Buzz Stewart. One of the best I’ve ever had the privilege to know.” Her eyes misted. “My mom and dad would’ve loved you.” She smiled. “Grams and Pa do.”

Buzz shrugged. “I wasn’t trying to be charming.”

Kelly’s eyes cleared and she smiled. “And that’s the most potent charm of all. Just you being you. The good guy you are, who worries about the reputation of a girl he agreed to a four-week, no-strings fling with.”

“Of course, I worry about you. You’re amazing, and the people here really look out for each other. I wouldn’t want your neighbors to look at you differently because of me.”

Kelly rested her head on his shoulder. “It really is a nice place. I didn’t always appreciate that, but after Enzo and I got married, we made it our home.” She brushed his cheek, and her tummy rumbled. “I’m starved. Let’s eat. Or didn’t you actually get us lunch?”

“I sent your assistant. I wasn’t leaving you here alone with that—brother.”

“He is an asshole. But one good thing came out of it.” She hopped off his lap, smoothed her skirt down, and buttoned her blouse.

“Yeah?” His eyes were glued to every inch as she covered up.

“I no longer wonder what would’ve happened if he’d come home when my dad got sick.”

“No?”

Her brown eyes held acceptance. “It was never even on his radar. He isn’t capable of really taking care of anyone but himself.” She scoffed. “He’d rather come here begging for money than make any sacrifices to pay for Giovanni’s care.”

Buzz had come to the same conclusions. “So, you’re still gonna get tested?”

“Yeah.” Kelly tucked her blouse in and checked her hair and makeup in the mirror next to her office door. She glanced over her shoulder. “Tonight, I’m sucking your cock.”

One sassy look and a sexy promise, and Buzz’s body heated.

After they enjoyed their food, Kelly sat next to him on the couch with her legs over his lap while she looked over some financial reports her sister had put together. Kelly shook her head.

“Something wrong?”

“No. Everything’s coming together better than I planned. Once we’ve hired more seamstresses, we should be able to decrease the turnaround time for fittings once they get caught up on the additional influx of bespoke dresses since Nicki and Emily tweeted about us.”

Buzz laughed. “Nicki tweets, but Emily hates social media. She has a thread in her private online reader community with links to your dresses.”

“They really are great. I’ll miss them when you guys leave next week.” She glanced up from the report she was reading. “I’ll miss you, too. This didn’t turn out the way I thought it would.”

“I hope it turned out better?”

“I knew, or at least I hoped, the sex would be good. And good is such a pathetic word to describe what we’ve shared.”

Buzz’s heart pounded. He knew what he wanted, and he was pretty sure it was more than what she was ready to give, so he had to tread lightly. He took the report from her and tossed it on the table. “It doesn’t have to end.”

“But you’re leaving.”

“I’ll be back.” He kissed her nose. Blood coursed through his veins. “As a matter of fact, in early October, I have a three-day break.”

She stiffened and stared past him. “Four weeks is a long time.”

Buzz chuckled. “Time’s relative, isn’t it?”

“Meaning?”

“The last three weeks have flown by.”

When their eyes met, hers held uncertainty. He was asking her to risk her heart again. The last time she’d taken this risk, she’d been fifteen. A lifetime ago.

He wasn’t sure she would, but he’d wait until she was ready.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“BUZZ, I LIKE YOU.” KELLY’S HEART BEAT WITH A FRENZIED rhythm. He couldn’t mean what she was thinking he meant.

His face gave nothing away. “But?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”
We had a deal.

“I don’t want you to say anything but what you think and feel. If continuing doesn’t work for you, just say so.”

“It doesn’t,” she blurted. *Could it?*

Disappointment flashed in his eyes. “Okay.” He stood. “I’ve got therapy.”

“Oh, I assumed...” This was too much pressure. She did like him, and she didn’t want to disappoint him, but she’d never thought he’d want to continue their arrangement. *I love you just the way you are.* Her brain had still been so scrambled from an orgasm his words hadn’t registered until now. He couldn’t mean love. He was sexually excited by her body. Fear spread through her. She sure as hell hoped it wasn’t love. The last thing she needed was to disappoint another fine man. She was determined never to make more promises she couldn’t keep.

“Assumed what?” Compassion burned in his caring brown eyes. She’d crushed the hope that had been there, and it was threatening to suffocate her.

“You were free all day.” She had no right to make that assumption.

“I’ll be around later if you want me to come over.” His smile was like a shrug.

I hurt him. How had this happened? They’d agreed to four weeks of sex. No one was supposed to get hurt. “Umm. You know what? I do have a lot of work to catch up on.” She forced a smile. “Maybe tomorrow.” She couldn’t do more. Casual worked for her and all the things she wanted to accomplish. She didn’t have time or energy for more.

More scared the shit out of her.

Her time with Buzz had been the break she’d needed to get her focus back where it belonged.

“Okay, well, call me if you change your mind.” He smiled and left.

Kelly stood and paced. “What the hell just happened?” She’d blown him off, and he knew it. But what had he expected, trying to change the rules this close to the end? She’d had to put her feelings aside so often when Jenny and RJ were younger. She’d done it throughout their dating life.

“Was I even ever the person he thought I was when we got married?” She’d spent so much time adapting for others, had she been honest with Enzo? “I wasn’t honest with myself. I didn’t know who I was outside of being mom to Jenny and RJ. I never got the chance to find out before I got married.”

Kelly wanted to cry, to let the multitude of emotions out, but tears wouldn’t come. All the feelings whirled and mashed together. How was it possible to feel like a hurt child and a grown woman at the same time? Weakness hit her, and she dropped to the couch, kicked off her heels, and curled up in a ball.

“What’s happening to me?”

Kelly had no idea how long she lay there. Thought after thought rolled through her mind. She couldn’t shut off the chaos. Frankie. Bone marrow tests. RJ leaving Brooklyn.

Buzz.

Her dad. The day he'd died, she'd woken with a sense of dread. As she'd made breakfast for Jenny and RJ, she'd decided to stay home from school. After she'd gotten them on the bus, she'd gone and sat at his bedside. The nurse had arrived to administer his pain medication. He'd been in and out of sleep. Kelly hadn't left him. She'd sat there, numb, holding his hand. She wouldn't let her dad die alone like her mother had.

When he'd woken around noon, he'd smiled and told her he loved them more than anything else in the world. Along with meeting their mom, they'd been the greatest gifts he'd ever had in this life.

Kelly had promised him she'd take care of Jenny and RJ. He hadn't asked her to promise. She'd volunteered. He'd drifted off to sleep and hadn't woken up.

Could she let Buzz walk out of her life? Should she? Part of her screamed yes. No good would come from needing him in her life. It was a guarantee of more heartache. But it probably wasn't her decision anymore because she was sure she'd just screwed up. She'd basically ended their arrangement. He wouldn't call or come back. This whole thing had been in her favor. He'd practically jumped through hoops to be with her, and she couldn't understand why. He was a rock star, and he could have any woman he wanted.

But he'd wanted her.

And she'd hurt him.

When her marriage had ended, she'd promised herself she'd never hurt another man with her inability to commit to a full relationship. Now she'd hurt the best guy she'd ever met. When had Buzz taken that title from Enzo? Her brain hurt, and Kelly needed to stop thinking. She stretched out on her couch and let sleep take her from her thoughts.

"Kel?" Jenny kneeled next to her. "You okay?"

The fear in Jenny's voice had her shooting upright. "What? What happened?"

"You were asleep."

Kelly never napped. “Oh.” A dull throb behind her eyes had her thoughts foggy. “I guess I fell asleep.”

“Anita told me as soon as I got in Frankie was here. What the hell happened?”

Kelly swung her legs to the floor, but she was nauseated, so she didn’t even try to stand. Another stomach bug was the last damn thing she needed. What she did need was to call Buzz.

“Kel?”

She brushed her hair off her face and patted the seat next to her. “He said Giovanni’s sick. Needs a bone marrow transplant. I offered to get tested.”

“Why the hell would you do that? That asshole abandoned mom with a newborn.”

Jenny was the fierier of the two of them. Kelly had never been allowed the luxury of being so flagrant. “I felt it was the right thing to do.”

“Well, I hope you don’t expect me to offer. He can rot in hell.”

“Jennifer Clancy Hoffmann, that’s not nice.”

Jenny jumped up. “Not nice?” She paced the length of Kelly’s office. “It must suck to be you.”

“Some days. Why today?” *Besides the fact I may have blown a good thing with Buzz.*

Jenny stopped in front of her. “Because you never allow yourself to really get pissed. You don’t always have to be so levelheaded.”

“I don’t know how to turn it off. I always tried to be calm for you and RJ because you had enough turmoil growing up.”

“Oh, sis.” Jenny sat and hugged her. “No one could’ve done any better. I love you.”

“Love you, too.” *Please don’t leave me.* Kelly pulled away. *What the hell’s happening to me?* She swallowed hard to keep her lunch down.

“What is it? Are you sick?”

“Why?”

“You’re pale.” Jenny stood and grabbed a bottle of water from the small fridge. “Here. Did you eat?”

She nodded as she sipped. *Buzz.*

Jenny felt her forehead. “You don’t feel hot.” She sighed. “What else did he want?”

“Money.”

“There’s a fucking shock.”

“Jenny!”

“What? I’m twenty-five.” Jenny smiled. “What are you going to do, wash my mouth out with soap?”

Kelly shook her head. “I would, but we only have liquid soap here.”

“Do they even make bar soap anymore?”

“Yes. As you know, Grams doesn’t believe in liquid soap. Says it can’t possibly be better than a solid bar. And do not come between her and her beauty bar. She swears by it.”

“She does look good for her age. Sixty-five tops. And a young sixty-five, not a hard-lived sixty-five.”

Kelly patted her thigh. “Let’s hope we inherited her good-aging genes as well.”

Jenny laughed. “And don’t even get her started on antibacterial soap.” Jenny puffed up. “If you wash your hands properly with a bar of soap, you don’t need those chemicals.” Jenny sighed. “What did you tell him?”

“He tried to say he only got a portion of his share. Called Grams a liar. But he backed that shit down when I said I’d call the trust attorney.”

“You’re my hero. I don’t know how you manage to stay so calm. I get so angry I can barely think straight.”

I never had that luxury.

“What else?”

“Then he asked about Mom’s life insurance and said he was entitled to a share. I told him I’d check with the attorney, and if he didn’t get his share, I’d have a check cut.” She sighed. “Then he asked about Dad’s life insurance and pension.”

Jenny’s mouth fell open, and her face turned red. Her jaw clenched, and her eyes narrowed. “He’s got some fucking nerve. How dare he.” She stood, tilted her head back, and screamed. “Our half-brother is a whole asshole.”

Kelly burst out laughing. “He sure is. I told him he wasn’t a beneficiary. He got really pissed at that. Even though he basically told our father he didn’t want him anymore, jerk felt entitled to a share.”

Jenny stomped around the office for a minute. “It’s a good thing you don’t have alcohol here.” She grabbed another bottle of water and sat. “You really are my hero, you know that?”

Kelly shrugged. “RJ’s gonna be pissed. He’s gonna want to put some dents in Frankie’s face.”

“We should let him.”

Kelly shook her head. “So he can sue RJ?”

“I hadn’t thought of that. You think he would?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he was counting on it.” She sipped her water. Her stomach was still unsettled. The salmon had tasted fine. Kelly hoped she didn’t have food poisoning. “I told him I’d discuss it with you two and get back to him.”

“What’s to discuss? You’re the trustee. It’s your decision.”

“The money belongs to all of us. You guys are old enough to be involved in any decisions where the family trust is concerned.”

“You said you’d try and treat me and RJ like siblings instead of your children. And you’re doing it.”

“It’s not easy, but you guys are grown-ups now.” She’d like to say it happened so fast, but it felt like a lifetime.

Jenny tilted her head. “What else is going on with you? Anita told me Buzz was here, but you haven’t mentioned him.”

Closing her eyes, Kelly took a slow inhale and let it out. “He was. He stood outside the door in case I needed him.”

“Really. He’s a keeper.”

He would be for some lucky girl. “Why?”

“A man who knows his woman can handle herself and can deny his primal urge to rush in and save the day? Damn right, he’s a keeper.”

“I’m not his woman.”

“You sure? Why else would he have come here to support you when Frankenhole showed up?”

Kelly covered her mouth. “I forgot you and RJ called him that.” She sighed. “I’m sure. We kinda had a fight. Or something.”

Jenny raised her brow and waited.

“After Frankie left, we...uh, had lunch. He suggested maybe we could still see each other, and I...”

“What?”

“I panicked. I told him I didn’t want that. Reminded him we had a deal.”

“Oh, Kel.” Jenny hugged her. “It’s okay to like him and want to be with him.”

“But we wouldn’t be together. He’s leaving for three months next week. He did say he had a three-day break in October and he wanted to see me.”

“He can’t change what he does for a living any more than you can. But if you find a guy willing to work with your insanity, you could try to work with his.”

“It’s insane I want my business to succeed?”

“No, of course not. What’s insane is you cut out everything else to make it succeed. I mean, at first, you had to, but now

you're using it as an excuse not to live.”

Kelly's face heated. “I have a life.”

“Four cats in a practically empty apartment isn't a life. It's existing. You need to balance out work with play. And for the last few weeks, you've done it to be with Buzz. Don't you think that means something more than just sex?”

“I can't keep leaving early and taking weekends off. I have too much to do.”

Jenny shook her head. “Most people don't consider going home at six every night leaving early. Every other employee is here for eight hours with an hour for lunch. You cut back to eleven for this break with Buzz, and most days you don't even stop working while you scarf down food. You never take vacation. I know you won't be able to step away completely, and I'm not suggesting you should. Take a vacation once in a while. Don't you think you've earned it?”

“I can't just leave at six.”

“Why not? I think I've proven to you the company won't implode without you being here every second of the day.”

“Jenny, you've done amazing, but I've had my fun, and now it's time to get back to work.”

“You really think that's all you're entitled to?”

“It's all I can spare.”

“Not if you hire more people.” She pointed to the financial report on the coffee table. “We can certainly afford it.”

Jenny knew as much as Kelly did about the business side of things. “I don't have to explain myself to you.”

“I cannot believe you just said that to me.”

“What?”

“I know you're technically my boss, but you just bossed me.”

“So what's the problem?”

Jenny stood. Anger covered her face. “If you don’t want to talk about it, just say so. In all the years you took care of us, you never used that tone.”

“What tone?” Kelly’s head ached

“That ‘because I said so’ tone. You always talked to us like we were equals, always explained things to us. You never made us feel like we were less than you because we were younger.”

“I hated being treated like that.”

“Mom and Dad never treated us that way.”

Kelly shook her head. “No, *they* didn’t.” Kelly had as much as she could take of memory lane. But she regretted making Jenny feel that way. “Frankie did. I was so pathetic, always chasing after him, trying to get him to pay attention to me. Trying to get him to play with me. And feeling like I was special on the few occasions where he actually did. Feeling like he’d actually...love me.” Kelly wiped a single tear. “He was always all about himself. He wasn’t always as obvious about it as he is now.”

“I forget you knew him when he was still human.”

Kelly sighed. She was exhausted, and she shouldn’t be. She’d slept plenty over the weekend in between watching movies, eating, taking the kitties on walks, and sex. And she really slept great when Buzz was next to her. Sadie usually slept on his pillow, but this weekend, she’d slept on Kelly’s, and she hadn’t pawed her awake the way she used to. And twice she’d woken up with Sadie curled up on her belly. She was so tiny Kelly had hardly felt her.

Jenny stood. “I’ve got work to do. Why don’t you go home and rest? If anything comes up, I’ll handle it.”

Three weeks ago, she’d never have considered going home because she was tired. She’d push through because there was always more work than time. She sighed. “I can’t. I’ve got a conference call with a new lace supplier.”

“Hmm. Shit. That’s out of my wheelhouse.” Jenny smacked her forehead. “Duh. You have a phone and a laptop.”

She grabbed a pad and pen off Kelly's desk. "I think it's about time we have the ability to work from home."

"What are you talking about? Consultants have a hands-on job."

"Wow, you really are off your game. I meant us. I'll call the IT guy and see what needs to be done." Jenny's eyes narrowed. "I also think it's time to address our software issues."

Kelly's head fell forward. She'd had to learn so much about business outside of actual designing when she'd started, and there were some aspects she still hated.

"I know, but we've outgrown the inventory software Enzo's buddy wrote for you when you opened." Jenny's eyes misted. "I hate this time of year. I swear it's only getting harder." She held up her thumb and forefinger. "I'm this close to losing my shit between last week's epic PMS and the memorial next week. I don't think I'm gonna make it." She blew her nose and scrunched her eyes closed. "Anyway, we're gonna need to upgrade. I'll look into it. We may be better off going with an ERP package that includes the financial software as well as point of sale."

Kelly rubbed her eyes. "ERP?"

"Enterprise resource planning. It's kinda like an all-in-one. We're on the small side for it, but since you have so many plans to grow the business, it makes financial sense to set it up now. It'll take a while to implement, but it'll be a lot easier while we're smaller to get it done and everyone trained. And upgrading our POS software for future expansion will need to be addressed also."

"I'm all for easier." Kelly was useless right now. "What kind of future expansion would require an upgraded POS?"

"Boutiques throughout the world."

"What would this ERP cost?"

"It's not gonna come cheap."

"Ballpark it."

“Upwards of two hundred K for the software. Equipment is extra, and a yearly licensing fee based on number of users, probably another ten grand every year.”

Kelly’s eyes bulged. “That’s not expensive. That’s ridiculous.” But she understood it was the cost of doing business, but with the expansion, things might be tight for a while. “You really think we need to do this now?”

Jenny raised a brow.

“Right, you wouldn’t have brought it up if you didn’t.” She’d reinvested in her business since day one, but this was a huge outlay, and she’d have to think about it before making a decision. “How’s the custom side going?”

“Booked solid for the next nine months. I know you didn’t want to book out that far, but with the number of requests we’re getting, it was inevitable. And assuming sixty percent of the next six months of custom appointments buy, the new space will be well on its way to paying for itself. I think we should consider making an offer to the owner for the building.”

“We’d have to take out a loan for the mortgage.” Kelly knew what Jenny was thinking, but she wouldn’t raid the family trust for her own benefit.

Jenny shrugged. “Okay. But I still think we should see if he’s willing to sell. Maybe we could buy out over time. We’d get a tax break on the interest for the mortgage, and I already checked on the property taxes. We’ll be saving money in the long run. This area is growing, so the sooner we buy, the less we’ll pay.” Jenny sighed. “I know you never expected the custom gowns to take off the way they have. I think this is where our future is, and we need the systems in place to handle it.”

There was no aspect of the business Jenny wasn’t interested in. A few brides had told Kelly their first call after telling their families was to get an appointment for a custom gown. Then they’d pick a wedding date. Which still blew her mind. “Okay. But let’s wait until after the memorial. I don’t have any more bandwidth at the moment.” Her mind raced

with thoughts of Buzz, and she wasn't going to concentrate on even the most remedial task right now. "I'm gonna go home."

"Do you want me to set up some interviews?"

"For what?"

Jenny's eyes pinned her. "I'll need an assistant if I'm going to take over more of the day-to-day for you."

Kelly's mind raced. "When did we discuss that?"

"We didn't. But we should. I haven't forgotten your dream of traveling the world. Now you barely leave Brooklyn." Jenny looked down. "You have an opportunity to travel now, and I think you should."

Kelly didn't understand what Jenny was talking about. Even if she relinquished more of her day-to-day, she still needed to be in Brooklyn for her custom appointments.

Jenny paused on her way out. "You've done every job here, and I think now's the perfect time for you to step back from the rest of the responsibilities you hate. Get back to designing, because there's no business, no jobs for anyone else, if you don't create. And that's the biggest burden of all." She opened the door and walked out but popped her head back in. "And don't let Buzz get away. Work something out with him. He's a good guy, and you deserve a good guy."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

BUZZ HAD HATED LYING TO KELLY, BUT HE'D NEEDED TO GET out of her office before he made things worse. He didn't have therapy today, so he went to a meeting, but when he got back to The Yorkshire, he felt cooped up, so he went for a jog. It was hot and humid, and he was sweating as he walked into Central Park.

The air was heavy in his lungs, and he tried to focus on the trees he passed instead of Kelly. He kept a leisurely pace so as not to overtax his knee. The brace helped, but he only wore it during exercise.

Fuck. He'd thought it had been the perfect opening to bring up continuing their arrangement. For a second, he'd thought she'd agree because her smile had said yes, but her lips had said no. She had no room for him in her life, and his heart hurt. He'd thought they had something special. But if he was falling in love with her, maybe it was better they end things. He'd felt like he could have some room for a relationship, but love was all-consuming, and he wasn't ready to take that leap, and Kelly certainly wasn't if she couldn't even see a way to make a tiny bit of space in her life for him.

She might never be able or willing to risk her heart again.

And love always brought risk because there were no guarantees. People fell in love every day, got married every day, and many of those relationships ended every day. People changed, grew apart, or realized they'd made a mistake.

But his heart wouldn't let him deny his feelings.

He wasn't falling in love with her.

I'm in love with Kelly.

Buzz stopped dead in his tracks. The air was thick and unpleasant to breathe. *How could this have happened? I wasn't ready for love or a relationship. I'm not strong enough yet.* But love didn't care about his readiness or strength. It blew all his good intentions to shit. The hot and heavy part of their relationship would slow down next week because he was leaving. She'd have weeks to get her work done, and it hurt she wasn't willing to see him here and there even. Had he misread her so badly? If she was aware of her feelings for him, feelings he was sure she had, she'd be scared.

He was.

Buzz didn't want to hurt her, and he didn't want to get hurt again. But he was sick of meaningless one-night stands with strangers. He'd had more of a connection with Kelly the night they'd talked for hours at Quivers than after he'd had sex with the women he'd met the past fourteen months.

He couldn't force her. He wouldn't try to. She had to want to be involved with him. And she'd told him in no uncertain terms she didn't want to be. Didn't want to see if they could be more.

He jogged forward. He'd told her to call if she changed her mind, but he didn't think she would. The look on her face of pure shock still haunted him. It didn't jive with her actions. They'd shared a lot more than sex. He'd told her things he'd never shared during his seven-year relationship. And she'd helped him understand Stephanie's feelings better. If it hadn't been for Kelly's counsel, he might have let his anger stop him from trying to repair the damage he'd caused before he left even though it would've eaten at him. He stopped in front of a bench under an enormous oak tree and sat. The leaves on the trees didn't sway, and the humidity kept the air heavy.

The warmth in the air mixed with wet grass. It had rained while he'd been at the boutique waiting to take apart her asshole half-brother if he'd stepped out of line. The rain had caused the humidity to skyrocket, and midday was the worst

possible time to go for a run in New York City in the summer. Not a single cloud to offer the smallest relief from the relentless early-September sun. He reached into his pocket. “Motherfucker.” He forgot his damn phone. He wanted to call his sister and arrange to have dinner before he left. Just the two of them. He needed her to know he loved her. And he needed to know they’d be okay.

He needed a win.

Pushing to his feet, he walked to the exit of the park and hailed a cab.

His phone was ringing when he opened his hotel room door, but it stopped before he answered. He dialed Jack back. “Hey, man, what’s up?”

“Where are you?”

“The Yorkshire, why?”

“We’re at the Colonial Hotel meeting with Dex to discuss Harmony’s offer.”

Buzz whipped his sweaty shirt off and threw it across the room. “Oh, fuck me. I forgot.”

“No worries. Can you get here soon?”

“Yeah. I gotta jump in the shower. Thirty minutes?”

“No problem. I’ll tell Dex you’re stuck in traffic.”

Buzz showered, dressed, and hailed a cab. He ran into a few fans on the way into Dex’s hotel. At least he wasn’t obsessing over Kelly. He smiled for pictures and signed autographs.

When he got to Dex’s suite, his bandmates all had shocked expressions on their faces. He took a seat. “What’d I miss?”

Jack looked at him but shook his head.

Harmony’s dumping us? “Dex?”

His smile grew so wide Buzz thought his face would split in half. “Harmony’s offer is quite nice.”

“Then why do they look like we got dumped?”

“Not dumped,” Elliot said.

Dex clapped his hands with glee. “My boys, you have several offers to choose from.”

Buzz shook his head. His phone vibrated in his pocket. He slipped it out. “I don’t understand. You shopped us?”

Dex shook his head. “I would never do that without consulting you.”

Buzz glanced at his phone. It was Kelly, but he’d held up everyone long enough. “How then?”

“It’s no secret your seven-year deal was coming to an end. Other record companies have put in bids.”

“Bids? For what?” Maybe he had heat stroke because his brain just wasn’t comprehending.

Dex smiled again. “For the honor of being your label. Your hard work has paid off. And it’s about to make you the highest paid band in the industry.”

Buzz looked at his brothers. They were thinking the same thing he was. They’d wanted to cut back on touring.

“Dex, listen,” Jack said. “That sounds great, but things are changing for us.” He glanced at Elliot.

“Siobhan’s pregnant again,” Elliot said as he pointed to Jack and Curt. “And they’re getting married.”

Dex waved him off. “And you travel with your lovely wife and Jason, and Emily and Nicki travel with you, too. Or has that changed?”

Jack and Curt shook their heads.

“Then what’s the problem?”

Jack sighed. “We’ve been touring nonstop for over eight years. And it’s been amazing, and we love it, but we also want to spend time with our families. We’ve had to make a lot of sacrifices, and now we’re all kinda moving into having our own families, it’s time to make less sacrifices.”

Dex nodded.

Buzz was a little shocked. He was taking it better than they'd thought he would.

“You think I don't understand?” Dex asked. “I get it. You've worked hard, and now you're wanting to shorten runs and have more breaks.”

They all nodded.

“This isn't my first rodeo, gentlemen. You guys put in the work, and if you want to consider these other offers, which all include a signing bonus and a higher percentage of the sales, downloads, and streaming fees, I'm sure they'll do whatever we want. And if they won't, someone else will. Right now, we have a bidding war going on. I let each company know who else had made offers, and Harmony's already working on an updated offer. Most bands who could get to the top don't stay together long enough to. We hold all the cards.”

Jack cleared his throat. “What if we wanted to start our own label?”

“Not a problem. If you wanted to start from scratch, it'd be a lot harder. If you sign with Harmony or one of the others, you could release under your newly formed label and still use their distribution channels.”

They'd talked about helping Val and Beth, their instrument techs, get a deal because that was where their hearts laid, but if Stone Highway had a label, they could do so much more to help them.

Buzz was shocked. This was great news but so unexpected. And he had a lot on his mind besides the band. She worked too hard. He worried about her well-being. She was headed for burnout but refused to see it. Most people didn't until they'd been lit on fire and put out, left with only charred remains. She was just existing. *I hope our time's not over.*

Buzz forced himself to be present while Dex went over the offers and various other bits of band business.

“You coming?” Jack asked.

Buzz's head snapped up. “Uh, where?”

“We’re gonna grab dinner so we can discuss the offers.”

“Sorry. I’m a little distracted.”

Jack smiled. “Of course, you are.”

Elliot and Curt smiled, too.

“It’s not like that.”

“Like what?”

“Our time’s almost up.” *It may be already.* “She doesn’t have room for more, and even if she did, she’s not ready for anything besides casual.” He was grasping at straws because she’d already said no.

Jack chuckled. “Do I have to remind you Em wasn’t ready for more either? She tried casual with me, and it didn’t work out for her. Worked out great for me, because in the end, she knew we had something special, and even though she wasn’t ready, she gave us a chance.” Jack clapped him on the back. “If my stubborn burgundy stunner could see reason, Kelly can, too.”

“You don’t know what she’s been through.”

Jack sighed. “No, I don’t. I know whatever it is she’s through it. It’s the past, over and done with. I’ve only met her a handful of times, but I gotta say, she reminds me of Em when we first met. Stubborn. Determined. Vulnerable. Hurting.”

They rode the elevator to the lobby. “Pushing didn’t work for you.”

“No, it did not. It almost lost me her. But then I started focusing on what she needed in order to give us a chance, and then I gave it to her.”

“And that was?”

“Time. Patience.” Jack smiled. “Em needs to come to things in her own time. Maybe Kelly does too. Just plant the seed that you’d like to see her again. She’ll have plenty of time to think about it after we leave next week.”

Buzz nodded. He'd tried planting the seed, but Kelly kicked up the dirt and stomped it into oblivion. He had to call her back, but he wasn't ready for her to definitively end things. Having a single strand of hope was better than knowing she was done with him.

They took a cab to Buzz's suite at The Yorkshire and ordered room service. By the time the guys left, it was after eight.

Buzz listened to Kelly's voice mail. Damn, she sounded really upset. Probably his fault for pushing her. He called her, and when she answered, he held his breath.

"Hello?" She sounded sleepy.

"Hey. Sorry I missed your call. We had a meeting with our manager."

"Oh, of course. You have things you gotta do. You've been very accommodating."

"You sound like you were asleep." Her sleepy voice turned him on.

"Mmm. Yeah, I was."

"You okay?"

"Not sure. After you left, I started feeling a little sick to my stomach and rather exhausted. I went home early. I had a conference call, but other than that, I've just been hanging out with the kitties." She cleared her throat. "They've been looking for you. Sadie runs to the door every time she hears someone in the hallway. I think they miss you."

What about you? But he wouldn't ask. He'd already gotten that answer.

"I miss you, too."

Buzz flopped on the bed. His heart pounded with hope. "Even though I was in a band meeting, thoughts of you sliced in."

"You busy tonight?"

He sat up and swallowed the lump in his throat. "I'm free."

“I don’t like how we left things earlier. Unfortunately, I didn’t realize it until after you left, and then I freaked out a little.”

“I never meant to upset you.”

“You were being honest.”

And it upset you.

“Anyway, I know it’s kinda late...”

“Not for me. Most gigs don’t start until seven or eight, and we usually don’t go on until eight or nine. Then it’s two and a half hours for the gig, a quick shower, and depending on where we are, a meet and greet.”

“Oh, I thought you did those before your...gig.”

“Sometimes. Depends. Some venues have hard closing times we have to be out by.”

“So...you want to come over?” Kelly sighed. “I’d come to you, but I can’t leave—”

“The kitties all night. No, you can’t.” Relief relaxed his muscles. “I can be there in half an hour. Did you eat?”

“No. My stomach’s still off. Not really hungry.”

“I can bring soup. There’s great Chinese takeout not far from here. You should eat something.” If she wasn’t well, there’d be no sex, and he didn’t care. He just wanted to be with her, hold her, wake with her in the morning.

“That sounds nice.”

“Great. I’ll be there soon.” He disconnected and grabbed his key card and MetroCard. This time of night, taking the subway would be faster than battling traffic in a cab. He ordered the soup while he waited for the elevator, and ten minutes later, he picked up his order and double-timed it to the subway station.

After a quick stop in the grocery store by her place for ice cream and flowers, he crossed the street to her building. “Hi, Mrs. Espo.” Kelly’s neighbor waved and smiled. She was pulling a wheeled cart behind her. “Here, let me.”

“Oh, no. You have your own packages.”

“No problem. I can handle both.” He took the handle while she unlocked the door. He carried it up the two flights to her apartment.

“Such a nice young man.” She smiled. “I hope we’ll continue to see you around.”

He tilted his head to the side. *You know something I don’t?* “Why wouldn’t you?” Maybe they hadn’t been as convincing as a couple as he’d thought.

She patted his hand. “Everyone knows your tour starts up again next week. You’re a nice couple.” A small frown crossed her forehead. “It was so sad when they separated. I was married to Edgar for forty-six years before he passed.”

“You know I’m a musician?”

“Of course. Everyone here knows. There are no secrets in this section of Brooklyn. And modesty’s another fine trait.”

“Modest?”

Hands on hips, she faced him. “Young man, you are a bona fide rock star. My grandson told me all about it.”

“I never describe myself that way. I’m a drummer.”

She reached up and patted his cheek. “A very famous drummer. And Kelly’s boyfriend.”

Since he’d been coming here, he’d only been stopped a few times. “I didn’t realize it was common knowledge.”

“Everyone deserves their privacy. This is your downtime.” She smiled again, and her faded blue eyes glistened. “It’s good to see Kelly so happy again. She deserves it. Thank you.” She took her cart and wheeled it in, closing the door behind her.

Buzz walked one flight down and knocked on Kelly’s door. She shooed the kitties, and the door opened. She was in butter-yellow pajamas and looked absolutely beautiful. “Hi.”

She smiled and stepped back. “Hi.”

Buzz dropped his bags, kneeled, and loved on the four cats. “I saw you guys this morning.” Had it only been this morning? So much had happened today it felt like longer. “I missed you, kitties.”

Kelly reached for the bags, but Buzz snatched them as he stood. “No. I got this. You go sit. I’ll bring it to you. We can watch a movie if you like.” He started toward the kitchen but turned. “Do you have something I can put these in?” He took the daisies out of the bag and held them out.

She dipped her head for a sniff. “They’re beautiful. You didn’t have to.”

Because it’s too boyfriend-like? “A good boyfriend gets his girl flowers when she’s feeling crappy. I got several smiles of approval from your neighbors in the store when I picked them up.”

“You’re sweet. There’s a vase in the kitchen cabinet by the window.” She snuggled up in the corner of the couch. “What do you feel like watching?”

He walked into the kitchen. “Anything funny.” Buzz filled the vase with water and arranged the flowers. He poured the soup into her only bowl and found a tray. “Where do you want the flowers?”

“Out here so I can see them. Daisies are so cheery I can’t help but smile when I see them.”

That was why he’d picked them. He carried the tray into the living room and set it on the small folding table. He placed the vase on her lone end table and moved the tray to her lap.

Kelly didn’t hesitate. “Didn’t you get anything?” Squdgy and Chonkers settled on the back of the couch. Darcy curled in the crook of Kelly’s bent legs, and Sadie sat next to her

“We had dinner after our meeting to go over everything.” Buzz smiled and went to the kitchen to retrieve his ice cream. He settled on the couch next to her, kicked off his flip-flops, and popped the lid off.

She eyed the pint of ice cream.

“It’s mint chocolate chip. You want some?”

Kelly nodded. “Maybe.”

“Soup first.”

Kelly took a spoonful of soup. “Good news?”

He still couldn’t believe it. “Yeah. We’ve got several offers from other labels. I never expected a bidding war.”

“You guys have worked hard. That’s great.” Her smile faded. “Does that mean you won’t be able to shorten your runs and add more breaks?”

He shook his head. “On the contrary, according to Dex, we can pretty much ask for and get whatever we want.”

Kelly grinned. “Mmm. This soup is amazing.”

Buzz sat back and enjoyed watching Kelly enjoy her soup. For someone who hadn’t been hungry, she made quick work of it. After she finished, he took the tray to the kitchen, grabbed a couple bottles of water, and sat back on the couch. She shifted over and snuggled into his side. *This means something, right?*

He took a spoonful of ice cream then offered her one. They shared the spoon and the rest of the pint. After the movie, Kelly sat up and clicked the TV off. “We need to talk.” She glanced down. “I’m sorry about today. I was counting on our agreement, but...”

He used his knuckle to tilt her head up so she’d meet his eyes. “But?”

Their brown depths held uncertainty and fear. She exhaled slowly. “I like you. I liked you before we slept together, and I like you even more now.”

He smiled. Buzz relaxed his shoulders. “I’d like to keep seeing you. Tell me what you need from me so I can make it happen.” *Patience.*

Her soft smile made his blood pump harder. “I’m not really sure. I’m a planner. It’s what I do. I make plans, and I stick to them. We made this plan, and I thought it was perfect. We’d

have fun, and then we'd get back to our separate lives. I've been thinking about it all afternoon, but I've got nothing."

"I'm not really a planner, but I get that's what works for you. Whatever we decide now, it's not set in stone. You need a guy who's flexible because you're crazy busy. I need the same thing."

Kelly's fingers stroked the edge of the pocket watch tattoo on his arm. "That's part of the problem. I realize now I've never been the flexible one. At least in my relationships. Enzo was the one who always bent to my schedule. And so have you."

"I think it's safe to say you won't be flying out to see me while I'm away."

"Do you want me to?"

He'd love to see her. But he needed time as much as she did. "Someday, yeah. I know you have a lot of responsibility, and I don't want you to feel like it has to be all or nothing. Why don't we plan to see each other on my three-day break? That'll give us plenty of time to get used to the idea. And if it goes well, we can make another plan from there."

"What would you normally do during a break? Fly home to see your family?"

"Depends. If it's around a holiday or birthday, yeah. Otherwise, I take that time to get in any treatments for my knee, rest it up, really focus on myself and where I am mentally and physically and make any necessary adjustments. And sightsee, of course."

"Haven't you seen it all before?"

He smiled. "There's always something to see. I like being outside, being in nature. So it doesn't have to be sights. I love going to parks and forests and hiking around."

"Wouldn't your break be better spent doing those things than flying to see me?"

"You're kidding, right? I won't be having any sex for weeks. I fly home, I'm expecting you to rectify that." He

waggled his brows.

“So, we’d still be exclusive?”

His brows pulled together. “You don’t want to be?”

“No. No, no. I do. I just didn’t know if you were getting bored.”

He scoffed. “You’re kidding.” He shifted closer. “You’re the most exciting, fascinating, intelligent, strong-minded, and strong-hearted woman I have ever met, and if we spent an eternity together, bored still wouldn’t happen.” His heart pounded. The urge to kiss her, to brand her as his, almost overwhelmed him. But he wouldn’t.

No. He wouldn’t.

“Wow.” Her eyes shifted away then back. “That’s a little unbelievable coming from a guy who travels the globe for a living. How can I compete with that?”

He shook his head. “Not compete with. It’s great, and I’m not gonna pretend like I don’t love it. But it’s also exhausting. I like being home. I get to see friends and family. I like being able to work on songs without having to rush off to do an interview or a gig for a radio station. I love practicing drums.”

“You still practice?”

“Most days.”

“The Yorkshire can’t approve of that.”

“I bought an electronic kit when I was staying at Curt’s place. I use mesh drum heads, and I can play quiet enough so anyone outside my room won’t be disturbed. And to be safe, I only practice during mid-afternoon when it’s less likely to be a problem.” He smiled. “But I’m gonna be looking for a house, and I’ll have a studio built. With soundproofing, I won’t disturb my neighbors.”

“Oh, where are you looking?”

“Still up in the air. I only just decided on a house over an apartment a few weeks ago. I need the space. I need a yard with trees and bushes and little critters. Maybe a pool. I’d

planned on seeing apartments in the city during this break 'cause I can't keep crashing at my parents' home. But something better came up." He kissed her lightly on the lips.

Her girlish grin made his heart flip.

"Was it me?"

"It *is* you." He filled his nose with her unique scent: light floral with a spice that drove him wild.

Kelly stretched, and her breasts strained the fabric of her butter-yellow cotton top.

His dick pulsed. She wasn't feeling her best, and he was concerned. She'd been taking better care of herself these past few weeks, but it wasn't enough. "Come on, you're tired." He stood and extended his hand. Her small hand wrapped around his, and he pulled her to her feet. The cats rushed ahead of them into the bedroom.

By the time Buzz had washed up for bed, Kelly and the kitties were sound asleep. Her breaths were even. He'd be one lucky fucker to see that for the rest of his life.



THE PAST TWO DAYS HAD BEEN SOME OF THE BEST KELLY HAD ever had. She'd be taking the next four days off. She had a few calls scheduled, but after two custom appointments had canceled, this had been the perfect opportunity to take Friday off to be with Buzz before he left. The waitlist for custom was long, and she could've easily rebooked, but Kelly needed to start taking some time off, and this was a good start.

And she had a surprise for Buzz. She'd worked late tonight so Buzz would have to pick her up here after everyone left. Tomorrow, they'd sleep in. And later, Buzz was taking her to the Museum of Modern Art to see a limited-time fashion exhibit. His idea.

She'd had her blood drawn on Wednesday to see if she'd be a candidate for the bone marrow transplant. Her brother and sister had declined. Even though she didn't think much of him,

Giovanni was grandfather to Frankie's kids, and he'd said they adored him. The soft part of her heart had made her do it for their sakes.

As she'd finished her paperwork, Buzz walked in.

Simon stood behind Buzz.

"Lock up on your way out, Simon."

"Have a good night."

Her breath caught. Buzz's black jeans hugged his muscled thighs and butt perfectly, and a tight gunmetal-gray T-shirt showed off his well-defined upper body.

"What?" He looked down at his T-shirt. "It's too small, isn't it?"

On another man, maybe. "No, you look very sexy."

"So yes, it's too tight." He sighed. "It's my favorite one, too."

Kelly pushed her chair back and stood. She'd worn her highest red suede heels. The additional five inches should be perfect. She sauntered to the corner of her desk, sat on the edge, and crossed her legs. She'd worn a fitted black leather pencil skirt with a not-quite-sheer white silk blouse with a short flutter sleeve. Professional but sexy.

From the gleam in his eye, she hit the mark. One look from him, and she was wet. The T-shirt didn't hurt either. And his low-slung jeans fit him perfectly. Black suede sneakers replaced his usual flip-flops.

Kelly allowed her gaze to travel slowly from his eyes, his lips, his strong jaw and down to his neck, chest, and abs. She paused at his groin and smiled, then continued down to his firm thighs, calves, and feet, and her gaze slowly moved back up again. When she met his eyes, she licked her lips.

Buzz moaned.

"Yummy."

"Kel, stop it. You need to eat dinner. I know you skipped lunch."

She quirked a brow. “How?”

He smirked. “I have my ways.” He still stood in the open doorway. His body radiated energy and lust. His gaze softened, but he tightened his control. “I’m not the only one who’s worried about you.”

Kelly crooked her finger, but Buzz didn’t move.

“Not a good idea.”

Now that they’d continue to see each other past their four-week expiration date, this had been the last rule. Sorta. Buzz had gone down on her the other day, and it had been the most erotic, crushing orgasm she’d ever experienced from oral. “I disagree.” She popped a button on her blouse. Only one. The remaining rules were things to keep doing: have as much sex as possible and remain exclusive, which they’d agreed to.

Buzz was already shaking his head. “Kel, this is your office.”

She undid another button. “And as I recall, you wanted to fuck me here from day one.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed wildly. He glanced over his shoulder. Buzz slowly nodded. “Oh, hell yeah, I did.”

She bit her bottom lip. “You don’t anymore?” Another button popped. She moved her hand to give him a peek at the lace of her bra. He appreciated her silk underwear collection. This set was new. Lace and satin with a good amount of cleavage for him to ogle.

He didn’t disappoint.

Her nipples hardened. She undid the final three buttons. “Close the door.”

Buzz’s eyes flared, and the door slammed shut behind him. “I fucking love it when you get all bossy.”

“I am the boss, so it’s in the title.” Kelly let her blouse fall off her shoulders.

“Are you sure?”

“No one’s here but us. We can make as much noise as we want.”

He pulled her into his arms. His lips took hers in a fiery, passionate kiss, their tongues warring. She nipped his lip.

Buzz pulled his lips from hers. “Tell me what you want me to do.” His voice was strained, and his heart thumped wildly.

She glanced around the spacious office. “Hmm. Well, let me see.” She pushed her hips closer to feel his thick cock. “Mmm. You’re ready.”

“I’m always ready around you.” His dark-brown eyes glistened with desire.

“Let’s see. I could ride you on the couch.” Her eyes fluttered closed as she pictured it. “Mmm, yes.” She opened her eyes. “My chair.” She thrust her chest closer to his. The near-naked contact sent shock waves from her hard nipples to her clit. “Plenty of wall space.” She closed her eyes again, and an image of Buzz fucking her up against the wall sent fluid gushing from her core.

“Kel, please.” His voice dropped an octave.

She opened her eyes and rubbed her hands over his chest and down his abs to the bottom of his T-shirt. Slipping her hands underneath the thinning fabric, she stroked his firm muscles.

He moaned as she caressed him.

Her eyes caught his. “I want you to bend me over the desk and fuck me.”

Growling a low primal grunt, which vibrated through his chest, Buzz pulled her into his arms, and his lips crashed onto hers. He kissed her with such passion she could barely breathe. His fingers found the button and zipper on her skirt and quickly undid them. She didn’t usually wear stockings in the summer, but today she’d made an exception.

She popped the button on his jeans and lowered the zipper. “Better?”

He shook his head, released her, and stepped back. He whipped his T-shirt off and flung it aside. Kicking off his sneakers, he shucked his jeans, underwear, and socks.

“Wow.” Seeing him standing completely naked in her office was more of a turn-on than she’d imagined. Her pulse pounded through her veins.

While he kissed her neck, he slid her blouse off her arms, and it joined his clothes on the floor. Kneeling, he slid her skirt over her hips and down, and she stepped out of it.

Buzz sat back on his heels. His cock jutted upward. “You are amazing.” He ran his hands up her calves and thighs. “Silk?”

She nodded. “You like?”

“Oh, yeah. Me like.” His fingers stroked the black silk straps of her garter belt. “Will you leave these on?”

She grinned. “I thought so.”

His body shook as he took several deep breaths. “I like your thoughts.” His left hand cupped her butt, and his right slipped under the satin of her panties. He stroked her clit. “You’re dripping, baby.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about fucking you here all day.”

“Come for me.” He stroked around and around her clit. “Mmm. Gotta taste you.” He leaned in, and his tongue flicked her clit.

She grabbed his shoulders as her hips swayed back and forth. “Yes.” Sensations radiated from where his tongue pleased her throughout her body. Her skin was so hypersensitized that every brush of his cheek on her inner thighs had her quivering. She leaned on Buzz’s shoulders. Every muscle in her body tensed as she yelled out. “B, yes!” Shockwaves of pleasure exploded throughout her body.

Buzz rested his face on her belly. She’d been the one to come, yet he needed to catch his breath. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just need a minute.”

She grinned. “Really?”

Buzz stood and held her. “You have no idea the effect you have on me. Watching you come is so...incredible. Powerful.”

She kissed his chest as her hand curled around his impressive erection. “I have some idea.” She stroked him, but he pulled back. “You’re really that close to coming just from getting me off?”

He nodded.

She put her arms around him. “That’s turning me on.”

“You look so fucking sexy.”

Kelly grinned. “Sexy enough to fuck?”

“Oh, yeah.” His breath shuddered out. Buzz lifted her, and her legs went around his waist. His lips took hers in an all-consuming kiss.

She nibbled a path along his jaw to his ear. “I know I just came, but I need you to fuck me right now,” she said in a throaty whisper.

“Bent over your desk?”

She nodded.

He set her on her feet and took a step back. “Lovely.”

Kelly reached around and unhooked her bra. She let the straps slide down her arms, and she dangled it from one finger before letting it drop. She hooked her thumbs in her panties and slid them down and off. “If you put the garters on first, they don’t have to be removed.” She smiled. “Unless you want them off.”

“No way. Heels and stockings on. Oh, fuck.” His head fell back and he took several openmouthed breaths.

When his eyes met hers again, they were near black. The heat of his body and the scent of his desire stole her breath. His body was perfect. Every inch was toned. Since they’d talked about continuing their arrangement, she’d felt more in control. And in spite of this being the worst time of year for

her and her family, she was almost...hopeful. Buzz truly understood her, and Jenny had been right. Kelly needed him.

No. I don't need him in my life. Need led to disappointment. And she'd had her fill. But it didn't mean they couldn't have a mutually beneficial arrangement.

"You keep looking at me like that," Buzz said, "and I might come."

"Like what?"

He closed the distance between them. "Like you want to devour me." His voice was a low growl.

She let her gaze drop to his dick. "Mmm." She licked her lips. "I do. I really, really do."

Buzz let out a breath and groaned. "You're killing me, Kel."

She tilted her head back to see his face. So many emotions passed between them. Desire. Comfort. Understanding. Love.

Whoa. Not love. Not again. But she liked him. If she'd thought weeks ago she'd feel like this, she might not have had the courage to have this time with him. But it was good to feel close to a man again. To share. The give and take.

Buzz pulled her into his arms and kissed her again. His hand stroked up her sides, cupped her breasts, and pinched her nipples. "I need you now."

Smiling, she turned, bent at the waist, leaned her forearms on her desk, and taunted him.

Buzz's hands stroked over her ass and hips. He dipped one hand between her thighs. "Fuck."

She glanced over her shoulder, and he licked his fingers. She shook her ass at him. "I'm waiting."

He grabbed her hips, and in one thrust, he pushed inside her.

All thoughts turned off as Buzz filled her. His fingers dug into her soft skin as he clutched her hips. He pulled out and thrust back. "Oh."

“Damn, Kel, you’re so tight.” He exhaled a breath as his cock plunged back in until her ass was settled against his groin. “Yeah.”

Yeah was right. She loved how he filled her so completely and not just her body but her life. Her inner muscles flexed around Buzz’s hard cock as he pulled out and swiftly back in. A light sheen of perspiration formed on her skin, but she didn’t feel cold. “Buzz, please.” She had no idea how he’d managed to last this long, but she couldn’t wait anymore. “Now.”

“You’re the boss, baby.” He pulled out and slammed back in. “Oh, Kel.” He grunted with every thrust.

“Harder.”

His measured rhythm was driving her crazy. She was out of her mind. Time slowed as her orgasm broke in wave after wave. It was hard to breathe through all the sensations assaulting her from her scalp to her toes.

Buzz groaned and screamed her name as he came inside her. One last deep thrust and he stilled as he panted for breath. He pulled out, lifted her, and carried her over to the couch. He held her close as she became aware of her surroundings again.

She’d forgotten they were in her office.

Nothing else existed but Buzz.

Chapter Thirty

KELLY NEVER CEASED TO AMAZE HIM. NOT ONLY HAD THEY broken her rules, but she'd gone above and beyond by taking four days off, and with the annual memorial service for her mom on Monday, these days together would hopefully help ease her growing tension. There would also be a reception at her grandparents' house after the service.

He didn't believe having a memorial service for Marie Hoffmann every year since that tragic day was a good idea. They'd never, ever get over their loss, but this wasn't helping if Kelly and her siblings spent all the days leading up to the service dreading it.

But then again, Buzz couldn't even imagine having a child let alone losing one. The pain Kelly's grandparents knew from outliving their only child would never leave them. His family had buried their loss of his older brother, but it didn't mean they didn't live with the pain. He wouldn't judge his parents for their choice, but he was glad he knew about it. It fully explained his mom's fear and paranoia he'd always felt from her.

Today was Friday, and they were going to a limited-time fashion exhibit showcasing clothing from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that had an impact on the world. The glee radiating off Kelly when he'd suggested it had his deeper feelings taking hold. He definitely wanted more glee for her. Buzz enjoyed spooning Kelly while she slept, a luxury he wouldn't have after Tuesday for several weeks. He'd miss her and the kitties. They all still slept peacefully. Sadie was curled

up next to Kelly. They'd warmed up to each other considerably. Kelly no longer claimed Sadie only kept her alive for food and toys or called her Satan.

Kelly stirred and turned onto her back. "Hi." Her beautiful eyes glistened.

"Hi."

Sadie stood, stretched, walked over Kelly, and nestled between them.

Kelly laughed. "What's up with her?"

"I think she likes us." He grinned.

She cupped his cheek. "She loves you. She's gonna be one unhappy matriarch when you leave."

"I'll be back." It felt so fucking good to say it. He kissed her gently on the lips, careful not to squish Sadie. "She loves you, too."

Kelly's fingers played over the pocket watch tattoo on his forearm. "This is beautiful." She leaned in for a closer look. "Truly a piece of art." She placed a kiss on his chest as her head settled back. "Does it have a special meaning?"

Buzz's heart flipped. "It sure does. Three actually." He licked his lips. "We only have so much time, so this reminds me to make the most of it." He closed his eyes and sighed. "I wasted so many years being wasted. This reminds me the clock's always ticking. The hands are set at 11:37 because that's when I woke up in the hospital after my parents found me unconscious in my kitchen. I'd slipped on water and hit my head."

He'd never forget the sheer terror in his mom's eyes when he'd woken. It had been so much worse than the fear he'd sensed as a kid. "There was a clock on the wall opposite my bed, and I vowed to never use drugs again. Never put my parents through such a thing." He rubbed a hand over his face. "I spent a lot of time lying to myself that I'd had it under control. Even felt like I was better than people who got hooked on recreational drugs because I had a medical need." He

scoffed. “Like that made me any better. An addict is an addict.”

Kelly snuggled closer. “What’s the third thing?”

Buzz allowed the memories to leave his body. “My grandpa. He collects pocket watches and fixes them. When I was little, I was fascinated with them. How something so small could hold such intricate and immense beauty.”

She leaned up on her elbow, and her smile was pure joy. “So sweet. Are you still close to him?”

Buzz nodded. “Yeah. He’s an amazing man. Both my grandparents are. They couldn’t have children, so they fostered dozens of kids and adopted my dad and aunt. They only stopped fostering about five years ago.”

“They sound wonderful.” Her hand caressed a path to his side. “Turn over.”

Buzz rolled onto his stomach. Her fingers traced over every limb and leaf of the tree. Her touch was life.

“I don’t normally like tattoos that are this encompassing, but this is so beautiful.” The tree took up all the space on his back.

“It took four sessions for the tattoo artist to complete.” His dick hardened with every stroke of her fingers on his flesh. “It represents life and longevity.” He swallowed the lump in his throat. “The deep roots represent my amazing support system. My family, bandmates, crew, and a few close friends. Their support means everything.”

“There’s little buds on the branches. Why only a few baby leaves?”

“The buds and leaves are for the new beginning. I’m going to have twelve green leaves added every year to represent another twelve months sober. One day, it’ll be filled with green leaves.”

She placed soft kisses over the twenty-four green leaves. “The dandelions are so detailed.”

Their bright yellow always made him smile when he'd catch a glimpse in the mirror.

“And this one that's already turned into a puff. So beautiful. I can almost feel the breeze taking the spores.”

“They remind me to let go of the things I can't control.”

Buzz rolled onto his back and pulled her in for a deep kiss. For the first time in his life, he felt strong and capable because he was. Not because he measured his strength by someone else's weaknesses. He and Kelly had something truly special. And since they'd agreed to keep seeing each other, she was starting to fully embrace what they had.

Kelly's stomach growled. “I'm starving.” She waggled her brows.

“Good thing we stopped for groceries last night. Pancakes?”

“Oh, yes, please.”

Buzz got up carefully so as not to disturb the cats, but they jumped out of bed and sat by the door before his feet hit the floor. He pulled on his jeans and padded to the kitchen. He fed the cats and got them fresh water. By the time the first pancakes were done, Kelly walked into the kitchen with a huge smile on her face. “You make the best pancakes I've ever had.” Her hand flew to her mouth. “Don't tell Grams I said that.”

“Never. Coffee?”

“Please.”

They sat at the small folding table and enjoyed a leisurely breakfast. Buzz handled the dishes while Kelly showered. He joined her as she was rinsing her hair. They made love, then she got out while he finished. He toweled off and opened the curtain. Kelly had finished blow-drying her hair. Her pink robe gaped in front, giving him a nice peek at her fine tits. She slipped off her robe and began applying body lotion.

“You are so damn sexy.”

She turned her head, smiling. “Really.” Her eyes dropped to his hard-on. “This turns you on?”

He nodded. “Sure does.”

Kelly applied lotion to her ass. She was teasing him.

Her phone trilled on the counter, and Kelly glanced at the screen. “It’s my doctor’s office. Can you hit answer?” She raised her hands which were still covered in lotion.

Buzz reached past her and hit answer and the speaker icon.

“Hello?”

He tilted his head toward the door. Kelly shook her head.

“Kelly, it’s Dr. Martinelli.”

“Hi.”

“Well, my dear, I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?”

What bad news could there be? She either was or wasn’t a match.

“Bad.”

“I’m afraid you’re not a candidate at this time.”

“What does that mean?” Her brows pulled together, and she glanced at Buzz. Her hands stilled on her bare leg

He shrugged and wrapped a towel around his waist.

“It means you passed the first round of testing to be a basic match, but any more tests would have to wait.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re pregnant, my dear. Congratulations.”



A WEIGHT BORE DOWN ON HER, MAKING IT DIFFICULT TO stand. The heat and steam from their shower still clung to the mirror and walls, but a frigid shiver tore through her. *It’s a*

mistake. There's no way. It was true they hadn't used condoms, but Kelly never missed a pill. "I'm what now?"

"You're pregnant."

Heat spread throughout her body. A lump the size of a cantaloupe lodged in the pit of her stomach. *No. Not a chance. I've always been careful.* "Dr. Martinelli, it's not possible. Can you have it checked again." They must've mixed up her blood at the lab.

"I already did because of the donation. There's no mistake, my dear."

She stared at her shocked reflection. Buzz stood behind her, and his mouth was open. He didn't blink, and he didn't appear to be breathing. "Please check it again. The lab must've mixed up the vials or something."

"I could do that. In the meantime, you could take a home pregnancy test. I've been using this lab for over thirty years, and they've always been reliable."

She jumped when Buzz put his arms around her. "Uhm, okay. Thank you, Doctor." Kelly wiped her hand on a towel and disconnected the call. She turned in his arms and looked up at him. "This has to be a mistake. I swear I haven't missed a single pill."

"I believe you." His voice was odd, distant. His face registered shock, and his eyes were empty.

"The lab screwed up." She'd keep telling herself that because the alternative was unacceptable. She'd torched her marriage because she didn't want to put her life on hold again. There was no way she was pregnant by Buzz. They weren't even technically dating, and they'd just agreed to see each other in October. High tide at Jones Beach had nothing on Kelly's insides.

Buzz stared at the floor. He took a deep breath. "Look, it's probably a mistake because you haven't missed any pills." He sounded a little more like himself. "We'll get a pregnancy test, and it'll clear this up."

Kelly shook her head and pulled out of his arms. “No way. We can’t go anywhere in Brooklyn where someone won’t recognize one of us. I could have Jenny get it, but if it got back to Grams... No. No.”

Buzz nodded. “Right. Of course. We’ll go into the city. We can go back to my hotel room to do the test.” His eyes finally met hers, and she saw the same fear that clawed through her. He pulled her close. “It’s gonna be okay, Kel. You’ll see.”

She sure as fuck hoped so.



TWO HOURS LATER, THEY RODE THE ELEVATOR UP TO BUZZ’S suite at The Yorkshire Hotel. They hadn’t talked the entire drive in from Brooklyn, each lost in their own thoughts. Buzz had insisted on paying, and they’d gotten four different brands. He used his key card, and when she didn’t move, he gently nudged the small of her back.

“Oh, sorry. This is just...”

Buzz closed the door behind them. “We don’t know what this is yet. Let’s not jump to conclusions.” He took her hand and walked into the bedroom, dropping the bag on the bed. He sat and pulled her between his knees. “I know you’re scared. Me too.” He brushed her hair back. “But whatever happens, we’ll figure it out together.”

Kelly pulled away. “I’ll never get an abortion.”

Buzz stood. “Hey, I’m not suggesting that at all. I’m trying to tell you that you’re not alone in this.”

Their gazes locked. Tears stung her eyes. “Okay. Sorry. I just have a million thoughts in my head, and frankly, they’re all terrifying.”

He nodded. “I get it. But I mean it. If you are, *we* did this. I’m not gonna abandon you.”

Kelly’s shoulders relaxed, her jaw unclenched, and she exhaled the breath she’d been holding. She was ashamed that

had been one of those terrifying thoughts. Buzz had done nothing to deserve it. She let out a shuddering breath. “Okay. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Kelly picked up the bag and pulled out a test. The pink box looked so cheery, but her stomach turned, and her hands trembled.

“Let me.” He took the box from her limp fingers and took a picture of the box, and a few taps later, a voice read the instructions. “Kel?”

She scrunched her eyes. “Sorry, I missed everything after ‘Keep out of reach of children.’” A hysterical chuckle burst out. She covered her mouth, exhaled a shaky breath, and shook her head. “I’m sorry.” Her stomach muscles clenched and bile rose.

“Hey, it’s okay. Feel whatever you’re feeling. There is no wrong or anything to be embarrassed about. This is stressful.”

She nodded, but she couldn’t say thank you because any words out of her mouth would end in a scream. She tilted her chin at the box.

Buzz kissed her nose. “How many days past your period?”

“That matters?”

“Apparently so. It says it’s better, more accurate, if you take the test one day after you’ve missed. Wait.” He pulled the other tests out and took pictures, and the app on his phone read them out loud. They all said basically the same thing. “I guess we didn’t get any of the early results ones.”

“I had a really light period last week on the days we didn’t see each other. It was lighter than usual. With all the stress I’ve been under, I didn’t really think twice about it.”

“And you threw up at dinner two Sundays ago.”

Kelly shook her head. “That was just the stress of everything. I’ve always been a bit irregular, sometimes it’s thirty days, sometimes thirty-six or thirty-seven days.”

Buzz threw the test on the bed. “This is stupid.” He picked up his cell. “Best time to take a pregnancy test,” he said into the phone. “Great, only two million, three hundred and eighty thousand hits.”

Kelly looked at the screen and laughed. “That’s two billion, three hundred and eighty million results.”

Buzz’s jaw tightened.

“Shit, I’m sorry. I wasn’t laughing at you.”

He put his arm around her shoulders. “I didn’t think you were. I can’t believe there are over two billion search hits. That’s ludicrous. What are we supposed to do with all that? How is that helpful?”

Kelly shrugged.

A wry chuckle slipped through his lips, and he shook his head.

Kelly sighed. “Yeah.”

Buzz picked up the test. “You ready?”

Kelly shook her head. “No. If I take it and it’s positive, I’m not ready to deal.”

“Okay. When?”

“I need a few minutes.”

“Kay.” Buzz sat. “Do you want to be alone?”

Kelly shook her head. “No... No.” She took his hand. His firm grip was oddly reassuring.

Buzz tugged her onto his lap. She leaned against him, and his strength and warmth were so solid tears formed. She was scared, nervous, nauseated, but she wasn’t alone. She was freaking out inside, and she did her best to keep it there. This wasn’t Buzz’s fault, and she wasn’t mad at him, but at the same time, since they’d heard the news, other than looking shocked, he’d been his usual calm self, and it was pissing her off. Was he really not concerned? Did he think the blood test was wrong? She wanted to scream, but Buzz held her, singing softly a song she didn’t recognize.

“How can you be so calm?” she blurted out angrily.

He stopped singing and stared at her. “Because you’re freaking out. One of us needs to stay calm, because if we both lose our shit before we know what we’re actually dealing with, it’ll be a nightmare. You need me to be calm.”

How had he known? She hadn’t. “Aren’t you worried?”

He nodded. “But you’re the one who may be pregnant, so I feel like you should feel whatever you’re feeling without having to deal with my feelings. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah. So, you’re stressed...inside?”

“I’m focusing all my energy on you and how you’re feeling.”

“But if I’m pregnant, you’re the father.” A stab of fear slithered down her spine, but she shook it off. “Suppressing your feelings can’t be good for you. For your recovery.”

“It wouldn’t be if that’s what I was doing. Not suppressing, prioritizing.”

Kelly tilted her head. “Mine over yours.”

Buzz smiled and nodded. “For now. Once we have all the facts, there’ll be plenty of time to feel my feelings.” He chuckled. “My therapist would be so proud.”

“The facts.” She was being selfish by not taking the damn test. It only needed minutes to process, and then there’d be no turning back. But hovering in limbo was hiding. Buzz somehow knew that was what she needed. He really was a good guy. The best. *What if I’m pregnant?* Buzz had worked so hard on his recovery she’d hate for this to be the reason he relapsed. If he did, she wouldn’t allow him around her baby. *My baby.*

“Hey, what’s going on in there?” Buzz’s voice held concern.

Kelly exhaled slowly as she glanced at him, making sure to not make eye contact. “Nothing, you know, besides *everything*.” She didn’t want him to think she thought he’d fail, but she had to consider it a possibility. She understood his

reasons for keeping calm, and she hoped he was being honest with her. She'd pay extra attention to him over their last days together for any signs of relapse. *Will we even have these days if I'm pregnant?* He said he wouldn't abandon her, but what did he mean exactly? Would he want to be around? He'd said he didn't want kids. But then neither had she. Her stomach turned over. "Okay. I'm ready." She needed to know before she drove herself insane with all the possibilities. Kelly stood. "I'll be out in a minute."

Kelly grabbed the boxes and went into the bathroom. She closed the door and said a silent prayer. She was shutting him out, but she couldn't help it. She needed to know first so she could prepare for all the possibilities, including him saying he'd be happy to send money but he couldn't be her baby's father. She didn't need his money.

She needed him.

And that was more terrifying than the positive results on all four tests.

Chapter Thirty-One

BUZZ'S HEART POUNDED. KELLY HAD BEEN IN THE BATHROOM for a long time. He'd hoped she'd come out while the tests processed. He'd hoped to find out when she did so he could be supportive. Buzz had stopped himself from knocking several times to see if she was okay. Of course, she wasn't. Her marriage had ended because she hadn't wanted kids, and if she was pregnant now, she'd be having some deep, painful, terrifying emotions over it.

If she's pregnant, is she wishing her ex-husband is the father instead of me?

She'd said they'd had as amicable a breakup as possible, and she still had intense feelings for Enzo. Buzz wouldn't blame her if she did wish it. What could he possibly offer her? His DNA held issues no parent would want for their kid. He'd never even considered having kids because of it. Now that it looked like it was happening, he wasn't sure how he felt. His heart had been glad when she'd said she'd keep the baby, but he didn't understand why it made him happy. He already felt guilt over the possibility of passing on his issues.

Fear clawed from the pit of his stomach until he choked on it. *She's pregnant.* She'd have flung the door open with joy if the tests had been negative. And it hurt she'd shut him out. He'd been trying to be supportive and understanding. Maybe she was trying to figure out a way to tell him she didn't want him in their baby's life.

Can I really blame her? I'm an addict, and I always will be. Do I have a right to even want to be a part of the baby's

life?

The air in the room was stifling. Each breath was harder than the last. If she was trying to find a way to dump him, would he let her? His head fell into his hands. “Oh, fuck.”

She didn’t need his money, but there was no fucking way he wouldn’t contribute. If she refused, he’d set up a trust.

But he didn’t think she was thinking about money right now.

She was trying to decide if she wanted him to be her baby’s father. Women had babies all the time without getting married. But he didn’t want that for his child. He wasn’t religious, but he believed in God and prayed every day as part of his recovery.

He pictured her going over the list of pros and cons where he was concerned.

Addict.

Dyslexic.

Heart defect.

Away from home more than home.

Never wanted kids.

He couldn’t refute any of it. Or change it. Except the last one. He needed to figure out where he stood because if he was going to be involved, he might have to convince her to let him.

“I’ll fucking sue her if I have to, to be a part of my kid’s life.”

Shock had him sliding off the bed onto the floor. He prayed it wouldn’t come to that, but he’d do it if she left him no other choice. She was going to have his baby.

I’m gonna be a dad.

A wave of love more powerful and intense than any he’d ever had covered him like a warm, fuzzy blanket fresh out of the dryer. If he passed on his shitty traits to his child, he’d move heaven and earth to get the baby the help they needed.

“Just like Mom and Dad did for me.” Tears of joy filled his eyes, and a calmness settled his raging thoughts.

Buzz stood. There was no way he'd let Kelly kick him out of her life. He was in love with her, and he wanted her and their baby to be a family.

Now he just had to convince her.

She was making a plan right now.

So he would, too.

Chapter Thirty-Two

KELLY'S BUTT WAS COLD FROM SITTING ON THE TILES SO LONG. She had a plan at least. She'd let him off the hook. This was her problem, and she was more than capable of handling it on her own.

So why am I still on the floor?

She should be on her way back to Brooklyn. She had to make an appointment with her gynecologist. Luckily, she'd left her phone on the bed; otherwise, she'd be consulting with Dr. Internet as to what kind of changes she needed to make to her diet and work life. But that was what she'd be paying the doctor for. And the internet wasn't an expert in anything except, at best, overwhelming amounts of data and at worst false information.

Her stomach grumbled, reminding her they hadn't eaten lunch. She hadn't eaten lunch. First on her list: stop considering her and Buzz a they, an us, a couple, because they weren't. They'd started on a path to try to be one, but this changed everything. She understood his reasons for not wanting kids, and he'd understood hers.

She'd been there and done that. She'd given over a decade of her life to make sure her sister and brother had the best life they could have. And while she'd never intended to give up any more of her life to raising children, that no longer mattered.

"I'm pregnant.

Pregnant.

Having a baby.

With child.

Buzz's child."

Her heart pounded. "I like Buzz." She chuckled. "I *like*, like him. But this isn't fair to him." The last thing she'd ever needed was to get pregnant, but now that she was, the last thing was Buzz staying with her because of it. She didn't want or need that kind of relationship, and it would never work.

It never did.

Any chance they'd had of turning their four-week sex fest into something more was gone. She figured he'd probably try to do the honorable thing, but she deserved better. Her baby deserved better.

Because he was a man, this wouldn't have to change anything in his life. His career would continue without a hitch.

What if he wants to be involved?

Kelly sighed. "This is getting me nowhere. I should go out there and tell him I'm pregnant. Not a complete shock since Dr. Martinelli insisted his lab results were accurate. But he didn't say a single thing when we heard. He just looked shocked. So was I. So am I. This is stupid."

Kelly gripped the edge of the counter and pulled herself up. She checked her reflection. "I don't look any different, but I sure feel different." Her hand covered her belly, and a wave of love surrounded her. "Hey." She knocked gently on her tummy. "How you doing in there, little person?" She turned to the side and looked in the mirrored wall. "No fatter than usual." Kelly groaned. "I'm gonna get fat. My ass gets any bigger, I won't fit through doorways." Damn genes.

She'd seen pictures of her mom when she was young, and while she'd always had generous hips and butt, after she'd had four kids, the spread had widened. "Oh no, what am I gonna tell Grams and Pa?"

"Kel?" The closed door muffled Buzz's voice. He knocked once. "May I come in?"

“I gotta tell him first. It’s the least I can do.” She pushed forward, turned the lock, and opened the door.

Buzz smiled. “So, what are we going to do?” He walked in and rested his butt against the counter.

Kelly’s mouth fell open, and she turned to face him. “Do?”

“You’re pregnant.” He smiled again. “So, what are we, as in us, going to do? What’s our first step?”

“How do you know the test wasn’t negative?”

Buzz shook his head. “Because if it had been, I’m fairly certain you wouldn’t have stayed in here so long by yourself. You were planning.” Buzz’s eyes clouded over with an emotion she didn’t like. “What do we do now?”

She was going to let him off the hook, but he truly seemed to be on board with this. She’d changed her mind about being a mom because she no longer had that choice. It was happening. But Buzz didn’t need to hang around. Now she didn’t know what to say. She needed to rethink things before she made a decision for her baby she’d regret.

“Come on, let’s go into the living room and sit. We need to talk this out.” He took her hand, and they walked through the bedroom. He stopped. “Unless you still want to go to the exhibit?”

It would be a way for her to stall this conversation so she could reformulate her plans. But she was too emotionally wrung out to walk around a crowded museum. “No.”

“We can always go... Damn, it’s only open until the end of September.” He pulled her on the couch and sat next to her. “Hit me.”

“What?”

Buzz smiled. “With questions, doubts, thoughts.”

Kelly sighed. “Right, of course. Sorry.” She rested her hand over her stomach. They’d been lovers for mere weeks, had explored every inch of each other, but the man sitting across from her was like a stranger. Her baby needed her to

ask the tough questions. “You said you didn’t want kids. Why aren’t you freaking out? What’s changed?”

Buzz scoffed. “I guess I’m a good actor. I am freaking the fuck out, but that’s not what you need, and it won’t help. You didn’t want kids either. But it’s a moot point now, right?”

She nodded and glanced down. “But you don’t...”

He shifted closer and tilted her chin until she met his eyes. “I’m not going to abandon you. And I’m certainly not going to run out on the best relationship I’ve ever had.” Something she hadn’t seen before shone in his eyes. “I’m scared but not how I thought I’d be.”

“But we’re not really in a relationship.”

“Aren’t we?”

“Maybe.” Kelly’s belly tingled. He was sincere.

“Kel, I care about you. I really do. But you have to see this changes everything. I never thought it possible to feel so much so fast, but I do.”

She looked away. “I care about you too, but what if it isn’t enough?” She’d been so prepared to move on without him, but whatever this was, it was churning up emotions that had nothing to do with their situation. *What’s Enzo gonna think?*

“There are no guarantees. You have to be willing to give us a chance to find out.”

“How do I know you’re not just being nice?”

Buzz sat back and his lips thinned. “I don’t know? Maybe because I’m telling you? Because we’ve been sleeping together, and I’ve opened myself to you. Could you maybe try giving me just a little bit of the benefit of your clearly multiple doubts?”

He was pissed. She’d never seen him like this, but right now, and for the rest of her life, she couldn’t care about that. She needed to do what was best for her baby. She wasn’t scared of doing it on her own because she’d basically already done it.

Buzz closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. “Kel, I wanted to keep seeing you, remember? It was my idea. And I’d felt that way for a while before I dropped it on you, but I was afraid if you didn’t feel the same way you’d end things early. And if four weeks were all we were gonna have, I didn’t want to lose a single day.”

“But as you said, this changes everything. I’m having a baby with or without you. You still have choices.”

“So, you’re pissed at me because you think my life isn’t changed by this?”

She shrugged.

“It’s not my fault I was born a man.” He shook his head on a sigh. “I didn’t figure you for being so man hate-y.”

“Not man hate-y, but you have to agree it’s the woman’s life that changes. I’m the one who has to ‘make adjustments’ to my career.”

“I’m not gonna say I’m sorry you were born a girl, apologize for being a guy, or pretend like I’d switch places with you. Things are what they are, and damn it, Kelly, I’m trying to work with you here. I’m trying to not freak the fuck out because you’re trying to cut me out of your and my baby’s lives. I will make whatever changes you need me to in order for this to work, but you have to give me some guidance. I can’t do anything about the next three months because it’s not just about me. We have fans. They’re our boss, and we made a commitment to them. We’ve taken their money in return for the promise of a live show, and if you can’t see that—”

“What? You’ll leave?”

His teeth clenched. “Stop picking a fight with me.” With effort, he relaxed his jaw. “The next three months are what they are. But then we’ll have a long break before we record our next album, and that *will* be followed by a long tour, but we already talked to Dex about more breaks and shorter runs. But those are next year’s problems. Stop blaming me for you being the girl in this relationship. I wouldn’t change a thing

because I think you are the most talented, amazing, intelligent woman I've ever met."

Tears formed in her eyes. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm doing that!" Her voice was an octave higher than usual, and she practically shrieked the words at him.

His anger deflated, and he pulled her into his arms. "I'm sorry too. I'm trying to stay calm here, but it's easier said than done."

"I'd feel better if you were the one freaking out. I've prided myself on my ability to stay calm in stressful situations, but it's gone now. My insides feel like high tide, and every emotion I have is exploding like grand finale Fourth of July fireworks at the same time. One second, I feel like I got this, and the next, it feels like I can't even breathe I'm so scared." She sobbed on his shoulder.

"I know this isn't what you wanted, and I'm sorry I did this to you." He sat back. "I take that back. I'm not sorry you're pregnant. I can't explain it, but I already love our baby. Which makes no sense to me because I thought I never wanted kids." He exhaled slowly. "Maybe that's not true. I was too scared to want this because I don't want my kids going through what I did." He smiled. "But now that it's happening, I want this." He rested his hand on her belly. "I want us to try to be together." He glanced away. "I care about you."

She giggled. "I already love the baby, too. How's that possible?"

"Fuck if I know. We can handle this. We'll figure it all out. Our schedules, everything. The timing's really good for me. I'll be home during most of your pregnancy and for the birth. It's your timing that worries me."

"Meaning?"

"You'd work twenty-four hours a day if you could."

She gritted her teeth. "That's because I *could* work twenty-four hours straight and still have *at least* forty-eight more hours of work to do because all the things fall on me. It never ends."

“I understand, but we’re going to have to work something else out for you. I will do whatever I can to help you figure it out. But the sooner you wrap your head around the fact that you’re going to have to make some major adjustments, the sooner your mind can get to work figuring out exactly how you’re going to pull it off.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If songwriting has taught me anything, it’s that when I let ideas sit, sometimes they take paths I might not have come up with otherwise. Those bits of grace from God that come down and flow out as a complete song are rare. Songwriting’s hard, but I make it easier by giving my mind the time to percolate over the idea until it’s ready to come together as a fully formed baby. We’ll figure this out.”

“What if we can’t?” Fear spread throughout her. “I’ve done this before, but what if I can’t do it now?”

He smiled. “The only thing holding us back are our thoughts on doing it. But right now, our thoughts don’t mean much because the baby isn’t here yet. It’s not going to be easy, and we have a million things to figure out, but believe it or not, we’re not the first couple to go through this. Billions and billions of people have. Our baby’s going to be born either way, and we have a responsibility to get our shit together and give them the best possible start. We have to get our heads where they need to be, which is really, really, simple.”

“I’m glad you think so.” She wasn’t normally sarcastic.

“Kel, we’re having a baby.”

“There is nothing simple about that.”

“There really kinda is. Babies have been born since the beginning of time. Long before there were doctors or nurses who’d deliver them, before medicine, before technology.”

“Aren’t you scared of messing it up?”

“Terrified. But that’s natural. Elliot and Siobhan had been trying for years to have a baby before she got pregnant with Jason, and once it happened, they were scared of all the things we’re scared of. This is happening regardless, so we have to

adult up here. It doesn't matter what I thought about having kids yesterday. It only matters what I think going forward. And no one is more shocked than I am that I'm so fucking happy right now I could bust."

"I'm used to being the rational one."

"Well, you still are, but this was quite a shock, and you have all those hormones swimming around inside you. Maybe give yourself a few days before you make any big decisions. Let it settle in."

"I should make an appointment with my doctor."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

Some of Kelly's emotions settled, but others rose. She wanted Jenny with her. "I'm not sure when I'll be able to get an appointment."

Buzz nodded. "Okay, well, if you get one before I leave and you want me to come with you, I will." He made a face. "Is it weird I offered?"

Kelly shrugged. "I don't know." She giggled. Fear rose, but she squashed it down. She couldn't handle another emotion or thought right now.

Buzz smiled at her belly. "Are you hungry?"

"Starved."

"Room service?"

She nodded. "Hamburger, fries, and do they have milkshakes?"

"They have everything." Buzz grinned at her. His eyes washed over her like a caress. He dialed room service and placed their lunch order then sat back on the couch. "You're pregnant. Growing another human being." A soft smile lit his face. "Our little baby." His eyes darkened with desire. "I can't imagine you looking more beautiful than you do right now, but I know you will, because I gotta say, I can't imagine anything sexier than watching you percolate our baby."

Kelly burst out laughing. She laughed so hard she couldn't breathe. "Percolate?"

Buzz scrunched his nose. "Sorry, sounded better in my head. But I mean it, Kel."

His dark-brown eyes shone with joyful emotion and...lust.

"Are you trying to seduce me?"

Buzz shrugged. "Fail?"

"No. Maybe. Lunch is coming."

He nodded. "Right. I forgot."

"What?"

"Elliot said when Siobhan was pregnant, if he didn't want to lose a finger, he'd never get between her and food." Buzz tried to hide a grin.

Kelly narrowed her eyes. "What else does Elliot say?"

Buzz shook his head. "Nope."

"Oh, come on. If you know something I don't about what's coming, you have to tell me."

"Not a chance."

"Fine." She pulled out her phone. "The internet doctor is always in."

"Okay, okay." Buzz shifted closer and put his arm around her. "You're going to be really tired during the first trimester."

She craned her neck to see his face. "Yeah, that's not why you were smiling."

His smile turned to a grin. "You're gonna get super horny in the second. Just in time for me to be home."

She swatted his arm. "Really. You're thinking about sex? That's what got us into this."

"So, there's no reason to stop now, right?" He waggled his brows.

She'd already been super horny around Buzz. She couldn't imagine it taking up more space in her brain.

“Just saying we’re in a hotel.” His brows waggled. “After lunch of course.”

“Stop talking about sex. We have other things to discuss.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

She frowned. “Are you always going to be so amenable?”

“I’ll try to be.” He tilted his chin.

“Are you coming on Tuesday? To the memorial?”

He nodded. “I’d like to be there for you.” He let out a long breath. “I know it’s not my place. None of my business, really, but...”

“Go on.”

“I think it’s counterproductive to have a private memorial every year. It’s letting the pain continue to live and breathe. It’ll never go away, but it should be in the background not being constantly fed.”

Kelly sighed. “I’ve felt that way for years, but it’s not like I can stop it. Grams insists. She’s old-world that way. Not quite the ‘wear black and wait to die’ way. One year, I forgot to call her on my mom’s birthday, you know to acknowledge I hadn’t forgotten, and she got pissed. She’ll never give up on the memorial. My mom was her only child, and I can’t imagine the pain she lives with every day. Maybe she’s afraid people will forget her, but we won’t. I miss her every day.” A lump formed in her throat. *I’m having a baby, and my mom’s not here to help me.* Tears spilled down her cheeks.

Buzz wiped them away. “I’m sorry I said anything.”

“It’s not that. You’re right. It’s just my mom isn’t here to be my mom. I’m having a baby.”

His fingers brushed over her cheek. “*We’re* having a baby.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

BUZZ WAS STILL IN SHOCK, BUT AT LEAST THE ROLLING FEAR had calmed to manageable levels. He'd said it with more confidence than he'd felt that they'd deal with any issues their baby might inherit from him. They would, and he wasn't sorry about the baby, but he was already feeling guilt over the possibility. Kelly had asked him more questions about what it was like living with dyslexia. She had every right to know what they might be facing, and it had been surprisingly easy to talk to her about it. Letting go of another of his secrets had been freeing. There was a fifty percent chance their baby would be dyslexic, so if their child had it, he'd do whatever he had to so they wouldn't suffer the fear he had over being different. Or broken. He'd deal with his feelings in therapy so he could help his child see it was a challenge not a curse.

A simple echocardiogram after the baby was born would tell them if the baby had a heart defect.

He'd also told her details about his descent into addiction.

They had a lot of changes they needed to make. They'd keep the news to themselves until at least after Kelly saw her gynecologist. He'd lain awake for hours going over everything in his mind. Kelly. The baby. His tour. His parents and sister. He recalled a conversation he'd had with Elliot after Siobhan had gotten pregnant. Even though they'd wanted kids, the reality had hit Elliot hard that he could pass on his depression, panic attacks, and anxiety. He'd been scared because no parent wanted to pass along their problems, but he hadn't let it stop him from becoming a dad. Buzz had envied that, and now he

understood in a way he hadn't. It was a normal thing to worry about, but however it turned out, he'd deal with it. He wanted this baby with Kelly.

When he woke Saturday morning, Kelly was in the bathroom getting ill.

Jumping out of bed, he ran to the bathroom door. It was only closed over. He wasn't sure if Kelly wanted to be alone. It was their baby, but it was her body.

"Fuck it." Knocking gently, he stuck his head in the door. "Kel?"

She sat on the cold tile looking utterly spent. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Hey, what is it, baby?" He grabbed a cup and filled it. "Here."

Kelly smiled weakly at him. "Sorry. Did I wake you?"

He sat and pulled her into his side. "No. I woke 'cause you weren't there." He smoothed her hair off her face. "Been in here long?"

She shrugged.

Sadie crawled onto Kelly's lap and curled up. Buzz hadn't seen her when he'd come in. He stroked Sadie between her ears. She purred and pressed her head into his hand. "You've known all along, haven't you, Lady Sadie?"

Kelly glanced at him. "I've wondered that since we got home yesterday. She's been on me, literally. I'd wake up with her on my belly for the last week or so. And she's following me around, which she used to only do when it was time for food."

"Animals are smart."

Sadie rolled on her side and lifted her legs. Buzz obliged, rubbing her soft belly. The vibrations of her purring calmed his nerves. "Hungry?"

Kelly shook her head.

“You need to drink plenty of water because of the morning sickness.”

She nodded. “It’s not gonna be easy to keep this our secret if I’m puking all the time. I wish I had a bathroom in my office.”

“You could have one put in.”

“Yeah, maybe.” She rested her head on his shoulder. “I can’t think right now. My head’s fuzzy.”

Buzz stood and offered her his hand. “Come on.” He pulled her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her. He’d never been happier in his life. “Do you want to go back to bed or go to the living room?”

“Mmm. Living room. I need to get my shit together.”

“No, you don’t. It’s Saturday, and you’re off. What you need to do is learn to give yourself a break. Especially after you’ve been puking. Take the time you need to get your bearings.” Buzz got her settled on the couch. The kitties curled up next to her. “I can get bagels, or would you prefer eggs and bacon?”

“Bagels.” She scrunched her nose. “I don’t think I can handle the smell of bacon frying.”

“No problem.” Buzz dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. They were up earlier than usual, and the cats snuggled next to her, so he’d feed them when he got back. “After breakfast, maybe we’ll take the kitties for a walk.”

“Okay.” She smiled, but something was off about her. More than finding out they were pregnant. Her gears were turning. Of course, she had a lot on her mind; he’d seen her anxiety and stress intensifying the closer it got to the memorial. This was different. She was quieter, more withdrawn. He understood she had a lot to process the same as him, but it had his anxiety growing. He couldn’t force her to talk to him, and it added to the clawing need to get answers. Rock-solid answers.

He had rehearsals today and tomorrow for their gig at The Rock House and the final leg of their tour. He’d rather stay

with her, but he'd never blow off rehearsals.

She was going to have to cut back her work hours. His skin tingled, and his insides tightened. He was projecting, and he needed to be present in their time together. He exhaled hard to help release his fear. Only time would tell how this played out, and he wouldn't waste these last few, precious days together by anticipating the worst. As he waited for the light to change, words for the song he'd been working on formed. He leaned up against a tree, dug his phone out of his pocket, and tapped the speech to text app.

*Through blazing fire and smoke
I clawed my way back
Won't give up the ghost
Before the fade to black
The times that I laugh
The times that I cry
Doing whatever to stay in the light
All the things, good and bad
All the things, old and new
All the things, with grace I'll stay true*

When he got back to the apartment, he used the keys Kelly had given him. Would she expect them back on Tuesday? He hoped not. Kelly was asleep on the sofa. The kitties ambled up to greet him, wanting their pets before letting him know they were ready for their breakfast.

Buzz went to the kitchen, and the cats followed. After he fed them, he made a half a pot of coffee. Kelly would cut back, so he would also. He poured a cup, grabbed a bagel, and walked into the living room.

Kelly stretched, and her breasts strained against the fabric of her sleep shirt.

Blood rushed south, and his jaw hung open. He snapped it shut. “Hungry?”

“Starved.” Her sleepy smile added to his discomfort.

He handed her his plate. “Here.”

“This is yours.”

“Now it’s yours.” He returned with her coffee and another bagel.

She finished her bagel, and she sipped her coffee.

Buzz took a swig. “I guess we have a lot of things to discuss.”

Kelly sighed. “Maybe we should wait until after my doctor appointment.”

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. “Why? Is something wrong?” His hand went to her tummy. “Does it feel weird?”

“You touching me like this or the baby?” Her tone held a hint of laughter.

He wasn’t amused. “Kel, I’m serious.”

“No, nothing feels weird.” Her head tilted to the side. “If you don’t count waking up because I had to puke or analyzing every sensation I have to see if it’s good or bad.”

He pulled his hand back. “Sorry.” He needed to get some things straight with her, and it surprised him she was pushing it off. She was a major-league planner. And they only had nine months to get ready. *How are we gonna get everything ready in time?*

Everything about their relationship felt weird. Gone were the easy silences, the comfort of another’s company that didn’t need to be filled with conversation. But he needed it. Which wasn’t like him. She wasn’t the only one who was off.

“I wish I could be here for your appointment.” He’d already checked their schedule. It fucking figured on the twentieth they had two interviews during the day, the second at the local radio station where they’d be doing an acoustic set

for fans who'd won a "name that Stone Highway tune" contest the station was running.

"It's okay. You'll miss a lot of appointments."

She didn't say it nastily, just matter-of-factly, but it still stung. "I still think we should talk about...future arrangements." *Like living arrangements.*

Kelly shook her head. She didn't look at him. "Things can happen. I don't think we should rush into any plans."

Yeah, something's fucking wrong. Maybe she was just as worried he'd pass on his shitty DNA. It wouldn't be weird for her to be concerned about it, but it was more than that. They'd planned to see each other on his break. Was she reconsidering? Maybe she didn't think they had more than great sex in common? They needed to spend time together to find that out. He was more connected to her than he'd ever been to his ex. *Is she pushing me out?* Panic radiated through him. Sweat formed and his stomach burned. *I'll never let that happen.* If she didn't want to continue with their relationship, he'd be heart broken. But he'd fight for his rights. She was pregnant with his child, and he wouldn't abandon them, no matter how hard Kelly might try to push him away. "Kel, we—"

She stood so abruptly Sadie slipped off her lap onto the floor, landing on all fours. "I'm gonna shower. I'll only be ten minutes."

He wasn't surprised when the bathroom door lock clicked. His pulse pounded and he paced. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* He knew what he wanted. He wanted to be with Kelly. He wanted to be there for her as her pregnancy progressed. He wanted to wake up and see his child every damn day. He wanted three a.m. feedings, diaper changes, play time. He wanted all the things.

He had not a single clue what Kelly wanted or why she was pushing him away. Shutting him out. Refusing to discuss their future.

Buzz needed to be the calm one. Usually that wasn't a problem, but his world had been turned upside down. They were having a baby together, and as much as he wanted to tell

her his true feelings, she was putting distance between them. He'd felt it since they'd found out yesterday. He'd made it clear he wanted to be a part of their lives. But she hadn't made her feelings clear. Maybe she was rethinking giving them a chance.

Or maybe, she'd already decided.

Chapter Thirty-Four

BUZZ LEFT HER APARTMENT SUNDAY MORNING AT EIGHT. Rehearsal was set for eleven, but he'd said he had some emails to attend to, and he wanted to get to the studio early to warm up. He'd been the quietest she'd ever seen him the past two days. But she had her own worries to deal with, so five minutes after he'd walked out her door, Kelly left and walked the five blocks to Jenny's apartment.

She was freaking out, and it was early, but she couldn't wait anymore.

Kelly used her key to the outside door of Jenny's building and walked up the three flights to her apartment. Her sister enjoyed going to clubs in the city on Saturday nights and was more than likely still sleeping. Kelly knocked, and after a minute, when there was no answer, she called.

"What's wrong?" Jenny's voice was a little hoarse and sleepy.

"I need to talk." She had a key but respected Jenny's privacy.

"What time is it?"

"A little after eight."

"Okay, give me a minute."

Before Jenny disconnected, she said, "You gotta go." She'd never considered Jenny wouldn't be alone. Kelly's head hit the door. *I shoulda called from my place.*

Buzz was leaving in two days, and he was worried about her well-being.

This was, as he'd said, a lot to take in.

She'd stopped at a coffee shop and picked up donuts and coffee on the way here. She'd ordered a small coffee for herself. It was like a shot glass's worth next to the jumbo she'd gotten for Jenny. She inhaled deeply of the rich coffee scent. "So good." She needed to stop drinking soda entirely, and with only two six-ounce cups of coffee a day, she didn't know how she'd survive nine months uncaffeinated.

Her hand rested on her belly. She'd found herself doing that a lot since Friday.

She stepped back when the locks opened. She almost dropped the coffee tray when the guy walked out. She'd seen him around the building. He smiled, waved at Jenny, then went up to his apartment. Kelly's mouth hung open.

"What?" Jenny shrugged. "You think you're the only one who has a friend with benefits?" Jenny pulled her into her apartment. "What's wrong?"

Kelly sighed. "I hope you're using protection." She set the bag and coffee holder on the table.

"Of course, *Mom*. Ever since you had the safe sex talk with me before my first date, I make them rubber up, and I never miss a pill. I've got it covered." Jenny fished out a cream-filled donut and grabbed her coffee.

"Yeah, that's what *I* thought."

"What?" Jenny's head snapped up. She had powdered sugar on her lips.

"I'm pregnant."

The donut fell on her lap. "What? How?" Jenny picked it up and dusted the powdered sugar off her black shorts.

Kelly raised a brow.

"I mean... You don't want kids." Jenny appeared as shocked as Kelly felt.

Kelly almost spilled her coffee. “How do you know? Did Enzo tell you?”

Jenny’s lips rolled in. “No.” She shrugged. “He didn’t have to.”

There was no way Jenny knew if Enzo didn’t tell her. Kelly had vowed never to tell Jenny or RJ. “I never said I didn’t want kids.”

Jenny’s eyes pinned Kelly’s. “You didn’t have to. I was on the receiving end, and I’m not sure I want kids.”

Kelly’s scalp tingled and a piercing ache throbbed behind her eyes. She opened her mouth, but words failed her. What could she possibly say that wouldn’t be a total lie? “Does RJ know?” She’d never wanted her siblings to think she regretted her choices.

Jenny sighed and shrugged. “It’s never come up.”

Tears filled Kelly’s eyes, and her throat tightened. “How?”

“Because you’re my sister, and I know all you sacrificed for us. And if it’d been me, I’d feel the same way. It doesn’t mean you don’t love us or have any regrets. I know you love us.”

The strain in Kelly’s jaw was making her face ache.

“Are you keeping it?”

“Yes.”

“Does Buzz know?”

Kelly let out a breath. “He was there when Dr. Martinelli called with the results of my blood test.”

“How long have you suspected?” Jenny’s voice was hurt.

Kelly shook her head. “I didn’t have a clue.” Looking back, though...

“Oh, right, father of Frankenhole. I’d forgotten about it. Sorry.” Jenny rubbed her eyes.

“It’s okay. I understand how you and RJ feel. Because I’m pregnant, I can’t get the next round of testing until after the

baby.”

“How did Buzz take it?” A small smile played at Jenny’s lips.

“Well, he didn’t say anything for quite a while. I guess neither of us did. I kinda argued with the doctor that the lab had to have screwed up, but he insisted I was pregnant. He said I could take a home pregnancy test to confirm, so we got some.”

Jenny’s eyes widened.

“We went to Manhattan and bought them, then we went to his hotel to do them.”

Jenny smiled. “He really understands this neighborhood.” Her smile dimmed. “Was he pissed?”

After the shock had worn off a little, she’d seen many emotions on Buzz, but anger hadn’t been one of them. “No. He was shocked, of course. So was I. But then he said we’d figure it out together.”

“Figure what out?”

“How to deal with us having a baby.” Her face heated. *We’re not even in love.*

“Aww.” Jenny sighed dreamily. “I knew he was a good guy, but wow. He’s taking it well.”

“Yeah. He never wanted kids either...”

“Really?” Disbelief shown on her face.

She wasn’t sure how much she should tell Jenny about Buzz’s medical history. He was private, but she supposed she had a right considering the baby could have some or all of them. “He was born with a heart defect. He had surgery when he was three to fix it, and he’s okay now. He also had severe allergies. Like allergic to everything from dust to pollen and everything in between. He couldn’t go outside to play with other kids. Didn’t even have any friends until his parents moved to Pine Hill next to Jack’s family when he was four.”

“That sucks.”

Kelly sighed. "He also has dyslexia."

"Wow." Jenny took a bite of donut. "If I had all that to deal with..." She sniffled. "How's he handling all that?"

"Unbelievably good. He said we know what to look for, and after the baby's born, a simple test will show if they have the defect. The other things only time will tell, but at least we'll be prepared." She smiled. "I was so shocked I stayed in the bathroom for a long time trying to figure out how to let him off the hook, but he didn't want off. He said he already loves the baby." Tears welled in her eyes. She grabbed a tissue from her purse. Not even eight thirty in the morning and she'd already cried twice today. *Maybe I'll get stock in tissues.* How was she going to handle the tidal wave of emotions she was constantly bombarded with?

Jenny put her coffee down. "Come here." She shifted closer and wrapped her arms around Kelly.

Kelly had comforted her siblings growing up, and they'd all cried together over a shared pain, but this was a first.

"It's gonna be okay, Kel. We'll get through this. I know you're scared, but you're not alone."

"What am I gonna tell Enzo?" It was stupid to be thinking of her ex-husband, but she was worried Enzo would hate her. He'd been her rock, her knight in shining armor, her best friend, and she couldn't handle it if he wasn't part of their family anymore.

Jenny pulled back, took a tissue, and wiped Kelly's cheeks. "Honestly? I think he'll be thrilled for you. Enzo's really happy with Claudia. You know he still loves you, but he's moved on."

Kelly nodded and sniffled. "I never thought I could do it again. I mean..." Guilt washed over her.

"Relax. I understand. Are you happy about the baby?"

More tears streamed down her cheeks. "Yes."

"Then that's all that matters. Buzz is on board with you, which is great. So, you're not ending it?"

Kelly's lips rolled in, and she pulled back. Her head hurt. And her heart wasn't doing much better. What had started as a wisp of a thought two days ago had turned into a full-blown haunting.

Jenny studied her. "What else?"

"What?"

"You're not the only one with sister's intuition. What else's wrong?"

Kelly didn't want to say it out loud. She hated thinking it. Hated being forced to deal with her worst mistake. But this was why she'd come to Jenny so early. She needed to tell someone. She needed someone to support her. "It may not be his."

Jenny's eyes bulged. "You slept with another guy since Buzz?"

She shook her head.

"No way." Her eyes widened in understanding. "You think maybe No Name is the father?"

Kelly hadn't been able to shake the nagging feeling since she'd found out she was pregnant, and the little research she'd done only solidified the possibility. She'd been looking to quell the rising fear, but instead, it had been reinforced. Kelly nodded. Terror tightened every muscle in her body.

Jenny blew out a long breath. "You never got your period last week?"

"That's just it. I've always had light and quick periods since being on the pill. And with everything going on, I guess it was more like spotting, but I didn't really think too much about it." Kelly wiped a tear and sniffled. The gnawing in her gut wouldn't let go. "I read when the embryo implants on the uterine wall you can bleed a little, and it was lighter."

"What about before that? Was that a normal period?"

"Yeah."

Jenny scoffed. “Normal for you. I bleed like a stuck pig, and the stupid thing lasts like seven days. Do you know what it’s like to go without sex for seven days? Really like almost ten because of the PMS.”

Kelly snorted. “What answer do you want here?”

“Really? You do it during?” Jenny shuddered. “Gross. No guy better come within five feet of me if he wants to keep his manhood.”

“You could do it in the shower.”

Jenny shook her head. “Yeah, until I have to get out with blood and cum running down my legs. That’s soooo sexy.”

Kelly scrunched her nose. “Don’t be gross.”

Jenny leaned in. “So that guy’s in the window of possibility?”

“Yeah.” Kelly exhaled slowly as her stomach turned. She had no idea if it was due to her baby or her behavior.

Jenny patted her knee. “Kel, you’ve got to stop beating yourself up over that night.”

“How can I? I don’t know who the father is.” Kelly covered her face and gave into the tears. She was pissed at herself for giving in and doing an internet search. It only left her confused and scared. But having to wait two weeks for an appointment with her gynecologist had crumbled her resolve. “Earliest appointment was the twentieth. Not knowing is going to drive me crazy.”

“But you used a condom, right?”

“Well, yeah, with No Name, of course. I didn’t know him.” If she was pregnant by a guy whose name she couldn’t remember, Kelly would never forgive herself. “But, we did it in the car on the way to his hotel.”

“While he was driving?”

Kelly poked Jenny’s arm. “No. He pulled over because I... touched him. Said he couldn’t wait.” She exhaled. “He kept them in the glove compartment, and it wasn’t a new box. It

was the hottest July on record here. Drastic temperature changes affect them. In a bad way.”

Jenny’s eyes widened. “And we all had that stomach bug in August.”

“Yeah.” Her stomach turned.

Jenny got her tablet and did some quick research. “Okay, about mid-cycle is the fertile time.” Jenny sat back. “Oh boy. Yeah, they’re both in the...zone.”

“I know.” More tears streamed down her cheeks. “How could I have let this happen?”

Jenny shifted closer and hugged her. “Shh.”

After Kelly got herself under control, she shifted away.

“Maybe we could get you an appointment somewhere else?”

“I don’t want to see a stranger. They said they’d call if they get a cancellation, but I’m freaking out right now.” Kelly palmed her forehead. “I don’t even remember that guy’s name. What am I gonna tell people?” Her heart sank. “What am I gonna tell Buzz?”

Jenny pinched her arm. “You’re not gonna say anything to anyone until you know everything for sure. Buzz is a good guy, and he’s stepping up.”

“Which is why I have to at least give him a heads-up about this.”

“Kelly, no. Why? There’s no reason to say anything before you know for sure.”

It didn’t feel right. Fear gripped her heart, squeezing the air from her lungs. Her stomach turned over. This was a fucking nightmare. She was more and more sure No Name was the father of her baby. No man, no matter how good, would want to be with a woman pregnant by another man.

“Do you want to lie down?”

Numbness spread through Kelly’s limbs. “No.” If she did, she might never get back up.

“Crackers?” Jenny asked.

Kelly nodded.

Jenny returned with crackers and ginger ale. “Here.” Jenny grabbed her tablet. “Okay, the earliest you can get a prenatal DNA test is...” Jenny sighed “One article says seven weeks. Another says nine. Typical.” She scrolled. “Both say it’s noninvasive and won’t harm the baby.” Jenny nodded. “Oh, okay. They take a blood sample from you and a cheek swab from Buzz. Test takes about a week after the samples are submitted. I’m sure our gyno will have more accurate info. You could get a swab from Buzz now and have it tested and ready to compare to your blood once you’re at the right number of weeks.”

“We already talked about when we’d see each other again. He’s got a three-day break the first week of October.” Kelly smiled. “He brought up continuing to see each other last Tuesday, you know, before we knew I was pregnant.”

Jenny gripped her hand. “See? That’s gotta ease your mind he wants to be with you for you, not just ’cause you’re knocked up.”

Kelly let out a mirthless chuckle. “Yeah.” But did she want to be with him? Continuing to see each other had been a huge step for her. She’d been dead set against getting into another serious relationship. But now it didn’t feel like she had a choice. They’d be forever stuck together because she’d gotten pregnant. *If it’s his*. Kelly swallowed down another wave of nausea.

“So maybe you can sneak a sample of his DNA, and you don’t have to say anything until you know for sure.”

“Really? Sneak a sample? This isn’t some kooky sitcom. I think he’d wonder why I’m coming at him with a giant cotton swab.”

“Yeah.” Jenny’s eyes lit up. “Maybe tell him you want to get some DNA testing to see if the baby inherited anything from him?”

“You mean lie?”

Jenny bit her lip. “Fib?”

“No. He’s being very supportive, and I like him too much to lie. Besides, I don’t know if it can be ascertained this early.”

“But he doesn’t know that.”

“Stop!” Kelly hadn’t meant to yell. “I’m sorry. I know you’re only trying to help. My nerves are stretched thin, and I feel like I’m gonna be in constant turmoil until I know for sure. And that can’t be good for the baby.”

Jenny nodded. “Or you, Kel. I’m sorry. Buzz doesn’t deserve being sneaked around on.” She touched Kelly’s arm. “I know you’re scared.”

“Yeah.” She leaned back into the cushions. “What do you think Grams and Pa are going to say?” Kelly closed her eyes and rested her head on the back of the couch.

“You mean ’cause Mom was pregnant with Frankenhole before she was married? I always thought Grams kinda forced them to marry.”

“Dad never said. He wouldn’t. He loved and respected Mom too much to ever say anything bad about her ex.”

“Have you called F-hole yet?”

“No way. I’m not dealing with him. Besides, after the trust attorney confirmed Frankie had gotten his full share, he didn’t hang on the phone to chat. I got the feeling he was more concerned about getting his hands on more money than helping Giovanni.” Kelly sighed. “That’s mean.”

“Fucking shock. Apple meet tree.” Jenny’s face scrunched. “You know, I’ve thought a lot about it, and I just can’t muster any sympathy for him. Does that make me an awful person?”

“No. Grams said Giovanni hardly ever visited his parents after he left, so it wouldn’t surprise me if he put Frankie up to getting his share back then. Like he saw a payday and wanted to cash in. I guess that’s not really fair since I’ve never even met him.”

“Have you guys talked about getting married?”

“What? No, no way. We’ve only known each other four weeks. I like him, but...”

“You’re not in love with him?”

She had so many feelings swarming around and colliding inside her she couldn’t separate them out. She shrugged. She’d never get married again. They could raise a child together without marriage. One divorce was more than enough.

Jenny studied her but didn’t say anything. “Well, I think we need to have that conversation now about hiring more back-office staff. You’re going to need to lighten your load at the office. The IT guy already set up what we need to access the office from home. And I’ll put the ERP and POS systems on the back burner for now.” Jenny grabbed her tablet. “I think if we hire three more people for the office we should be good. At least for now.”

“Three?” Kelly sighed. She’d rather take a nap than discuss this. “An assistant for you, and?” As fuzzy as her brain was, at least talking about work meant she got a break from obsessing over the ugly possibility she faced.

“We need a floor manager so you don’t have to be available all the time. You’ll have to cut back on your hours. No more twelve-plus-hour days for you. Since the custom side has exploded, we need to hire another buyer to source the fabric and accessories. I also think we should revisit the pricing structure on the custom dresses. Maybe have two or three tiers of fabric options to give our brides more choices.”

Kelly shook her head. “That may not be such a good idea. So many brides have no idea what they want or what styles would best serve them, and giving them too many choices can lead to decision paralysis.”

“Okay. Right. You know better than me.”

“Feel free to do a cost analysis on it. It may be something we bring out for the brides who have an unlimited budget.”

“Like the bride who’s coming from Saudi Arabia?”

“Exactly.” Kelly sighed. “When’s that appointment?”

Jenny tapped her tablet a few times. “September 28th.”

“Any custom appointments October second through the fifth?”

“One.”

Kelly made a face. She’d hoped to work from home so they could spend as much time together as possible. The more they got to know each other before the baby was born, the better. And if they weren’t going to work as a couple, she needed to know as soon as possible.

If it’s his baby.

The timing couldn’t be worse. His flight out on Tuesday morning was at seven-thirty. “This sucks.”

“Which part?”

“One minute I’m fine with him leaving. I get it, this his is career, his life. But then next minute, I’m pissed for the same reason.”

“I think that’s normal. All those hormones now make PMS look like a calm, relaxing walk by the ocean, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe you could go with him.”

Kelly raised a brow. “With Buzz?” She was already shaking her head. “I have a business to run here in Brooklyn. Taking more time off is necessary now, but I can’t just leave.”

“Why not? If you can work from home, you can work from anywhere in the world.”

“Jenny, I know you’re trying to help. But everything is up in the air, and I can’t handle anything else.”

“Okay.” Jenny put her tablet on the seat next to her. “Want me to go with you to the doctor?”

Tears formed. “Yes.” It wasn’t the first time, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last time, Kelly wished their parents were still alive. Going through this without them was even

worse than planning a wedding and getting married had been.
“Thanks.”

Jenny hugged her. “Of course. What about RJ?”

“Not until I absolutely have to.”

Jenny snagged another donut. “And you won’t say anything to Buzz until after your appointment?”

He had a right to know. Not knowing was making her sick.

“Kel?”

What was she going to do if Buzz wasn’t the father?

Chapter Thirty-Five

BUZZ HAD DINNER WITH HIS FAMILY, INCLUDING HIS grandparents, on Sunday and it had been wonderful. Stephanie had softened toward him. She'd even busted his chops in the loving way she'd always done. She was still angry, but she was handling it better.

Of course, he loved his dad and grandpa, but he had a new respect for them now that he was going to be a dad. Soft, tender emotions spread through him whenever he thought about his baby. And a strength he'd never experienced was building inside him.

He'd wanted to invite Kelly, but every minute she was further away from him. They slept together every night, but even while she was snuggled next to him, she was a hundred miles away. He didn't like it, but he had to wait until she was ready to share. Considering the previous weeks she'd been very open with him, since they'd found out she was pregnant, the distance was insurmountable. She insisted she was happy about the baby.

He wouldn't get married because she was pregnant. They had a lot of things to figure out before he'd even consider it. Kelly had said she'd never get married again, but she'd also never expected to be expecting. They'd parent together, married or not, but marriage was a commitment they'd make to each other, and he wouldn't rush into it for any reason. Not even for their baby.

I'm gonna be a dad.

On Monday, as they got ready for the memorial, Kelly hadn't spoken two words to him since breakfast. He kept reminding himself today was an awful day for her, and he had no right to expect her to confide in him, but damn it to hell, she had been for weeks until last Friday. It pissed him off, but he refused to add to her stress by bringing it up.

He'd be there for her and her family today.

She and her siblings would be coming to their gig tonight at The Rock House. They'd have VIP access, and he'd hoped it would give them a break from all the stress. He didn't know where he'd be spending the night, but he wanted to stay with Kelly.

"You look very handsome." Kelly's voice held appreciation.

Maybe it's just all the hormones having their way. They hadn't made love since Friday in his hotel room. He'd slid inside her feeling like the luckiest guy in the world. He'd been more secure about their relationship.

But now...

"Thanks." He adjusted his tie and turned to her, and his breath caught.

She wore a fitted, short-sleeve navy dress that ended below her knees and a white patent leather belt and heels. "Wow."

Her warm smile eased his doubts. She turned slowly. "Does it make my butt look big?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder.

"It makes you look stunning. Your butt's perfect." His mouth watered, but now was not the time for lustful thoughts. At least none he'd share. "I thought white was a no-no after Labor Day?"

"That ridiculous rule hasn't been a rule for decades."

"Then why do people still think that?"

"I suppose we all heard it at some point, and most people associate lighter colors with summer, and since Labor Day typically marks the unofficial end of summer, it stuck."

“Well, you look gorgeous.”

Kelly scoffed. “Even when I’m out to here?” Her hands extended in front of her abdomen. She turned to the side and shuddered. “I’ll be lucky if all the pregnancy weight goes only into my belly.”

Buzz stood behind her and covered her hands with his. He drew her arms into her body and hugged her. “Why?”

“Because I’m short, and when I gain weight, it goes everywhere.” She looked at her chest. “My boobs are big enough. And my hips and butt, too.”

He cupped her breasts. “Mmm, bigger.” He wagged his brows.

She swatted him. “Stop that.”

Her mood lifted, and his tension eased. He’d do anything to keep her here. “Can’t help it. You’re perfect now, and you’ll be perfect nine months from now.” He gave her a wolfish grin. “Your lusciousness getting lusciousness-ier makes me hard. Or is it luscious-ier? Either way, my dick likes you.”

Kelly pulled away from him. “Oh no. Am I showing already?” She ran her hands over her belly, then leaned in and studied her face in the mirror.

“Hey, relax, okay. You’re not showing yet. I was just imagining it.” Buzz stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She leaned back into him and rested her head on his chest.

His dick hardened.

“You didn’t. I’m paranoid someone will figure it out before I’m ready to share.” She let out a long breath. “I’m glad you’re here.” She sniffled and dabbed under her eyes. “I better not start now.”

The sweltering heat of a New York summer had eased in the last few days, so they walked the ten blocks to the church. They met Jenny and RJ at the entrance.

RJ raised a brow when they approached, but he didn't say anything. And Jenny rushed forward to hug her sister.

Buzz had forgotten he'd told RJ he'd take the hit when their fling ended, and RJ was surprised to see him because it was now obvious it wasn't ending. At least he sure hoped it wasn't. He extended a hand to RJ, and he shook it.

"Nice to see you again, Buzz."

"I'm glad I could be here for Kelly." Even though he wasn't sure about where they stood, he wanted to set RJ's mind at ease. "Happy you're coming tonight. My sister will be there, too." He held Kelly's hand.

"Then you'll be gone for three months?" RJ said.

"Yeah, last leg of the tour. But I've got a three-day break in October, so I'll be back then."

RJ nodded almost imperceptibly. He kissed his sister on the cheek. "How you doing?"

She scoffed. "Same as you. Brave front, goo inside."

RJ and Jenny nodded.

People milled around the steps, some looking solemn and whispering quietly to each other.

The lemon-yellow sun in a brilliant blue flawless sky did nothing to brighten the atmosphere outside the church. Buzz recognized many faces from the neighborhood. The elderly people held rosary beads and wore black. The younger people looked awkward, and their expressions mirrored his feelings. It was time to end the annual revisit of the worst day in the Cappomaggi-Hoffmann family's lives. Buzz understood Kelly and her siblings had no say in this. They also had no choice but to show up.

"Hey," Enzo said as he and Claudia walked up. He hugged Kelly, Jenny, and RJ, and he offered his hand to Buzz. "How you holding up?"

They all shrugged.

Enzo nodded, and his lips formed a straight line. "Yeah."

“Thank you for coming,” Kelly said.

“Of course. I’ll always be here for you guys, you know that, right?”

“Yeah.” Kelly took out a tissue and dabbed her eyes.

“Buzz, so wonderful of you to come,” Grams said.

He turned and was pulled into a hug. When she pulled back, she had tears in her eyes. Her voice was weak, totally unlike the woman when he’d met her.

Buzz’s heart broke for the pain in her eyes. “Of course.”

He and Pa shook hands. “Son, thank you for coming.” He glanced at his grandchildren. “They need all the support they can get today.”

“I couldn’t let Kelly go through this alone.”

“I understand you invited them to your concert tonight. I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

Buzz shrugged.

“Shall we go in?” Grams asked as she hooked her arm through Pa’s.

“Kel, can I have a minute?” Enzo asked.

Buzz’s heart pounded. There was no way he could know Kelly was pregnant, but the look on her face said she was worried Enzo did. She wasn’t ready to tell people yet, which he understood.

“Sure.” Kelly turned to him. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

He nodded and kissed her cheek. He turned to Jenny, offering his arm.

Everyone else lined up behind Grams and Pa.

He wanted to stay out here with Kelly, but she’d made it clear she didn’t need him. He tried not to read too much into it.

Claudia walked next to him, so he offered her his other arm.

“Thank you.” She sighed and hooked her arm through his.

He glanced over his shoulder in time to see Enzo put his arms around Kelly.

Buzz didn't like it one damn bit.



WHILE THEY HUGGED, KELLY GLANCED AT BUZZ. HE WAS escorting Jenny and Claudia into the church. It was sweet of him. It was Claudia's first time at this annual nightmare, so she had to be feeling weird.

Buzz was so intuitive.

She loved that about him.

Whoa.

Enzo pulled back. "You doing okay?" He sighed. "She's never gonna give up on this, is she?"

Kelly shook her head. Her throat was tight, and she tried to swallow the fist-sized lump that was making it hard to breathe. "You okay?"

"Me, I'm great." He glanced at his fiancée as she disappeared inside the church. "I've never been happier." His eyes met hers. "I'm sorry. That came out wrong."

Kelly stroked his cheek. "It's okay. I understand."

"We were happy for a long time, weren't we?"

"Yes." She glanced at the church. They'd gotten married here. "I wouldn't have survived without you."

"I know today's probably not the day, but we don't get to see each other very often anymore. Claudia's great, and she understands we'll always care about and love each other." He chuckled. "That's not usually how exes are, is it?"

"Has she asked you yet why we didn't work it out since we still love each other?"

"She asked before she agreed to go out with me." He tucked her hair behind her ear. "It's great to see you so happy

again. Buzz's a good guy? He's good to you? Treats you right?"

Kelly blinked slowly and nodded. "Yeah." He'd been putting up with her crazy mood swings since Friday, and he was waiting patiently for her to adjust to their new reality.

"Anyway. That last fight we had"—he shook his head—"—wasn't really a fight. But when you said it was over, that we'd done everything we could to save our marriage, that it wasn't meant to be saved, I was really, really angry you were giving up on us."

"I know," she said solemnly.

His throat worked with the effort to swallow. "But you were right. We did get married too young. If we'd have waited a few more years, maybe we'd have realized we wanted different things out of life. But Kel, when I proposed, I thought we'd be together forever."

Tears welled. "Me, too."

"It's taken me a long time to understand we'd have ended up divorced even if we'd continued to try to work it out. You were the strong one, and I'm sorry I let you down."

"No, Enzo, you didn't. You were my rock. I wouldn't have survived moving here and raising RJ and Jenny without you. You were fifteen, and you took that on with me. You didn't have to. And you never resented me for all the times I put them first."

"Yeah, I did."

"At the end, yeah, when I refused to relinquish my role as mother, but not when they really needed me growing up. We put our life on hold for two years until RJ was eighteen and Grams let us move out to get our own place. I don't know any other guy who'd have done it."

Enzo glanced at the church. "You sure about that?"

Shock pulsed through her. Buzz's life was on the road, and that would never change, but he'd said he wanted to be with her and their baby every single second when he was home. *If*

it's his. Kelly's stomach turned every time the thought popped in her head. Other than being exclusive and having as much sex as possible, the other rules had all been hers, and Buzz hadn't pushed to break a single one.

Rules she'd thought would protect what was left of her heart.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is I wouldn't be having a baby now if you hadn't ended things when you did." His eyes misted. "I can't wait for the little guy or girl to get here."

Kelly's heart expanded. She threw her arms around him. "Oh, Enzo, I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks." He pulled back. "One more thing. A request really."

"Anything."

"Um, I was hoping, that is, I wanted to ask RJ to be my best man. I won't if it'll upset you."

Her jaw dropped. "He'd love that." RJ had looked up to Enzo as a father, but somewhere in the last few years, they'd become more like brothers. And since Enzo had three sisters, she was grateful he'd found a brother in RJ. "I'd love that."

Enzo grinned. "You'll come to the wedding, too?"

"Yes, of course. I'd be honored."

They hugged again, and they walked into the church. She had to tell Buzz the baby might not be his.

He had a right to know, but she was running out of time.

Chapter Thirty-Six

BUZZ HAD TO LEAVE AT FIVE FOR THEIR GIG AT THE ROCK House, and he couldn't wait. He didn't want to leave Kelly, but the morose atmosphere in her grandparents' house was draining him. After the memorial service in the church, they'd invited everyone back to their home. The air in the house was stifling between the heat from the kitchen, all the people, and the intense sadness.

The entire day had been brutal, and it had to be a billion times worse for Kelly and her siblings. He hadn't expected the luncheon to drag on all afternoon, and he'd hoped to have a few hours alone with Kelly before he left for the gig, because once he did, their time together was basically up. She hadn't invited him to sleep over tonight, and he wanted to believe it was because it would make his trip to the airport tomorrow easier than leaving from Brooklyn. But something wasn't right between them, and he'd wanted to talk about it.

There had been no opportunity while at her grandparents. She said she was staying to help clean up.

Buzz's heart told him she was lying.

But he needed to get his head into their gig, so he'd left and pushed it out of his mind. He'd arranged for a limo to and from the city for them so they could just enjoy a night out.

By the time he got to The Rock House, their gear was all set up. He hugged Val. "Good to see you."

"Oh, you have no idea. Beth has been driving me crazy wanting to hit the road again. You know she hates being

home.”

“Yeah.” He met the guys backstage, and they caught up. When Jack asked how Kelly was, he’d almost slipped.

Nicki squealed and ran over.

He had enough time before she crashed into him to brace his body for her atomic hug.

“Where’s Kelly?”

“She’ll be here in a bit.”

“So?”

Curt hugged Nicki from behind. “Babe, we talked about this. You gotta stop interfering.”

“What?” she said with entirely too much innocence in her voice. “A girl can’t ask how her friend’s doing?”

Curt turned her and kissed her on the lips. “You didn’t say ‘Buzz, my friend, how are you’, you said ‘So?’ expecting him to drop all his feelings about Kelly on you. You know he’s not like that, and he’s been a very good sport. You promised you’d ease off.”

Nicki huffed. “Well... I’m sorry for wanting everyone to be as happy as we are. They’re perfect for each other.” She turned back to Buzz, and her shoulders dropped. “I’m sorry.” Her lips pulled in. “How are you, Buzz?”

He smiled and patted her on the head. “I’m good. Ready to get back on the road.” Not that he wasn’t anxious to leave Kelly, but he’d always been ready to leave when he’d lived with Sally.

Five thousand questions crossed Nicki’s face, but she didn’t ask any of them.

He looked at Curt. “Nice work, buddy.”

Nicki swatted him. “Hey, I’m right here.”

“I know.” He smiled. “You’re perfect for each other.”

Nicki bounced and clapped her hands as only she could get away with. “I know, right.” She turned to Curt and pulled him

down for a long kiss.

Brian, their tour manager, clapped his hands. “Okay, sound check’s in ten.”

They’d left extra time for sound check since this was the first gig at The Rock House.

Viv escorted Kelly, Jenny, and RJ in, and Buzz missed a beat. Kelly wore jeans, a red lacy T-shirt, and sneakers. She looked fucking awesome. So sexy. His pulse pounded when their eyes met, and her small smile was like a jolt of electricity to his heart. They followed Viv to the backstage area, and Buzz exhaled a sigh of relief. He’d had a growing feeling Kelly would bail on him tonight.

When sound check ended, Eric stopped them. “I couldn’t have done this without you guys. Thank you.” He glanced around. “I know my dad’s looking down, and he’s so proud.”

“Our pleasure, man,” Jack said. “Your dad was the first one to believe in us. I don’t know where we’d have ended up without his help and encouragement.”

Buzz shook Eric’s hand and made a beeline to the band room. Emily, Siobhan, and Nicki were chatting with Kelly and Jenny, and RJ stood staring at the framed flyers that covered every inch of the walls, his face covered in awe.

“Holy shit.”

“RJ!” Kelly covered her mouth. “Sorry.”

“I can’t believe all the bands who’ve come through here. I had no idea this place existed.”

“Glad you came,” Buzz said. “We’re hoping to change that, which is why we all invested. Places like this are springboards for musicians.”

Buzz’s heart warmed. Seeing his girl backstage with his bandmates’ girls sparked a dream. Someday, maybe, his new family would join him on tour. He needed to talk to Brian about purchasing his own bus. He was getting ahead of himself. Kelly wasn’t even really his girl yet. He couldn’t quell a sense of unease whenever she glanced at him. She had

something big on her mind, but he tried not to let the panic crush him. It could well be about her business, or maybe one of her employees had an issue she was concerned about.

But she'd shared all that stuff during their time.

Half an hour before they were set to go on, Jeff cleared their family out so the guys could do their pre-gig rituals. Jack warmed up his voice in the bathroom, Curt meditated, Elliot listened to music, and Buzz fidgeted. Kelly had been increasingly uncomfortable, and he hoped she wasn't feeling sick. The last thing they needed was her puking. It wouldn't take much for Nicki to assume Kelly was pregnant and announce it to the world.

When they took the stage, seeing Kelly in the newly added VIP section had his heart pounding. The elevated area was cordoned off, and special passes had to be purchased. There were ten tables with bar service and a private bathroom. Tonight, it was filled with their family. Stephanie sat at a table with Jack's brother and sister. She waved to him with a huge grin.

The gig went off without a hitch, and when the last encore had been played, Jeff ushered them to the band room.

When the girls and family joined them, Kelly, Jenny, and RJ weren't there.

"They said they had a great time, but they'd had a long day and needed to get home," Jeff said.

His profound disappointment almost choked him. "Thanks."

Buzz showered and said goodnight to his bandmates. Miller drove him and Stephanie to The Yorkshire. He was thrilled she'd agreed to come tonight. After the strain of the last few months, it was great getting to hang out with her.

She plopped on the sofa next to him.

He adjusted the ice pack so it rested on his knee.

"Pain?"

"No. But it feels a little swollen."

Stephanie nodded. “Still wearing the brace when you run?”

He nodded. “Doc told me to, so I do.”

“He told you not to wear it all the time though, right? It’ll weaken the muscles if you do.”

Buzz grinned. “He did. Can’t take the doctor out of the girl.”

“Nope. It’s who I am.” She poked his arm. “You didn’t tell me you were seeing anyone.” Steph smiled. “She’s nice.”

Buzz’s stomach fluttered. “Yeah. It’s only been a few weeks. Not sure what it is.”

Stephanie poked him again. “Liar, liar, pants on fire.” She leaned closer. “She’s pregnant, isn’t she?”

“What?”

“Hey, I’m a doctor, remember. I did a rotation in obstetrics.” Stephanie’s grin eased his nerves. But he still didn’t know what to say.

“I’m not judging, Buzzby. It happens.” She studied him in that clinical way that always set his nerves on edge. “Are you happy?”

He let out a slow exhale. “Yeah. I am.”

“It’ll be our little secret.” She smiled. “You know there’s a much better understanding these days of dyslexia. If Baby Buzz is born with it, he or she will have it easier than you did.” She sat back and put her arm around his shoulders, like she’d always done.

He exhaled. “I know.” He kissed her cheek. “I’m not naming my kid Buzz or Garth.”

“I know why you never liked the name Garth.”

“You don’t know shit, Steph.”

Her maniacal laugh had him laughing.

“Oh, baby brother, you know I’m the all-knowing, all-seeing, irrefutable queen of knowing everything about you.”

“So, you know everything?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.” Stephanie had always been self-assured. “You hated it because you thought you weren’t deserving of Dad’s name. Like you weren’t living up to it.”

A feather could’ve knocked him over. “How did you know?”

She hugged him. “Because Dad’s freaking amazing. He’s so smart, but he never puts anyone below him. He’s been giving away a huge chunk of his salary since we were little because he’s so grateful for everything he has. It’s a lot to live up to.” She pinned him with her dark eyes. “We’re so proud of you.”

Considering his sister had picked one of the most competitive subspecialties in medicine, her praise meant everything to him. “It’s just music.”

“Yeah, like music isn’t everything.” She poked his arm. “I made a mixtape of all your songs. The ones I know you mainly wrote. I wouldn’t have gotten through these last few years without them.”

“How do you know which ones I wrote?”

She smiled in the big-sister way she had. “Because your strength and empathy, Buzzster, shines through. Don’t get me wrong, Jack’s an amazing songwriter, and I know he polishes them up, but the raw words that are yours always speak to me. They always have.” She poked his chest. “How many articles have I sent you where science has proven music to be beneficial to coma patients? To people recovering from strokes and undergoing chemo?” She ticked her fingers. “Depression, anxiety, stress relief. Music is what people turn to for comfort at the end of a shitty day. Stop putting yourself down.”

“I wasn’t, not really, but you have to admit it’s not quite the same as heart surgery on infants.”

“Doesn’t make it any less valuable.” She glanced away, and when her eyes met his again, the pain in them made his breath catch. “D-bag told me he was banging one of the nurses from the hospital because I was always working. But so was

he. There'd be times I'd get off shift, and he wasn't home." Tears clouded her eyes.

Buzz's body flooded with anger. Stephanie had never been a crier, and seeing tears from her now tore at his heart. If Deran were here, he'd take him apart, arrogant piece by arrogant piece, for what he was putting Steph through. Buzz had never been close to Deran, and it had always annoyed him Deran called him "Sport." He was arrogant and condescending, but he treated his younger brothers that way, so Buzz had never taken it personally. Stephanie had loved him, and that had been good enough for Buzz.

He'd seen many doctors over the years with varying degrees of arrogance, which he supposed was kind of warranted due to the years and skill it took to become a doctor. Some definitely pushed the line between arrogant and asshole though.

But not his sister. She was extremely confident and self-assured in her abilities, but she also had an uncommon empathy and sensitivity toward her little patients and their parents. She understood the unique stress a family was under when the patient was too young to understand or express what they were experiencing.

When a sob tore from her, Buzz pulled her into his arms. She wept and sniffled and sobbed some more. When she finally pulled back, her eyes were puffy and her nose was red.

"Sorry."

"Don't be. You're my sister, and I love you. I'm here for you, whatever you need."

Her sad smile tore a hole in his heart. One no surgical skill could repair. "Want me to beat him up?"

When she didn't smile, a lump the size of Kentucky lodged in his throat. "Hey. What?"

Stephanie closed her eyes, and a huge tear slid down her cheek. "She's fucking pregnant. And now, after giving me shit for almost a year and delaying everything, he wants to fast-track our divorce so he can marry her."

“Oh, Steph.” He pulled her into a hug.

“I’ve been ready to be a mom for three years. I would’ve reapplied for the fellowship, but he said it was too good an opportunity to pass up. So, I took it.” She coughed. “When he told me they were having a baby, he said he just didn’t want to have one with me. That I’d make a terrible mother because I’d never put my kids’ needs first.” Deep sobs tore from her.

Anger turned to molten rage. “He’s a fucking asshole, okay?” Buzz’s jaw tightened. “You are one of the most compassionate and loving people I’ve ever known. You will make a great mom.” Buzz gritted his teeth. “He’s always resented that you’re a better doctor. You know why he didn’t pursue a fellowship? Because he knew he didn’t stand a chance. And he always hated it that you were better at everything than him.” He pulled back and brushed her hair off her face. “Listen to me. You are going to be a great mom one day. If ever there was a woman who could have it all, it’s you.”

“I missed my chance.”

“Why? Because you work too hard? Because it takes a lot to be a doctor and even more to be a female doctor?”

She nodded dumbly. “What if he was my one chance?”

“No. There are guys who’d not only be worthy of all your outstanding amazingness but who are man enough to not be threatened by it.”

“I’m almost thirty-six. I work seventy-hour weeks. How would I even go about dating?” She wiped her eyes. “And if you say one of those sleazy dating apps, I’ll slug you.”

Buzz kissed her head. “I would never suggest such a sordid thing for my big sister. Double standard incoming. I would hate it if you did stuff like that.”

Steph’s body shook as she tried not to laugh. “Are you saying what’s okay for the goose”—she pinched his arm—“isn’t okay for the gander?”

“Damn right. You’re my sister. No sleeping around. No dating apps. No singles bars. No male nurses or medical

professionals of any kind. And definitely no more doctors.” Buzz tilted her chin up so she’d meet his eyes. “I don’t think a male doctor’s ego can withstand being second best to you. And they’d all be second best. Even the most world-renowned surgeon wouldn’t have your unique empathy for patients while being able to remain objective. You are one of a kind. And you deserve nothing less than a guy who treats you like the amazing woman you are.”

She took a shuddering breath. “I thought Deran was my one.”

“Maybe he was, but you kept growing, evolving, changing. He was as evolved as he was ever going to be ten years ago.”

Her lips thinned. “Is that what happened with you and Sally?”

As close as they’d always been, this was a first. “Yeah. It’s only recently I’ve come to understand that.”

When Stephanie met his eyes again, an even greater depth of sadness lived there. “Can I tell you something?”

He nodded.

“I’ve always been terrified of...failing. Mom and Dad taught us to never give up. So I felt like if I just kept applying myself, Deran and I would make it.” She swallowed hard. “You were so brave when you were little. You took everything in stride. You never complained even though I know how miserable you were being stuck inside.” Her lips spread into a grin. “How happy you were to see me when I’d get home from school.”

“I was miserable, and I wouldn’t have gotten through it if you hadn’t played with me. You chose me over your friends. I used to wait by the door for you.”

She nodded. “I remember. I was just as happy to get home so we could play.” She leaned into him. “You know why I wanted to be a doctor?”

“You wanted to save babies and toddlers the way I got saved.”

“Yeah. But there’s another reason.” She sat forward. “The surgeon who operated on you was a woman. Dr. Amati. She was amazing. I was so scared of losing you. I went and hid in the hospital’s chapel. I thought if I was closer to God he’d hear my prayers better. Anyway, she found me there afterward and told me you were a very brave and strong little boy and she fixed your heart and you were going to be fine.”

“Isn’t that the same reason?”

She shook her head. “She made me feel like everything was going to be okay. Mom and Dad had been saying it since they’d found the defect, but all those weeks leading up to your surgery, I was terrified, but I couldn’t be the weak one and let anyone know, especially you. You were brave.” Her eyes filled with tears. “I wanted to give the same comfort to others I’d gotten. Remember how I used to sneak into your room at night and crawl into bed with you?”

“Of course.”

“Do you know why I did it?”

“Because you loved me.”

“Yeah.” Tears dropped onto her leg, making dark circles in her jeans. “I was so afraid you’d leave me too. I thought if I was there and something happened, I could stop it.” She looked up at him. “But if I couldn’t save you...at least you wouldn’t...be alone like Gary.”

He pulled his sister into his arms. “Oh, Steph.” He allowed the pain at the loss of a brother he’d never know to surface and spill over. “I love you.”

When Steph sat back, she sighed. “I’m sorry I’ve been such a bitch to you. You’ve worked so hard to get and stay sober, and I really am proud of you. I was so scared of losing you too, and no matter how hard I tried to pretend things were fine between me and Deran, I knew they weren’t. I didn’t know how to fix them, and I should’ve ended it. But I’m not good at admitting defeat. When you went into rehab, it was easier to focus all my anger at you.”

“Wow, that’s... Did you come to that conclusion on your own?” Buzz had enough therapy to see the intervention in her words.

“I’ve been seeing a therapist for years. Mostly to deal with the loss of a patient because I can just never take that in stride. Every single one guts me. But I never thought to talk about other stuff.” She smiled at him. “I don’t know if you know this about me, but I can be a tad bit stubborn and single-minded.”

Buzz laughed. “I did pick up on that. But Steph, those are the same things that make you excel at doctoring.”

“Excel at doctoring? That’s the best you can do?”

Buzz shrugged. “I’m tired. I’ll come up with something more poetic tomorrow.”

“You really think I’d be a good mom?”

“Hundred percent.”

She sniffled. “And you really believe there’s a male ego out there who can deal with my awesomeness?”

He nodded. “Maybe you’ve already met him.”

She shook her head. “You mean Vince.”

“Yeah.”

“His attention was flattering, but I only flirted with him to feel better about myself because Deran just told me I was bad in bed.”

“Now I’m gonna fucking kill him.”

“Not worth it, Buzzicans.”

He snorted. “Can’t you ever just call me Buzz?”

“Nope. I know it annoys you, so by law, I have to keep doing it. I like annoying you.” She scruffed his hair. “You’re my most favoritest person in the world to annoy.” She kissed his cheek. Her smile faded. “I’m not a cuddler. I have too much to do to dawdle, you know, after.” She scoffed. “We probably did it in the hospital more times than we ever did in

our apartment. I was afraid we'd get caught, but he liked it so much."

"Wow the levels of his asshole-dom just keep revealing themselves."

She faced him. "What do you mean? He didn't want to get caught either."

"Did it happen more in the last few years?"

She tilted her head to the side. "Yeah, actually. Before he went into private practice, if he wasn't on shift at the same time, he'd meet me on a break." Her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Buzz's jaw tightened. "Because he wanted you to get caught. A bunch of old men in charge would look at you like you'd committed an egregious sin while high-fiving him for doing what they'd done. It wouldn't have hurt his reputation, but it could've damaged yours to the point where you got kicked out of the fellowship."

"Fucking asshole." Red slashes covered her cheeks. "I thought he was being sweet, a gentleman worried about my reputation." Her body vibrated with fury. "It never would've happened."

"That's a different kind of goose-and-gander situation. My sexism wants to protect you because you're my sister and you're a fucking boss at surgery. Theirs is set on destroying you because you give them a run for their money, and they can't handle it."

"Dr. Amati is my fellow. She'd never let that happen."

"You're studying under the doctor who operated on me?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Mom and Dad know. I didn't want to bring up bad memories for you."

"I'm a grown man. You can stop protecting me now."

She grinned. "Goose, meet Gander. Never. Gonna. Happen."



STEPHANIE HATED LYING TO BUZZ, BUT SHE WASN'T IN ANY condition to like another man. Besides, Vince was probably looking for a one-nighter, and that wasn't on her bucket list. The fact that he was in recovery didn't bother her. Or her girl bits. Vince had the most soulful blue eyes she'd ever seen. She was sure he was younger than her, and he was Buzz's friend, which was never a good idea. A girlfriend from college had had a crush on Buzz, and the idea of her brother hooking up with one of her friends had always sickened her.

Everyone thought she was so strong, but she couldn't even admit to her brother just how shredded she was over her divorce

The bitter taste of failure coated her tongue. She'd never failed at anything in her entire life. Every single colleague knew her husband had cheated with a nurse. There were two camps: Those who thought he never deserved her and those who thought it was about time she'd been taken down a few pegs. Some people were haters. She always kept it professional even when she had to deal with someone who'd screwed up. She worked in a hospital, and mistakes came with the territory. But that didn't mean she'd shy away from calling out a nurse or another doctor who'd been careless or distracted.

People's lives were at stake, and if she had to step on some toes to protect those lives, she would.

Stephanie stood and stretched. "I gotta get going."

"You got surgery tomorrow?"

She laughed. "No. I'm off. If I'd had surgery scheduled, I wouldn't risk my patient by staying out this late. Not even to see you, Buzzasaurus. Speaking of babies...I'm assuming you're not telling anyone until she's out of the first trimester?"

"Yeah."

"Then tell her to stop touching her stomach so reverently."

“Maybe she had gas?”

“I’ve been around enough mothers to know when they’re worried, and if she had gas, her face would look like this”—she bunched her face up—“and not like this”—she relaxed into a soft smile and wide eyes.

“Got it.

“And her sister knows, but her brother doesn’t.”

“She told her sister?”

“Course, she did.”

“She’s super close to them. How do you know she didn’t tell RJ?”

“Because he didn’t take a swing at you for knocking his sister up.”

“Yeah. Good point.” He stood and walked her to the door. “Listen. You know it doesn’t matter where I am in the world. You can always call me if you need to talk. Or if you want help burying a body.”

Stephanie laughed. She felt light for the first time in years. Even though she’d been mostly to blame for the rift with her brother, she hadn’t been able to let him off the hook. She’d been giving him gallons of shit, but he’d have been there for her if she’d reached out to him. “I love you.” She hugged him.

Buzz hugged her back. “Let’s never fight again.”

They cracked up.

Stephanie smiled. “We’ll always have disagreements, but let’s never let it go this long again. I know it was mostly me.”

“Hey, I fucked up. You had a right to be angry at me.”

“Yeah, you did. But I know you got this.” She hugged him again. “Next time, just tell me to stop being a bitch.”

“Not a bitch. Concerned. Scared.” He placed her palm over his heart. “I promise you, sis. I will do anything to not let drugs back in. Anything.”

She tilted her head. “You’d quit Stone Highway?”

He nodded. “If a time came and that’s what I’d have to do to stay sober? Yeah. In a heartbeat. I’ve got a kid on the way. He or she may inherit stuff from me, but I’d never do anything to harm my kid.”

“I love you, Buzz.” She smiled. “You’re going to be a great dad.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

AFTER STEPHANIE LEFT, BUZZ WAS RESTLESS. HE WANTED TO call Kelly, but he didn't want to wake her. He still had his key, and he was pissed she hadn't invited him to stay since it'd be their last night for three weeks. If he gave in to the paranoia that was churning throughout his body, he'd say she'd been avoiding him.

After another hour of tossing and turning, he got up, dressed, and went to the gym. He'd had enough sleepless nights to know tonight was going to be one of them. And lying in bed trying to force sleep never worked. Buzz pushed himself hard on the treadmill. His knee didn't even ache when he finished. He'd hoped to burn off his panic, but it didn't work.

"Motherfucker," he yelled in the empty gym. Something was wrong, and there was no way he could leave for three weeks with the dread living in his gut.

Buzz went back to his room and showered. He spent another hour trying to convince himself Kelly was still processing the news, but he knew in his heart and soul something else was wrong. He used the online service to check out.

Buzz hadn't needed a bodyguard while on break, but Miller was back on duty. He texted him he'd leave his bags outside Miller's door. When he got there, Miller was waiting. "Sorry to do this so early."

Miller waved him off. “Not a problem.” He yawned. “Give me five, and I’ll drive you.”

“No, that’s okay. I called a cab.”

“Pick you up in Brooklyn?”

“I’ll, ah, I’ll let you know.”

Buzz’s heart pounded the entire ride to Brooklyn. At four a.m., traffic was light, and fifteen minutes later, he stood across from Kelly’s building. He needed answers, but he’d wait until her bedroom light went on. The early-morning air was already thick. Another humid September day.

Kelly’s neighborhood slowly roused from its sleep. A few delivery trucks rattled by. A couple jogged on the opposite sidewalk with a big, white dog in tow. A squirrel appeared next to the tree he was leaning up against. “Oh, sorry, little guy.” He stepped back, and the squirrel jumped halfway up the trunk, then scrambled back to its nest.

An hour passed.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. *Kelly*. “Hey.”

“I know you’ve got a plane to catch.” Her voice was weak.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry. I wanted to talk to you yesterday...”

“It’s okay.”

“I didn’t want to do this over the phone.”

“I’m outside.”

“What?” The curtains parted.

She wasn’t happy to see him. He should’ve forced her to talk to him yesterday. *Fuck. It’s bad. She’s decided she can’t do this.*

She sighed. “You better come up.”

The *click* of the disconnect pierced his heart. He was already late leaving for the airport. He texted Miller: *Come get me.*

Before he could even put his phone away, his notification beeped with a text from Miller: *Already on my way.*

Buzz replied: *Call when you get here.*

Buzz crossed the street. With every step, his heart pounded harder, and anxiety twisted his gut. He let himself in the building and jogged up the steps. The door opened when he hit the landing, and he walked in and closed it behind him. Kelly stood looking beautiful in her pink robe and bare feet. Her toes were painted red. The kitties ran over for their due, but Buzz didn't bend down to pet them.

Buzz glanced at his watch. He should be at the airport now. The traffic in New York was always ridiculous, and if he didn't leave soon, he could miss his flight. "You didn't sleep either."

She shook her head. Tears filled her eyes, and Buzz went to pull her into his arms, but she put her hand up.

"Did something happen to the baby?" His heart pummeled inside his chest.

"No."

Her answer didn't calm his heart. "What then?"

She waved to the couch.

"No. Just say it." *You're dumping me.* He tried to brace himself for her inevitable words. He swallowed the bile burning his throat.

"The baby may not be yours."

Buzz stepped back. All the air rushed out of his lungs. Blood pounded in his ears. She'd barely made time for him. "What?"

"Don't make me say it again." Her voice was devoid of emotion. No tears, no apology, nothing.

"You cheated on me?" The words echoed through her apartment. Or maybe it was only inside his head because he'd barely whispered them.

She stepped back as if he'd struck her. "Really? That's what you think?"

His phone rang. "I'll be right down."

For several long, excruciating seconds, they glared at each other.

It must have been longer because his phone rang again.

He glanced at the screen. Miller. Buzz was still standing, but he felt like a crumpled heap on the floor. She didn't say anything. She didn't try to explain. Kelly glared at him with hatred in her eyes.

He connected the call when it rang again. "Coming." Pain exploded inside him. He was certain his heart shattered.

Somewhere in the span of two minutes, a steel-reinforced concrete wall stood between them.

And she made no move.

He didn't want to leave like this. "I'm gonna miss my flight."

Her jaw twitched, and her dark eyes narrowed. "Then you should go."

"Kel—"

"Just go."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

ANGER SWELLED INSIDE KELLY. IT DID EVERY TIME SHE WENT over their last conversation. He'd stood there and accused her of cheating. Didn't he know her at all? They'd agreed to continue seeing each other. How could he think she'd cheated? Why had that been his first instinct?

Her heart was heavy, and all she wanted to do was stay under the covers with her cats. But she had a business to run, and the last three days in the office had been spent in a total daze of red-hot anger and crushing despair because of Buzz.

She hadn't heard from him. Not even a text message. She'd never been more alone in her life, which was saying something.

Her stomach turned over, and she grabbed the bucket she kept on the side of her bed. She took a swig of water and rinsed her mouth. She took a few sips of flat ginger ale. The cats sat on Buzz's side of the bed. She'd displaced them grabbing for the bucket. Tears welled in her eyes. When had she come to think of the other side of *her* bed as Buzz's side?

Her heart was in tatters. This was nothing like the shredding it had barely survived at the loss of her parents and her divorce from Enzo. This was worse. Her phone rang, but she knew it was Jenny. She called every morning since Buzz left to check on her. She hadn't told Jenny how he'd left. The phone stopped, but after a minute, it rang again.

"Hey, sis," Kelly said.

"Hey. How's my niece or nephew doing this morning?"

“Making their presence known. I’m doing okay, too, thanks for asking.” Her voice held sarcasm. She’d been going for playful.

“I didn’t ask how you are, because every time I do, you lie. You say you’re okay, but you haven’t been okay since Buzz left. You lock yourself in your office.”

“Jenny…”

“No more lies, Kel. You can talk to me.”

She’d been hoping that morning had been a nightmare she’d wake up from, so she’d been putting off telling Jenny. Saying it out loud would make it real. But now it was clear Buzz wasn’t going to call her. “Can you come over?”

“Already here.” Her apartment door opened and closed. A few seconds later, Jenny walked in carrying coffee and a bag from their family bakery.

The kitties jumped off the bed to greet her, and Jenny stopped dead in her tracks.

“What are they doing?”

Sadie wove around her ankles.

A combination of shock and terror collided on Jenny’s face.

“They’re saying ‘hi.’” Kelly smiled in spite of herself.

“Are you sure?” Chonkers and Squdgy sat up on their hind legs and pawed the bottom of her jeans. “I think they’re tenderizing me.”

“Buzz has a way with animals.”

Jenny’s brows shot up. “I’ll say.” She crouched down, and when none of them pounced and attacked, she tentatively stroked each cat. When she got to Sadie, she said, “Don’t eat my hand.” Sadie meowed and rubbed her head in Jenny’s palm. “Wow.”

“What’s in the bag?” Kelly asked.

Jenny stood and placed the bag on the bed. “Cornetti.”

Kelly swiped the bag and peered inside. “They’re still warm.” She took a big bite. “So good.” Some considered them the equivalent of croissants, but Kelly loved these more.

Jenny kicked off her sneakers and sat on the bed with her legs crossed. She handed Kelly a small coffee.

“Too soon.” She placed it on her nightstand. These days, her stomach couldn’t handle coffee until after she’d eaten. Coffee used to be her breakfast.

When Kelly finished her pastry, she took a few more sips of ginger ale. “Yuck.” She’d only ever had ginger ale when she’d had a tummy ache as a kid. She’d never really liked it, but it did settle her stomach. Coffee went so much better with everything. “It’s like they’re made for each other,” she whispered.

Jenny stopped sipping. “You and Buzz?”

“What? No.” Obviously not. Anger turned her breakfast. “Definitely not.” Kelly’s jaw clenched.

“Kel, what did you do?”

She stared at the windows. The curtains were closed, and the sun was still rising, but it was going to be a bright, sunny day. “Why were you waiting outside my door?”

Jenny growled. “Because I knew you needed to talk. And for your information, I was outside yesterday for almost an hour. Made me late for work. Don’t tell my boss.” Her eyes narrowed. “And don’t change the subject.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Too bad.” Jenny leaned forward. “You’ve been in a terrible mood the last three days. I waited for you to confide in me. I thought you were making progress.”

“That’s not fair. I was. I am. But this is...”

“What?”

Kelly shook her head. She’d really hurt her sister by waiting, and she was sorry. It was easier to fall back on old habits because her mind and body were in turmoil, and she

didn't have the spare energy. Even during her separation and divorce, she'd managed to compartmentalize all those emotions during working hours. But this thing with Buzz, she couldn't just put it in a box and move on with her day. It was all she could think about. It had to be the hormones. Kelly swallowed the pain in her heart. "I told him."

Jenny threw the bag on the nightstand and crawled up next to her. "I thought we agreed that was a bad idea until you knew for sure it was even a possibility."

"Yeah, well, it didn't feel like the right thing to do."

"The right thing? For whom? Him?" Jenny pierced her with her gaze. "Or you?"

Kelly's jaw dropped. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, I think you're terrified any relationship you have will never work out, and now a baby's involved, you purposely torched your chances with Buzz so you can go back to believing you're better off never falling in love again."

"How dare you!"

"I dare because no one else will. I'm your sister." Jenny's jaw tightened. "Buzz is a good guy."

Kelly kicked the covers off. "Really?" She hopped out of bed. "He accused me of cheating on him."

Jenny's brows shot up, and her mouth opened. "He did?"

"Yeah, that's right. He did. A good guy doesn't do that."

"Why didn't you correct him?"

"Why should I? Why was me cheating his go-to response?"

"Aren't you expecting a lot from a guy you've only known for four weeks? A guy who understood our small town and was insisting on taking the hit since you'd be forced to break up because everyone thought you were dating?" Jenny's eyes narrowed. "You said he wanted to keep seeing you even before he knew you were pregnant. Don't you think that means something?"

Kelly shrugged.

Jenny's lips pulled in. "Well, I know you didn't drop it on him on Monday because he was all over you at the memorial, and we left the club together after their concert. When exactly did you tell him?"

Kelly bit the inside of her lip. "Tuesday morning before he left."

"He spent the night?"

She shook her head.

Jenny covered her eyes. "You told him over the phone?"

"No."

"Then how?"

Kelly's heart lodged in her throat. "I called really early, but he was already outside. He came here before he left for the airport. He must've suspected something was wrong."

"What?" Jenny's eyes scrunched closed and her head shook fast. "Let me get this straight. You waited until the last possible second to tell him the baby you're pregnant with may not be his, and you expected him to have a good reaction?"

"No reaction he had was going to be good!" She'd been hurt he'd accused her of cheating. It was bad enough she was ashamed of her behavior.

"That's why you told him, isn't it?" Sympathy softened Jenny's face. "How long were you looking for the escape hatch?"

"What are you implying?"

"I'm *saying* you deliberately torched any possible relationship with Buzz on purpose because you're afraid of being left again, and this time, it'd be worse because you'll have a baby."

"I did no such thing." Kelly stormed out of her bedroom.

"You did. I get it, though." Jenny followed her.

Kelly turned so fast Jenny almost plowed into her. “Get what?”

Jenny scoffed. “You think you’re the only one who’s afraid to get involved seriously with a guy because most relationships don’t work out and you don’t want to lose anyone else *ever* again? I’ve dumped two perfectly good boyfriends because I could’ve really fallen for them, but I wasn’t willing to risk it.”

Kelly looked down. “You never told me that.”

“I only started to figure it out this past summer. I’ve been seeing a therapist.”

Kelly’s knees weakened. “You have?” She slumped on the couch. All the anger seeped out of her.

“Yes. I don’t mind having fun with a guy, but as soon as he starts pressuring me for more, I freak out. The first time it happened, I figured he liked me more than I liked him, so I ended it. But after Brett, I knew something was wrong with me. I found a therapist who specializes in childhood trauma.” Jenny’s throat worked with the effort to swallow. “I have a way to go yet, but it’s really helped me to see how losing Mom and Dad has driven me to sabotage a good relationship, or one that could be good, because I’m terrified to lose anyone else.” She sniffled. “You and Enzo were so great together I thought you dodged that bullet. But do you think maybe you let him go because you thought if you were the one who ended it it wouldn’t be as bad?”

Kelly’s mouth fell open. “I...” She drew a deep breath, and tears filled her eyes. “I don’t know.” She’d thought it was the right thing to release the love of her life from their vows because she couldn’t be what he needed.

Jenny took tissues for both of them. She dabbed her eyes. “I’m not a guy, but I think most guys would jump to the same conclusion Buzz did. You’d only been together for four weeks, which isn’t all that long. I read he had a pretty brutal breakup with his ex. Maybe she cheated on him.”

Kelly's insides burned with anger. "You're taking his side?" As soon as the words left her mouth, she regretted them. "I don't know why I said that."

"Because you're pregnant, and your hormones are wreaking havoc on your normally levelheaded self. You've always handled problems with such, I don't know, calmness." Her eyes misted again. "You take after Dad that way. Remember the time I got called to the principal's office for picking fights? He had to leave his shift, and I was so scared he'd be pissed, but he just sat me down when we got home and calmly explained why my behavior was so wrong." Jenny shook her head. "Mom would've gone ballistic."

"Yeah, she was the fiery one." Kelly chuckled "I think Dad, being a firefighter, he knew better than most how to handle fire. That's why they were perfect for each other. They were yin and yang."

Jenny hugged her. "I think Buzz is in love with you."

Kelly shook her head. "Don't you think he'd have said so after he found out I was pregnant?"

Jenny's eyes squinted, and she shook her head. "I can't explain why guys do or don't do things. Women are easy. Men are...from Mars." She laughed. "You know, I think we did an excellent job with RJ, and someday, he's going to make some lucky girl an amazing husband."

"You don't think we femaled him up too much?"

Jenny smiled. "If we did, Enzo set him straight. He's a great big brother."

Kelly would always be grateful for Enzo stepping up with Jenny and RJ. And maybe that had been part of her motivation for marrying him. She'd been in love with him, of course, but he'd helped so much, especially with RJ. "He asked me at the memorial if I would be okay with it if he asked RJ to be his best man."

"Oh, that's so nice." Jenny gasped. "You are, aren't you?"

"Of course. I know RJ will be honored. Enzo's part of our family, and he always will be."

“What about Buzz?”

Every inch of her body was fatigued. “I honestly don’t know.” She’d have to spend some time going over why she’d been so set on telling Buzz he might not be the father. If there was even an ounce of truth to Jenny’s explanation, Kelly had a lot of thinking to do.

It might not matter.

Would he give her another chance?

Chapter Thirty-Nine

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HIS LIFE, BUZZ COULDN'T WAIT UNTIL to get off stage. He had no idea how he'd managed to make it this far. This was their third gig. He couldn't shut his thoughts off, and it was fucking with his timing. He'd never played so shitty in his entire life.

With the last strike of his sticks, he kicked the throne back and got the fuck off the stage. "Fuck." He threw his drumsticks on the floor with such force one bounced up and almost hit Val in the face.

"Hey!"

"Sorry, Val." He needed to take his lousy mood back to the hotel. There was no way he could do the meet and greet. He hated to bail on the guys and their fans, but he was in no condition to muster some personality, paste on a smile, and greet. "Fuck." He stalked back to the dressing room.

A few seconds later, the guys walked in. He was being a selfish asshole. Memories of the last time he'd bailed on a meet and greet assaulted his brain. He'd been using, and the need to get more drugs into his body had outweighed his responsibility to his bandmates and fans. Shame coursed through him.

"Hey," Elliot said. "Why don't you go back to the hotel? We got this."

Jack and Curt nodded.

"But..." What? That was what he wanted to do, and instead of feeling grateful his friends had his back, it

intensified his guilt and anger.

“You’re having a bad night. Don’t do this to yourself,” Jack said. “It’s not worth it.”

“But the fans.”

“Will survive. We’ll say you’re sick. You went on anyway, but now you need to take care of yourself. They’ll understand,” Jack said.

Curt smiled. “It’ll be fine.”

“But I’m not sick.”

Elliot pinned him with his near-black eyes. “You’ve been in a shitty mood since we got on the plane for this run. Something happened with Kelly, and if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine. But we’re four nights in on a three-month run, and if you don’t deal with your shit, it’s not gonna end well for you.”

“In a perfect world,” Curt said, “we’d never have a bad night, never have to play when we’re sick or feeling like the world is kicking us in the balls on repeat. We don’t live in that world, so we do the best we can each gig. I know you put in everything you had tonight. There are times each of us need to put ourselves first, and tonight, it’s your turn. Go. We got this.”

“I’m the luckiest fuck on the planet.”

“Aren’t we all?” Jack said.

“Yeah.” He grabbed his bag. “Thanks.” He walked out, and Miller met him.

“Back to the hotel?” Miller asked.

“Yeah.”

Buzz got in the SUV and collapsed on the seat. His muscles were screaming with pain because he’d tried to make up for his lack of timing with more effort. In all his years drumming, no matter what he’d been going through or how badly he’d been hungover, his timing hadn’t suffered like this. Some fans waved as the SUV drove out of the lot, but Buzz

looked away. He was ashamed he couldn't just suck it up. Ashamed of how he'd reacted the last time he'd seen Kelly.

"It may not be yours." Those five words haunted him since Tuesday morning. He'd known something was bothering her, and he'd been worried something was wrong with the baby, or that Kelly was worried because of his shitty DNA, but he hadn't doubted he was the father.

Now that he'd had some time to process, she'd been wild and out of control for her. They'd both had a sleepless night, and he'd had to leave for the airport. A perfect shitstorm for him to have reacted poorly. It was like someone pulled the plug on his world and his life was circling the drain. Images of Sally telling him how she'd fucked that guy while they'd been in rehab surfaced. The rehab he'd spared no expense in paying for. Kelly wasn't Sally. Complete opposites wasn't enough to explain how different they were.

He'd never imagined Kelly would cheat on him. Did he even have a right to feel that way since they'd agreed to casual? And if she'd cheated, it had to be early on. They'd spent a few nights apart, but they'd agreed to be exclusive. He'd held up his end of the bargain. He still was. At their first gig after-party at a local Tallahassee bar, several women had made it clear they wanted to fuck him, but he'd had zero interest. If he couldn't have Kelly, no other woman sparked even the slightest interest.

More fans waited outside their hotel, so Miller drove around the block and parked. He made it into the hotel without seeing anyone, and he was out of the elevator as soon as the doors had opened. "Thanks."

Miller nodded. "Of course." He hesitated. "You okay?"

Miller was as squared away as they came. A retired Marine in Jeff's unit, he'd been part of Stone Highway's security team since the beginning of this tour.

Buzz shook his head. As much as he hated to admit to his weakness, he hated lying even more. Miller was like a walking lie detector, so there was no point in trying. "Not really."

“Anything I can do?”

“No, man. Thanks.”

Miller nodded again and walked to his room.

Buzz dropped his bag inside the door and went into the bathroom. He took a long, hot shower, hoping to wash away his hurt, anger, and sadness, but it didn't work. His heart had been crushed. *“It may not be yours.”* The urge to drown out the pain of those words was overwhelming him. He didn't have that as an option anymore. But part of him wished he did. A few drinks and a couple pills and he wouldn't care the woman he was in love with might be pregnant with another guy's baby.

It should be mine.

Ever since they'd gotten the news a week ago, he'd been overwhelmed with joy. His very first feeling had been joy, not the terror he would've expected. He tapped on the speech to text app on his phone.

Tattered bits and pieces we wove together

Making a new life

By your side, never surrender

With you every day, I can finally see forever

The times that we laugh

The times that we cry

Together, through whatever, we'll survive

All the things, every day

All the things, we'll find our way

Of all the things I do, the easiest is loving you

He was exhausted, but he wasn't ready for sleep. He didn't feel like doing anything. Except calling Kelly. He missed her. Missed hearing about her day. Missed her warm, soft body curled into his while they slept. He pulled on a pair of

sweatpants and a T-shirt. Maybe a long walk outside would help relax him enough to sleep.

There was a knock on the door.

“Shit.”

Checking the time, he sighed. It was a little soon for the meet and greet to be over, and he didn't feel like talking. He looked through the peephole. *Emily*. “Double shit.” He opened the door. “I don't feel like talking.”

She smiled. “Good, because I need a friendly ear, and Jack's at the meet and greet.”

“Oh, sure.” He stepped aside. “Come on in.”

Emily sat on the couch. She did look upset, but he didn't know how he could help her. She was the one to help others. He didn't have the insights she did. “You and Nicki have a fight?”

“No.” Her hazel eyes pinned him. “She can't help me.”

“And you think I can?”

“We have some things in common that I don't with Nicki.”

“You want something to drink? I mean water, 'cause that's all I have.” Viv always made sure every room he stayed in had the bar emptied.

“No.”

He sat next to her and waited.

“I know how it feels to be terrified.”

Buzz's scalp tingled. “Did something happen?”

“Today, no. I'm talking about the past.” She swallowed hard. “After the accident, I was numb for a long time. Emotionally. The pain in my body was, at times, unbearable, but it was nothing compared to the loss of my family. A few days after I woke up, it was like a switch inside me was flipped, and I felt worse than numb, like a shell of a person. After they transferred me from the hospital to the rehab center, that's when the terrified feelings started.”

“Why then?”

“Because I realized I had to start doing something. Until then, I’d been lying in a hospital bed. But now it was time to find out if I’d ever walk again. A few hours after I got there, Eddie came into my room. He was honest with me. He was the first person not to say everything would be okay. My family was dead, and there was no way ‘everything’ would ever be okay. But he told me he’d be with me every step of the way.” She smiled warmly. “And to this day, he has been. So have Sheryl and Mike and Loretta. And Vince. I didn’t think I’d ever belong to a family again.” She touched his arm. “And now, I have this huge, extended family, which includes you guys, all of Jack’s enormous family, and the crew.”

“Always.” Emily had been there for him on a night when he could’ve slid back into addiction to ease his pain. He’d help her however possible.

“At the time, I thought my life was over. I didn’t know if I’d ever walk again. The first time Eddie made me stand, I was sure I wasn’t strong enough. Sure that I’d fall on my ass and break something or reinjure my leg. But that wasn’t nearly as terrifying as letting anyone else get close to me again. But Eddie was, and is, relentless. He refused to give up on me. Vince, too.” She looked him dead in the eyes. “I wouldn’t have survived long enough for my leg to recover and be able to walk again if I hadn’t met them.”

“Oh, Em.” His heart pounded. He had no idea she’d ever been so desperate. But he understood it. He’d felt plenty desperate in his life.

“I dated a few guys before Sully. But it was all superficial. I never really opened up to any of them. Looking back, I never really opened up to Sully even though I thought I had.” She scoffed. “He may have been the one to cheat, but our relationship never stood a chance in the long run. I was the reason my relationship with him crashed and burned. Catching him three weeks before the wedding was really a blessing in disguise because as much pain as that caused, it was less than if we’d gotten married and ended up divorced. I don’t think I ever would’ve been able to give another guy a chance.

“I wasn’t all in with Sully, and something inside him knew that. After time and distance from the end, I realized he was safe. There were no surprises. Every day was the same. Which was what I wanted. I thought knowing what to expect would protect me from getting hurt again. He never pushed me for more. If he had, we’d never have gotten engaged, and in the end, that was his excuse for cheating. He said I didn’t love him like he loved me.” She closed her eyes.

His heart constricted.

She opened her eyes, took a deep breath, and sighed. “All Jack does is push. When we first got together, he was relentless.”

“I remember.”

“Yeah.” She squeezed his arm. “But eventually, he eased up, and I knew how hard that was for him, but he did it because it was what I needed. Because he loved me. Every day is different, and I never know what to expect, but Jack has helped me to embrace that instead of being afraid of it. Because of Jack, I found a part of myself I’d forgotten I ever had. I feel whole for the first time since the accident. I will always miss my family, but instead of focusing on what I’ve lost, I’m looking forward to what Jack and I will build together. We can have a great life. Different, but no less great. I can never get back what I lost, but life is what you make of it.”

Buzz shook his head. “Wow, you’re good.”

“Well, I learned from the best. Eddie taught me how to live again by showing me how he chose to move forward. He showed me we have a choice in how we handle the shit that happens to us.”

“Kelly’s pregnant,” he blurted. Buzz’s heart pounded. “Said it might not be mine.”

Emily’s eyes widened. “Okay, well, I know how that sounds, but I don’t believe she cheated on you.”

“That’s the thing, I don’t see how she could’ve. We didn’t spend every single day together, especially at the beginning

because she was still so wrapped up in her work.”

“There’s another explanation.”

“Yeah, but what?”

Em smiled. “Well as much as I’m sure you rocked her world, she did have a life before she met you.”

“She told me she’d only dated one guy, and she’d married him. They’ve been divorced for over a year, and he’s engaged, so no sex with the ex.”

“Really? You never had a one-night stand?”

“Sure. Kelly’s not like that.”

“No, she isn’t, but neither was I.”

Buzz laughed. “You and Jack never had one night. Epic fail, by the way.”

“Best fail ever.” A soft smile played on her lips. “But it was supposed to be, and when I woke the next morning, even though I didn’t regret it, I was kind of ashamed of myself. I’ve never been one to have casual sex.”

Buzz nodded. “And you think if Kelly had a one-nighter she wouldn’t be proud of it?”

“Especially if she thinks she may have gotten pregnant by a stranger.”

“But she told me to go.”

“Of course, she did. The level of loss she’s suffered is so great she thinks she can’t take any more. Loss is a part of life. It’s going to happen no matter how you try to insulate yourself from it. But in trying to protect herself from loss, all she’s really doing is limiting how good her life can be. She’s guaranteeing she’ll stay stuck. It’s up to you to help her see that.” She touched his cheek. “Everything you didn’t know you wanted is with Kelly. If you let her go, you’ll always regret it.”

He shook his head. He wasn’t strong enough. She deserved a better man.

Emily sighed. “When I met Jack, I felt like the weakest, most pathetic, most broken thing on earth.”

He’d never forget her strength and tenderness toward him the night Jack had met her. “You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever met. You’ve been through so much, but you’re still standing.”

“That’s my point. It’s how I felt, but it wasn’t what you saw. It’s not what Jack saw in me either. No matter how well we know ourselves, we aren’t always the best judge. I can see when you think you’re not strong, but to me, that’s when your true strength shines through. You’re still standing, too. You don’t let feeling weak stop you from getting up and going out there. If you asked the guys what they thought of you, they’d say you’re one of the strongest dudes they know. You survived one of the worst things that can happen to a person, and you’ve fought your way back.”

“You think getting addicted is one of the worst things that can happen? After what you’ve been through?”

“I do.”

“But I did it to myself. I let it happen.”

“Drugs fuck with your head. They confirm every low thought you have about yourself and lie about your strengths. They convince you that you can’t survive without them, but here you are. You broke free from it. I don’t have to tell you the stats on relapsing.”

He shook his head. “You lost your entire family and might never have walked again. How can you compare that to the bad choices I made?”

Em smiled. “Because it’s not some awful contest where the most horrible or tragic story wins. No one wants to win that *if* they’re trying to recover. When we’re going through it, it’s natural to feel like nothing worse has ever happened to another human being ever. But it’s a sign of recovery when we can look at others and see what they’re going through without making comparisons. You had a lot of health concerns as a child, and they’ve left scars, physical and emotional, and they

would make anyone feel weak. But you're not. You're a strong, vital man, who's intelligent, compassionate, funny, and a great brother and friend. Believe me, I know." A soft smile played on her lips. "Riley was the best brother a girl could ever have, and when I finally opened my heart just a little, I got Eddie and Vince as brothers and Sheryl as a sister." She squeezed his hand. "And you."

Buzz's eyes misted. "Stephanie's an amazing sister. And I feel like that about you, Nicki, and Siobhan. You've all supported me and make me feel like I can do anything."

Em hugged him. "I know it's not always easy, but there's always a silver lining."

"What possible silver lining could there be to what happened to you?"

She shrugged. "Well, I'm not alone like I'd thought I'd be. I have a huge found family now. I wouldn't have met Eddie, Sheryl, and Vince. If Vince and I had never met, then who knows where he'd have ended up." She smiled softly. "He says I saved him. Maybe I'd never have been a romance writer, then I'd never have met Nicki, and because of her, I met Jack. And because of Jack and Vince, Eddie found out what happened to his mama." She let out a long, pained breath. "And Sheryl. You know her family stuff. Knowing her taught me how to forgive because she forgave her family." Gratitude washed over her face. "What's your silver lining?"

Buzz shrugged.

"Well, don't stop looking for it. Just looking keeps you in a positive headspace instead of spiraling into the void. Nothing good lives there. All it does is reinforce the loss, the pain, and the hurt. It thrives on it, feeds it, and feeds off of it. But by choosing to look for something good, you take its power away and kick that void's ass all the way back down to hell." Her hazel eyes bored into his. "Before Jack, I wasn't sure I wanted kids."

"Really?"

“Yeah, I know, it’s not a popular feeling. My ex said it was up to me. Either way, he’d be fine with my decision, but it put all this pressure on me, you know? I was halfway in the void, and because I lost my family, it whispered to my weakness, ‘why would you ever want to risk doing that to another innocent child? They don’t ask to be born.’” She let out a deep breath. “Everyone wishes for a perfect life for their kids. But life isn’t perfect or easy. They’re gonna struggle, feel pain and loss, and get hurt. But they’ll also love and be loved. A hard life doesn’t have to be unhappy if we choose happiness. Which means choosing to see the upside instead of the downside to everything.”

“What about those days when you can’t see the upside because the down is crushing you?”

“I still have days like that.” Her head tilted to the side. “Sometimes it’s something really simple or small, like the sun is shining after six straight days of rain. You can always find something, but you have to be looking for it. Whatever gets you to the next second and the next and so on.”

Buzz nodded. “I’m in love with her.” He never expected the first time he admitted it out loud it wouldn’t be to Kelly. But he’d convinced himself it hadn’t been the right time. He’d only just truly admitted it to himself, and with Kelly being pregnant, she’d already been overwhelmed. He should’ve told her. *I’m an asshole.*

Emily tried to hide her smile.

“You knew?”

“I suspected.”

“When?”

“At dinner two weeks ago.”

“I didn’t even know for sure then.”

“Sometimes we’re the last to know. I was in love with Jack for a long time before I actually admitted it to myself, and it was even longer before I was able to tell him. But that night at dinner, everything about you screamed to me you were in love with her.”

“Does Nicki know?”

Emily chuckled. “She insists you fell head over heels in love with Kelly the second you saw her at Eddie and Sheryl’s vow renewal. But I knew that wasn’t true. She’s like Jack. Bam. Love. We’re slower to figure it out. Everyone has some damage, but trauma’s a different beast. It can ruin your life if you let it. Don’t let it.”

“I’m so glad you’re my sister.”

She hugged him. “I need to get some sleep. We fly out early tomorrow.” Em stood and stretched out her leg.

She still had pain even after all these years. But she didn’t let it stop her. He opened the door.

“One more sisterly piece of advice?”

“Sure.”

“You need to forgive yourself for getting addicted. It happened, and you’ll always be in recovery, but don’t let it stop you from grabbing for every good thing in life. You have people who love you and will support you no matter what. If you relapsed tomorrow, we’d all be there for you. But the more people you have in your life who support you, the stronger you are. Don’t let addiction define you.” She hugged him. “Your ending hasn’t been written yet.”

He pulled back with a heavy heart. “Sometimes it feels like it has.”

“Then don’t be the ending written for you. The future isn’t set in stone. You’ve made the changes you needed to, and that’s what will determine how your story ends.”

“Are you psychic?”

She shook her head. “I pay attention, so I notice things others don’t. My dad taught me that.” She smiled and left.

Buzz closed the door.

He knew what he had to do.

He just hoped everyone would understand.

Chapter Forty

THE FOLLOWING TUESDAY MORNING, KELLY DRAGGED HERSELF out of bed after her seventh mostly sleepless night in a row. She forced herself to eat a few crackers and drink a bottle of water. On the days when she didn't wake up puking, it usually struck midmorning. Better to have something in her stomach. She was drained, and her brain hurt. The images from the last time she'd seen Buzz played over and over, and even pure exhaustion wasn't enough to combat them.

She had three custom appointments today, and going into the boutique and dealing with happy brides was the absolute last thing she wanted to do. But two were flying in, so rescheduling wasn't an option.

She took a shower hoping it would clear the fog, but it didn't. Lady Sadie sat on the edge of the tub inside the curtain the entire time. She'd done it every morning since Buzz had left. At least someone was looking out for her. Kelly fed the cats and spent ten minutes petting them after they ate. It wasn't even seven, but she had to get out of the apartment.

This was different than after Enzo had moved out. It had been empty because she'd let him take most of the furniture. The distance had been growing between them, and when he'd left, it had been a relief. She'd had her business to put her full attention on, and it had been easy to fill the empty spots.

When Buzz had left, he'd taken her heart with him. Nothing filled the barren cavity in her chest. Not even the baby growing inside her. She'd never thought she wanted to be a mother again. Buzz had said they were in this together. After

the way things ended, she was sure she was in this alone. And it wasn't what she wanted for her baby. But Kelly had to accept it. If the baby was Buzz's, would he still want to be a part of her life? Would he be able to put his anger aside so they could at least parent together?

Her phone rang, her heart rose in her throat, and her pulse kicked up. Hope was a bitch. "Hey, Jenny."

"You were hoping it was Buzz?"

Kelly shrugged. "No."

"You haven't heard from him?"

"Not even a text."

"Want me to come over?"

Kelly used all her energy to push to her feet. "I'm heading into the boutique."

"Okay, I'll be there by eight."

"You don't have to do that."

"If you're working, I'm working. You need someone to run interference with the staff." She scoffed. "It's not like everyone doesn't know something's wrong, but at least I can handle any issues so you can focus on the brides coming in. And after the last appointment, you're going home."

"I'd rather not."

"So don't. We'll pick up the cats, and you can crash at my place for a while."

"Jenny—"

Her sister huffed. "Stop it. You're not my mother, so don't use your 'mom' tone with me. You need help, and I'm going to be there with you every step of the way, sis."

Tears rose and streamed down her cheeks. Today was a personal best. She'd been up for two hours, and this was the first time she was crying. "Okay." Kelly didn't have the energy to argue. "Thanks."

Kelly took a cab to the boutique and let herself in. They didn't open for almost three hours. She locked the door behind her, went to her office, and got to work.

"Kel?" Jenny was gently rubbing her arm. "You okay?"

Kelly sat up abruptly. She was sitting at her desk. A piece of paper was stuck to her face. She pulled it off and rubbed her eyes. "Guess I fell asleep. What time is it?"

"Almost eleven."

Kelly rolled her chair back. "My bride will be here soon." She stood and wobbled, so she plopped in her chair. "I need to wake up more first."

"How's your stomach?"

Kelly did an internal check. "So far, so good." Her stomach rumbled.

"There's bagels in the breakroom. I'll get you one."

"Thanks." She looked over the design she'd been working on for the bride who'd be here shortly. They'd had a phone consultation, so Kelly had a few ideas sketched out. The bride would be in town with her parents for four days, and Kelly hoped to have the design she wanted finalized before they left.

Some brides were all about the bling. Nicki came to mind with her now five dresses. Emily had joked on their first appointment last April Kelly should hide her BeDazzler or Nicki would steal it and every piece of clothing she owned would be covered in rhinestones. Nicki had more crystals on her ceremony dress than Kelly had ever designed. She'd told Nicki it would be incredibly heavy, but she didn't care.

Will they still be my friends? Shit. I hope they don't cancel their dresses.

Her desk phone buzzed. "Yes, Anita?"

"Your eleven o'clock is here."

Jenny walked in with half a bagel with butter.

"She's early. Tell her I'm on a call and I'll be there in five minutes." Kelly replaced the receiver. "No cream cheese?"

“No soft cheeses.”

“But it’s pasteurized.”

“We see the doctor tomorrow, so we’ll get clarification.” Jenny put the plate on her desk and pulled out her phone. “In the meantime, you’ll do as I say. I already have a list of questions.”

Kelly laughed. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I’m taking care of you for a change. Now eat. Your bride will be getting restless.”



AFTER THE APPOINTMENT, KELLY WENT BACK TO HER OFFICE to lie down. The bride’s father had been happy to indulge his daughter’s wish for three dresses: a ceremony, a reception, and an after-party dress. The latter was a new request, so she’d done a sketch with the bride’s vision for her red dress.

At one, her next appointment was running late, so Kelly walked the floor, greeting the brides trying on gowns. She made a suggestion here and there, but her consultants were the best at what they did.

Kelly was talking to a bride who had tried on over one hundred gowns when a commotion near the front drew her attention. She turned, and her mouth hung open. She couldn’t believe it.

Buzz.

Simon, the boutique’s security guard, stood between them. “You need to leave,” he said through gritted teeth.

Buzz got in Simon’s face. “I’m not going anywhere until I’ve talked with Kelly.”

“She’s busy. You can’t come in here and expect her to drop everything. Make an appointment.”

Buzz growled, and his hands fisted. “I’ll wait.”

“Not here you won’t.” In his relaxed state, Simon was a big man and heavily muscled from his years as a professional wrestler. He menaced Buzz.

Buzz’s eyes narrowed. “Back off.”

Heat flooded Kelly’s body. Just the sight of Buzz was enough to suck all the air from her lungs. He was standing in her boutique, surrounded by women in gowns, and he wasn’t backing down. From the gasps and sighs behind her, her brides recognized the rock star on her showroom floor. “Simon, I’ll handle this.”

Buzz stepped around the wall of Simon. “Kelly, we need to talk. Now.” He turned and took two steps toward the back.

“I have a bride coming in for a custom appointment.”

Buzz turned on his heel. His lip twitched, and his jaw locked. He glanced at his phone clutched in his hand. “She’s late.”

“I’m sure she’ll be here any minute. We’ll talk later.”

Buzz’s eyes glazed over, and a muscle in his neck ticked. His black T-shirt strained over his broad chest. “Now.” He took three steps toward her, and before she understood his intentions, he bent, picked her up, and carried her toward her office.

“Put me down.”

He didn’t stop until he placed her gently on the couch, shut her office door, and pushed the lock in.

“How dare you?” Outrage flooded her system. She jumped up. “You had no right. You can’t barge in here and go caveman when you don’t get your way.”

His eyes narrowed, and his fisted hand pounded against his chest. “I have you to thank for that. You’ve turned my life upside down. And I’m not leaving until we get a few things straight.”

She’d never seen him so...aggressive. Not in a scary way, but he’d come here for a reason, and he wasn’t about to turn back now. Heat pooled low in her belly, and a warmth spread

to her entire body. Her nipples hardened. Caveman Buzz was a huge turn-on. Kelly shook her head. It was just the hormones. She hated this kind of Neanderthal behavior in men.

“Don’t. Not a word.” He appeared to be trying to get his emotions under control. “Sit,” he said through clenched teeth.

“You have no right to be angry at me! You’re the one who left.”

“I had a plane to catch, and you told me to go!” He closed his eyes and exhaled a slow breath. “I’m not angry at you. I’m angry at how I reacted. I know you didn’t cheat on me. But I’m a little pissed at how you dropped it on me that I may not be the father. That was shitty, Kel.” His voice was even, and when he opened his eyes, anger wasn’t the emotion in them.

Love.

No way. They hadn’t known each other long enough.

Kelly’s knees weakened, and she tried to sit as gracefully as their giving out would allow. She looked down. “You’re right. It was a shitty thing to do right before you left. I’d been trying to find a way to tell you, but…” She had no excuse. She’d been putting it off, and Jenny might have been right when she’d said Kelly had done it on purpose.

Buzz stood before her. His dark eyes pinned her. “I don’t care.”

“I’m trying to apologize, but—”

“If the baby’s not mine.” He shook his head. “It changes nothing about how I feel about you.”

His eyes held sincerity, but Kelly slowly shook her head.

Buzz crouched down. “I’m in love with you. I wasn’t looking for it or even ready for it.” He didn’t touch her. “But there it is. I love you. And I don’t care if you’re pregnant by another guy.” He pointed to her belly. “Mine. Ours.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. “You don’t know what you’re saying.” Her brain tried to rationalize his irrational statements. “You wouldn’t have gotten involved with me if I’d had a kid before we met.”

His eyes softened. “You don’t know that, and it doesn’t matter what you think I’d have done. It only matters what I’m going to do. And that’s be with you if you’ll have me.”

Kelly’s mouth hung open, but no words came out.

“I’d like to tell you you’re wrong, because from the second I saw you, I was hooked. There was something about you so appealing to me I couldn’t get you outta my head. And when Nicki set us up at Quivers, it was an opportunity too good to pass up. And you clearly had interest in me.” His smile turned smug.

“Oh, really? Clearly, huh?”

He nodded. “Crystal.” He smirked. “Do you really want me to remind you if you’d had your way we’d have slept together that first night once the clock struck midnight?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You just did.”

“Sorry. I’ve got a lot on the line here, and I’ll fight as dirty as I have to so you’ll give me a chance. Give us a chance.” This time his palm rested on her still flat belly. “If the baby isn’t mine, it doesn’t matter to me because I still love him or her.”

From where his hand rested on her body, an intense heat spread throughout. “But how?”

He shook his head. “Damned if I know. I just know I do.” He sighed. “And I know in my heart”—his other hand rested over his heart—“that you didn’t cheat on me. And I will regret accusing you of that until the day I die.”

Kelly exhaled slowly. She didn’t want to explain, but he deserved it. “After Enzo got engaged and he told me he was going to be a dad...”

“You did something you regret.”

She nodded.

“Well, if you want to start stacking regrets side by side, I’m fairly certain I’ll win. But I don’t want losing you to be one of them.” He took her hand and held it over his heart. “You’re the most amazing woman I have ever met. And

considering the women I know, that's saying a lot. Neither of us expected this to be any more than four weeks of fun." His gaze pinned hers. "I want to be there to see every smile, wipe every tear, from the silence to the chaos and all the things in between. I can't say goodbye to you because I'd lose the best part of me. You're my every joy and smile and hope."

His gaze trapped hers. "You're my every day."



THE SECONDS ROLLED ON. KELLY STARED AT HIM. SHE DIDN'T blink or speak. A tear rolled down her cheek, and his heart broke in two. *She doesn't love me.* He'd known with all she'd been through that it was a distinct possibility. But he'd come here anyway because even if she wouldn't give them a chance, he meant every word about the baby being his. If she needed the next twenty years before she could love him back, he'd give it to her, because without her, he had nothing. *I'll never give up.* He braced himself for her rejection.

Kelly opened her mouth and drew in air, her already tear-filled eyes drowned in more tears. She leaned forward and when her lips touched his, Buzz's heart resumed beating. He shifted to the couch and pulled her onto his lap. She nestled closer as their lips devoured each other.

Blood raced through his veins. Her heart beat wildly against his chest. Her hands threaded through his hair and held his head. But he had no intention of breaking the kiss. He'd give her whatever she was willing to take from him, and maybe someday, she'd want it all.

Abruptly, she pulled back. Her velvet-brown eyes held shock.

"What's wrong?" His hand went to her belly. "Is the baby okay?"

She nodded. "You're here."

He leaned back. "Uh, yeah." He cupped her cheek and wiped an errant tear with his thumb.

“I mean, here. You shouldn’t be here. You’re on tour.”

He nodded. “I left.”

“You can’t just leave.”

He grinned. “I did. Couldn’t wait until October, and what I needed to tell you could only be done in person. Being a rock star has its perks.”

“But the fans...”

“Will understand.”

“What about the guys?”

He grinned and kissed her nose. “When I told them I had to leave, they asked what took me so long to pull my head outta my ass.”

Kelly burst out laughing at the same time she tightened her arms around him. He was eye level with her impressive rack, which he’d swear was even more impressive than when he’d left. Kelly’s laughter faded. “But what about your concerts?”

“They’re playing without me.” He smiled. “Val, my drum tech is filling in for the next two gigs, but then I have to get back.” He swallowed his nerves. “I’m going with you tomorrow for the ultrasound. I read they do one to confirm your due date, and the sooner I know when our baby will be born, the sooner I can figure out when we can head back into the studio next year. We’d talked about May, but I figure that’s probably around when the baby’s due, so we’ll push it back to maybe July.” He smiled. “I want to go in with you. If you don’t want me to, I’ll wait outside, but I’m driving you.” His heart pumped so hard Buzz felt it in his toes. “I’ll take whatever test you need me to if you want to know whether or not I’m the father. But as far as I’m concerned, I am.”

“But what if the test comes back that you’re not?”

“I’ve pretty much spent every waking moment the last week going over that possibility, and if I’m not, it changes nothing. I’m in love with you, and I want to be with you. And I promise you I’ll raise our baby with you regardless. I know it’s a little soon to bring up marriage, but I need you to know

that's my ultimate goal. For us to be a family. You take as long as you need, and we won't rush into it, but I hope it becomes something you want, too." He swallowed the beach-ball-sized lump in his throat. "I know you said you'd never get married again, so if you don't change your mind, I'll live with your decision."

Kelly slid off his lap and looked down.

"Hey, none of that." He used his knuckle under her chin until she looked at him. "I know you're feeling ashamed, but I'm not judging you. And we don't ever have to tell anyone else if the baby isn't my biological child." He touched her belly. "This is my child no matter what. And it's really no one else's business."

"You didn't tell *anyone*?"

He sighed. "Emily."

"Oh, no."

"Hey, it's okay. She's a fucking vault. She won't even tell Jack." He crossed his heart. Even though he'd known Em wouldn't say anything, he'd still asked her to promise, and she had.

"Jenny knows."

Buzz nodded. "Of course, I kinda figured. She's your sister." Buzz smiled. "My sister knows too."

"I'm glad you're talking again, but why did you tell her?"

He brushed his thumb over her bottom lip. "Didn't. She figured it out the night we played The Rock House. I wasn't gonna lie."

"So, you didn't tell her..."

"No. And I never will if that's how it turns out."

She shifted closer and studied him. "You really won't hate me if..."

"I could never hate you."

"You're not going to ask any other questions?"

He shook his head. “The only question I truly care about I’ve already asked. Will you give me a chance?”

Kelly swallowed hard. “Yes.”

Buzz pulled her in and kissed her. A fireworks display could’ve been going off in her office, but all Buzz was aware of was the melding of their lips.

When they finally came up for air, he heaved in a breath. “I love you, Kel.”

Her lust-filled eyes darkened. She rubbed her thumb over his cheek. “I’m in love with you too, B.”

Chapter Forty-One

BUZZ WOULD BE HOME ANY MINUTE, AND KELLY'S BODY tingled in anticipation. They'd have three days together. Lady Sadie meowed at her. "I know. Daddy will be here soon." Her heart expanded when his key turned the lock. She jumped off the couch. Her nerves were stretched to the breaking point.

Buzz had taken her to her appointment two weeks ago. They'd agreed to open the results together when he got home. Her doctor hadn't batted an eye at their unusual request to mail the results of the paternity test. The door opened, and Buzz rushed in, dropping his bags and pulling her into his arms. Their lips crashed together. The cats wove around their ankles. She broke the kiss and pulled him to the couch. The letter was on the table.

"Did you open it?"

She shook her head. "I promised to wait. We agreed this was the best way." Her heart pounded. She had no doubt Buzz meant what he'd said about not caring. But she wasn't as sure. That she loved him was the only thing she was sure of. But if the baby wasn't his, she needed to take some time to process that before she made him any promises.

She had no intention of shutting him out, but it might change things.

"Do we just open it?" His voice wavered.

She nodded.

He slid it off the table.

“No. Wait.” The air in the apartment was so thick she had to breathe with her mouth open. “I just want to say... No matter what that says, I love you.”

Buzz grinned. “Me, too.” He kissed her. “Ready?”

“Yes and no.”

“Me too.” He blew out a breath. Clearing his throat, he ripped the end of the envelope and slid the letter out.

Kelly’s heart pounded in her ears with every beat. The cats joined them on the couch, two on each side. It was as if they were waiting to find out, too.

Buzz unfolded the letter, but he hesitated. “Should I read it out loud?”

She nodded furiously.

“Okay.” He blew out a steady breath. “Dear Kelly...” He stopped reading, and his eyes filled with tears.

Kelly’s heart hit the floor so hard she swore she heard it *thump*. “B?”

When their eyes met, her heart stopped.

The biggest smile Kelly had ever seen spread across Buzz’s face “We’re having a baby.”

She flew into his arms, the letter went flying, and their lips crashed together. “Wait.” She pulled back. “It’s ours, right?”

“Sure as fuck is.”

Thank you so much for reading our story. Kelly’s doing great, and we can’t wait to meet our little bundle of joy. If you’d like to read more, tap [HERE](#) for two extended bonus epilogues.

It’s our first Thanksgiving, and I was lucky enough to get home for a quick visit. We planned to have dinner at her grandparents and dessert with my family, but Grams has other ideas. Families, right? But it’s all good. Bonus epilogue two is just the best. My tour’s over, and it’s our first Christmas together. You don’t want to miss it!

****If you're having any trouble tapping on the bonus scene, please type jessicamarloweauthor.com/bonus-content-signup into your phone or computer browser****

If you haven't read Eddie and Sheryl's love story, **[NIGHT AND DAY](#)** you'll want to grab it **[HERE](#)**. Eddie's a great guy, one of my best friends, and Emily's found family. When Sheryl's family met him, they judged the book by its cover and didn't think a guy who rode a motorcycle, had tattoos and piercings, and worked on cars for a living would ever amount to anything. Sure, he was rough around the edges, but aren't we all at nineteen? He just needed the love of a great woman, and he found it with Sheryl.

If the link doesn't work on your Ereader, it'll pop right up if you type "Night and Day Jessica Marlowe" on Amazon.

OR

Buckle up and keep reading for a short excerpt of their triumphant love story!

Other books I appear in: Jack and Emily's Trilogy: **[WITH YOU, NO MORE YESTERDAYS](#)**, and **[ALL YOUR TOMORROWS](#)**, and Eddie and Sheryl's book 2 **[NIGHT and DAY: EVER AFTER](#)**—along with Jack, Emily, Elliot, Siobhan, Curt, Nicki, and Vince, and their 5000-word bonus epilogue, which is where Kelly and I meet for the first time. :)

One last thing... Indie authors need your support. If you could tell a friend or leave a review on **[AMAZON](#)** or **[GOODREADS](#)**, Jessica can keep writing the stories that fill up eighty percent of her brain—my sister Stephanie and Vince's story needs to be out in the wild. The other twenty percent is lyrics. She loves music, and I know Stone Highway's her favorite band. She has about twenty. Does anyone only have one favorite band? I don't.

Be good,

Buzz

Night and Day Excerpt

FEBRUARY, 1996

THE CREAKING OF THE AUTO SHOP'S BAY DOOR ROLLING UP couldn't cover the girl's high-pitched shriek. The sound pierced Eddie's heart. His gaze snapped to the girl in the car. Her hand rested on her cheek. Rage assaulted him. His chest tightened, and fury burned through his veins. He wiped the sweat off his brow. Bile rose in his throat, and he swallowed to keep from puking.

Every muscle in his body clenched.

He couldn't just stand there.

But it was none of his business.

The girl flattened her body against the inside of the car trying to shrink farther away from the prick.

Eddie turned away and scrunched his eyes closed. *No*. People were trouble, and he'd do well to remember that. His heart pounded, and the air seemed to disappear. Getting involved only led to trouble, and Eddie Burris had seen enough trouble to last a lifetime.

Since Michaels had gone to get their lunch, Eddie had opened the garage bay door when the smarmy prick had driven up in his 1977 black and gold Trans Am. The guy was an asshole, but he'd been in with four different cars since December, and he was one of Michaels' best customers.

"Why do you mouth off to me?" the prick yelled at the girl. The door flew open, and he got out. His white leather jacket got caught on the door, and his pasty face reddened. "This is your fault."

Eddie tried to focus on the buzz of the overhead lights in the garage, and he drew a long breath, but even the cold air burning his lungs couldn't douse his rage. A bitter taste covered his tongue.

No.

Fucking no.

Feelings he didn't want to have pushed their way to the surface, bringing with them an intense heat and a humming he felt in every fiber of his being.

Only a stupid fuck would take a classic, rear-wheel-drive car out in winter in New England. Even though the roads had been plowed yesterday, the leftover snow had formed large icy patches overnight. The overcast sky wouldn't allow them to melt.

Eddie's hands fisted as the prick pulled his girlfriend out of the passenger side by her long red hair, and she yelped again.

Motherfucker. He threw the greasy shop rag. *Fuck me.* The fucker had at least five inches and fifty pounds on her.

Eddie couldn't just do nothing. Growling, he ran out the bay door. The slap of skin on skin and her terrified scream rang through his ears, and only the *crunch, crunch, crunch* of the gravel under his boots drowned it out.

The fucking prick had her up against the open passenger door with his hand around her throat. Her eyes fluttered closed as her body went lax.

Eddie skidded on the gravel, and his fist landed on the back of the prick's head. He fell face-first into the car, but he released his hold on his girlfriend, and she sputtered back to consciousness.

"Run," Eddie yelled.

Her eyes narrowed in confusion.

"Run!"

The prick turned on him and took a swing.

Eddie blocked his punch and sneered, "Let's see how you do when you pick on someone your own size." He had at least four inches and twenty pounds of muscle on this guy. Eddie punched him in the jaw, leaving behind a smear of grease. Blood ran out of the prick's nose and splashed on the girl's pink ski jacket.

“Leave him alone!” She pushed Eddie, but being six foot four, he only stumbled back a step.

She’s defending him? What the fuck? Even though the bitter cold drew pink into her cheeks, it didn’t hide the bright red where the prick had slapped her.

The cold wind should’ve had him shivering since Eddie only wore jeans and a T-shirt under his coveralls, but he wasn’t cold. His flesh burned with rage.

Blood dripped on the prick’s white leather jacket. He looked down and back up at Eddie in disbelief. His eyes turned to steel, and his square jaw set. He lunged forward and attempted to get Eddie in a headlock, but Eddie was ready for him and stepped back, so the prick landed on the gravel but quickly scrambled to his feet.

The girl screamed, and Eddie started toward her. The prick charged him, grabbed him around the waist, and took him to the ground but not before Eddie landed a punch in the guy’s kidney. The prick rolled off him, covering his side with both hands.

One thing Eddie’s childhood had taught him was where the punches hurt the most.

A sudden crack of thunder broke through Eddie’s internal hell. He sat up, blinked slowly, and looked around. Not thunder. A truck had hit the pothole which had been expanding in front of the shop since Eddie had been working there.

The prick still lay on the ground clutching his side. He’d think twice before slapping her around again.

Eddie stood. Images flashed through his mind, so he scrunched his eyes closed.

“Don’t you touch him!”

Eddie’s eyes opened in time to see the girl try to kick him in the nuts. He blocked her, and she lost her balance and fell on the gravel. “Asshole!” She quickly scooted over to her boyfriend. “Baby, you okay?” Cradling his head in her lap, she glared at Eddie. “You fucker, you had no right!” Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her pale skin still bore a red

handprint. “You really hurt him.” She brushed his blond hair off his face.

She attacks me for saving her? As he watched the girl fawn over her prick boyfriend, Eddie took a few deep inhales. The frigid air burned his lungs. The rage had him, but he couldn’t let Michaels see him like this, or he’d get fired for sure. He spread his arms and fingers and tried to exhale his anger out.

She wiped the blood off the prick’s face with the sleeve of her jacket. Eddie’s stomach clenched, and he turned and walked toward the garage. *Sick fucks.* He’d thought he’d seen everything, but this was new.

Crunch, crunch.

Before he could turn, Eddie was hit from behind and fell against the building. The surface bit into his hands, but he stopped his face from eating brick. Eddie jammed his elbow into the prick’s ribs, and turning, he landed a punch on the prick’s jaw, sending more blood spraying into the air, and the fucker staggered back.

The girl screamed.

The prick’s eyes crazed over in a way Eddie had seen many times. His arm cocked back, and he swung, but Eddie blocked his punch.

She screamed again. “Leave him alone.”

This time, Eddie knew she was yelling at him. He’d be happy to leave the prick alone, but he wasn’t giving up.

“You’re gonna be sorry you ever met me,” the prick sneered. He rushed him, and they traded a few more punches.

“Enough!” Michaels yelled, yanking Eddie off the prick with his good arm. “What the fuck’s goin’ on?” His right arm had been in a cast since Eddie had met him. Michaels might be down an arm, but he was strong.

Eddie’s heart fell. Now he’d get fired. He looked down. *Whatever.* It was just as well. He’d stayed too long anyway. Michaels and his wife, Loretta, had been really nice to him.

Too nice. He'd gotten comfortable here. Eddie didn't deserve to be comfortable.

The prick tried menacing Michaels, but he was six foot two and muscled from years of physical labor, and his tilted chin practically dared the guy to take a swing. "Eddie, you okay, son?"

His throat was tight, so he nodded.

"Go on in. I'll take care of this."

Eddie tasted blood and wiped the corner of his mouth. He turned and went into the storefront and into Michaels' office. He could pack his shit and be out of there in three minutes. One of the reasons he always traveled light was because he never knew when he'd worn out his welcome until it was too late.

Eddie and Sheryl's duet is available now! Grab book 1 [HERE!](#)

All the Things Lyrics

Through blazing fire and smoke
I clawed my way back
Won't give up the ghost
Before the fade to black
The times that I laugh
The times that I cry
Doing whatever to stay in the light
All the things, good and bad
All the things, old and new
All the things, with grace I'll stay true
Sitting in the dark, waiting on the day to begin
Going over all the things I've done with sin
It's grinding me down and stealing my time
Stop looking back to escape the past's vines
The times that I laugh
The times that I cry
Doing whatever to cope with the lies
All the things, good and bad
All the things, old and new
All the things, time to forgive the past
Unpacking the baggage living in the attic
Cutting out all the static
One piece at a time
Memories in rewind
The times that I laugh
The times that I cry
Doing whatever to cope with my life
All the things, good and bad
All the things, old and new
All the things I'm still going through
Stressed and jaded

Blessed and creative
Missing all the signs
Never taking the time
Take a breath before
The toll chimes
The times that you laugh
The times that you cry
Loosen up the ties that bind
All the things, from then and now
All the things, everything's inside out
All the things, coming unwound
Tattered bits and pieces we wove together
Making a new life
By your side, never surrender
You're my every day, I can finally see forever
The times that we laugh
The times that we cry
Together, through whatever, we'll survive
All the things, every day
All the things, we'll find our way
Of all the things I do, the easiest is loving you
All the things, time has come
All the things, move on from what's done
With you in my life, I can see forever
With you as my wife, I can see forever

Exclusive Offer

I love my readers, and to thank you for joining my VIP reader group and signing up for my newsletter, you'll have access to exclusive bonus epilogues, cut or extended scenes, cover reveals, special pre-order pricing on new releases only for my subscribers, and insider updates and sales.

There are two bonus epilogues for Buzz and Kelly. One takes place at Thanksgiving, and the other at the end of Buzz's tour with Stone Highway just before Christmas. I'd love to tell you what happens, but then you won't want to read it yourself, and isn't that better?

Sign up here: [**I want more Buzz and Kelly!**](#)

Enjoyed this book?

YOU CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE.

Reviews are one of the single most important things that readers can do to help authors. It's a tough business and getting readers to take a chance isn't easy.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving an honest review—no spoilers please. A review on [Goodreads](#) and [BookBub](#) are also helpful. I would be grateful if you could spare five minutes to do that. Long or short, it would really help me out.

This link below will take you to Amazon.

[Yes, I want to help Jessica!](#)

Thank you very much.

Jessica

About the Author

Does anyone read these? Well, kudos to you for doing so.

I hope you appreciate the pained hours it took to write this. You try writing a bio on yourself. Go ahead, I'll wait.

Sucks, doesn't it? Now try it in third person. Even worse, right?

During the summer when I was seven, I broke my arm. Now being seven and down an arm is bad enough, but losing out on summer was even worse. During this time, I wrote my first piece of writing outside of homework, a poem. It was about the wind, fit on one small piece of paper, and I still have it. It's cleverly titled "The Wind." Well, I didn't *actually* write it because my arm was in a cast, so my mom wrote it down for me.

Little did I know this would be the beginning of my writing career.

Fast forward a bunch of years, and now I've written and published six books, and I'm working on my seventh.

It's still the only poem I've ever written. Unless you count the lyrics to "Welcome Home," "All Your Tomorrows," and "All the Things" from my *Rocked in Love* series. Even though they're songs, they're kind of poem-y. Or not.

You can follow me on [BookBub](#) or [Goodreads](#).

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Jessica's World - Series Crossover Reading Order

All my current full-length books are connected by Found Family. Eddie and Sheryl's books take place twenty and ten years prior to the start of the Rocked in Love series. You can start with Jack and Emily or Eddie and Sheryl, but you should read their books in order.

Rocked in Love Series - 1-3 Must be read in order

With You (Jack and Emily - Book 1)

No More Yesterdays (Jack and Emily - Book 2)

All Your Tomorrows (Jack and Emily - Book 3)

All the Things (Rocked in Love Book 4 – Buzz and Kelly stand-alone)

Found Family Series -Check the Content Warning.

Night and Day (Eddie and Sheryl - Book 1)

Night and Day: Ever After (Eddie and Sheryl – Book 2)

Lavender Roses Series

The One (Axl and Mara) Novella

Second chance romance with a former player and a headstrong, kick-ass heroine and her great grandmother who knows true love when she sees it and isn't afraid to set up a reunion.