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SOFIA AVES



**Bachelor**  
**AND THE**  
**Geek**



romance café PUBLISHING **tease**

BACHELOR & THE GEEK  
A BACHELORS ABROAD CONTEMPORARY  
ROMANCE



SOFIA AVES



# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

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*Step into the spotlight*  
*Or loiter in shadows*  
*Play the game your way*

# CHAPTER 1



## SIRIUS

BRIGHT, white light hit me in the face as I tried to force my frozen features into the semblance of a smile. From the look on the director's personal assistant's face where she loitered behind his chair clutching a clipboard at least thirty years out of date, the attempt at a grin was a really bad idea.

*Just like me.*

“Cut! Cut.” The director blinked at me. “Don't smile.” She rolled her fingers through the air. “Let's go again.”

Light flashed in my face. I tried not to wince and failed.

“Cut.”

*Shit.*

I didn't need to try to force a smile this time. My humor, along with fucks, had run out a dozen *cuts* ago. Apparently, as the cameras rolled—and stayed that way—I didn't need to flash my bright whites a tooth fairy would be proud to collect.

Mind, it wasn't my teeth that risked being knocked out onto the temporary studio floor.

A powder puff descended on my face, leaving me in a cloud of primp and fuss better suited to a *best in show* winner. If only the customs officials who had detained me coming into Jamaica were as easy to satisfy. Apparently, the locals didn't know what to do with the scary asshole with a passport that listed some of the most dangerous skirmishes in recent history. I didn't blame them for not wanting me in their country, stunning as it was. If I'd been there purely for pleasure, the experience would have been a hell of a lot sweeter. But this was a business trip. Mitch had seen to that when he condemned me to twelve weeks in limelight hell.

“This was a really bad idea,” I muttered to no one at all as my line of sight filled with fine powder. I inhaled the cloud, and it clung to the back of my throat and left me hacking. I said the same thing to Mitch, the epic ratbag, when he fessed



up. Debating prior to my morning coffee might be his style, but it sure as hell wasn't mine. I might have added a few other curses of choice that left my mother ripping up the tulips planted over her grave. And all before work started for the day.

*Fucking brilliant.*

“How bad can it be?” he asked that morning in the perfectly reasonable, polished voice of a first-rate attorney.

*How bad?* My scoffing response haunted me for the next week as I turned over the show's pitch in rare, quiet hours before dawn when the rest of the world was asleep, and my brain worked on. *Can a Beauty and their Geek survive the season's challenges to attend the Galaxy Gala at Nevada's newest observatory in the desert for the season finale and win the grand prize?*

I could almost imagine the headline: *Ex-special ops commander turned celebrity bodyguard fails his newest mission in true Geek style.*

The only thing that kept me committed to the course of action Mitch set me hurtling along at soul crushing speed was the tie into the business, as only Mitch could do. That, and the promise of a chance at winning a defense contract at the Gala at the show's end. Which meant not only surviving the production but winning the damn thing.

Sure, the five hundred K the winning couple pocketed at the end was tempting but winning and acquiring a personalized invite to that ball was the ultimate goal, and a shot at a deal I couldn't turn down.

Not that I had to win. I just had to short list, be one of the five couples present at the end of season event, handily held just outside Nevada at the new observatory. The event had a double purpose—to celebrate the winners of the show as well as the grand opening of the observatory beneath the stars.

*With* the stars, too, because the invite list had been planned over a year ago, and top senators, Hollywood wannabe C and D listers and business personnel would be in attendance,

hobnobbing in front of more cameras than anyone could ever need and poking into lives never meant to be shared.

My head ached just thinking about it. Good. At least my cheeks would have company. If I managed to make it through to the end goal without screwing my livelihood and reputation into the ground, I'd be a hell of a lot closer to home, even if I was stuffed into a suit with tails.

A hand waved behind a camera, drawing my attention back to the task at hand. I managed a truly sloppy smile in response. Or thought I did. The crew's combined grimace suggested I fucked that up too.

*"Cut. Why don't you show us who ... Sirius Weston is when he's not at home?"* the director smiled and sent a thumbs up after mangling my name. *"Geekily Yours fans want to know."*

Maybe that's just how they rolled on set. Not that the set was complete. The whole ensemble was a mishmash of spare parts hastily borrowed from random local studios. The host hailed from DC, and as a kid from California who ended up in Nevada with a contingent of orphaned brothers, East Coast politics and I avoided each other by no small effort.

*I have to survive up to twelve weeks of this? Mitch and I need to have a 'Sirius' conversation when I get home.*

Trying not to glare through the haze, the assumption, and the mistaken meaning to my name, I recited my prewritten bio Mitch created for just such a purpose—*wanker*—for the umpteenth time, lying through my teeth. *Geekily Yours* watchers didn't like too much technical and business talk. Their audience wanted a pretty hero who could pose with the rest of the unfortunate pack the studio had towed a quarter of the way across the globe.

*"I work four days a week." Make that seven days including Christmas, asshole. Do Beauties not work? "In my own business with the brothers I love." Fuck, please kill me now. "And I enjoy recreational paintball." Seriously? I don't get live ammo? "And sharing a top shelf chardonnay." I winced at the mangled terms. The teleprompter shot me a death stare,*

winding her finger through the air in an invisible reel- “with the right girl who I can talk to on a higher level.”

Jesus, I might as well be putting in an ad for a dog.

I smiled, my cheeks straining. The camera crew shook their heads as one, muttering between themselves as the little light on the side of the camera blinked and went out. Having an old grunt turned bodyguard around the cameras wasn't the best idea the studio had ever agreed to, not that I cared. The whole shebang hadn't been my suggestion to begin with.

I couldn't keep my lip from curling as I watched the host's security crew loiter at the edges of the crowd, their swanky suits and color-coordinated tech that likely didn't work around all the razzle-dazzle surrounding us bothering me at a gut-deep level.

*Utterly fucking useless.*

“All right.” Bettie Jansen, the show's host, stood in front of me flipping blonde hair that didn't match any color on the rest of her over-made-up face.

I took a half step backward to get myself a little breathing space and gave her my attention. Why had I let my brotherly assholes talk me into doing this again? Oh, that's right—I was the responsible older one. The one who owned the majority of the business and decided, with prompting, that I should be an example for my ramshackle band of brothers who looked up to me like I was a broken god they worshiped in their own quirky ways. And every time I saw that idolization, it reminded me of dead men in the desert. I didn't want to one day find I'd screwed up on the big brother front so badly I added to my body count. Survivor guilt ripped me a new one every night. I struggled with letting my brothers go their own ways. Until Mitch got drunk and threw my name into the proverbial ring after I'd confided in him over a few beers. I'd stopped drinking and gone to bed like the old man I felt like at that point.

He hadn't.

Instead, he'd woken with a renewed fervor, emailing the production company and, thanks to a morning spate of legalese, bamboozled everyone within Mitch's range, including me. Unfortunately, he'd opted to include the business reputation I'd worked so damn hard on into his madness, throwing the insta-acceptance into the show out across socials and other media I barely knew existed, linking my business and personal life intricately across a national stage.

We both wore the consequences the next morning. Him with a blinding smile, me with a case of the grumps that could have broken Wall Street.

And hence, I was here with my own disrupted purpose of setting a standard for my brothers—one in particular. My mind already cooked up its form of vengeance, not in keeping with my benchmark plan, but Mitch didn't need to know that. It wouldn't be pretty. At least, not from his end.

“Sirius, your allocated geek is in room one for the cocktail party. The one you picked from the screens,” Bettie reminded me.

I remembered highlighting three girls out of what looked like dozens spread across a giant screen that bleared my eyes in an instant. There had been a scant list of blondes representing Team Geek, a memorable redhead who gave off a cheeky vibe, and a plethora of brunettes, each who had a studious air and who could probably out-think the entire production team before breakfast.

My selection of the required short-list was based on a spate of interesting career choices. I focused on one girl who said she loved space rocks, reminding me of another girl with the same sorts of interest. Overall, the process was intimidating as hell.

One brunette stood out. Her face had the familiar angles I knew so well, and emotion gripped my chest at the memories that threatened to floor me on the spot. But it was her eyes that held me captive. Luminous, hinting at a sharp intellect and a

quick wit, though her white cheeks proved she was as terrified by the entire situation—something we had in common.

Naming her my first choice had been an easy option, and I hoped to hell that's who Bettie had allocated to me.

The show's official pitch had nothing to do with romance and everything to do with intellect, theoretically bridging the stereotypical gap between beauty and brains. From the little I knew, *Geekily Yours* exacerbated that divide in order to reveal the inequity caused by an invisible social class defined by a glass ceiling of intellect and accumulated wealth. But a whisper of some atrocious display of extravagance in the form of a branded engagement ring gifted to the show's winning couple blew that falsehood out of the water.

The show wanted a display of personal connection—read false love—or a magnificent clash of personalities for their rabid audiences. Drama sold just as well as love, or so Mitch assured me.

The host stared at me, her brows dipping slightly. I started guiltily, lost in my own head. She seemed to be the single person on set who wasn't intimidated by my scars and stoic stature.

“Uh huh,” I muttered noncommittally.

“Stay well away from the eastern wing of the studio.” She waved her hand toward a piece of plywood that separated us and the next area, which was to our west. But I didn't correct her. “Steer clear and you should be fine. There's filming there and you'll be kicked off premises permanently. You're sharing a trailer with ... Leon Shribner. He's sparkly. You'll have fun together. Your trailer is second from the end, orange line behind studio three. The girls are in the purple lane until we shift to our arranged premises.” Her full lips settled into a tight line.

I got the impression she was as unimpressed with the general state of SNAFU as me.

“Good to separate everyone.” I couldn't imagine what twenty randy members of each sex on a reality television

series would be like together, and I certainly had no intention of finding out.

“In the short term only,” Bettie warned, tapping her phone with long pink nails. “Permanent accommodation will be organized after tonight.” She made an odd face or tried to. Not much moved in her expression, and she turned away already speaking to the next person on her list, effectively dismissing me.

A day with nothing to do. No schedule, no work orders. No task list. That might sound like heaven to others, but absent, useless hours were my version of purgatory. My phone buzzed in my pocket as I walked in the direction Bettie pointed, working my way around a cluster of *beauties*. My cluster.

*There’s something I never thought I’d say.*

*Beauty* wasn’t a word that came to mind when I looked in the mirror. Brains and brawn—those I had in massive doses. Along with a full contingent of scars hidden beneath the shirt, a decent amount of ink, complimentary of military service overseas and domestically, and a hell of a lot of the invisible sort of both that marred whatever natural look I might have had once. Not that I could remember, nor could a mirror remind me.

My brothers held up the pretty section of the family, and from the fronts I watched the fight on, I was pleased to never have been a contender, until now. Thirty-nine and in my first beauty pageant on an international stage.

*Wind me up and hand me a taco, Bell Dog.*

Not that I didn’t have an ego to stroke, just that it was centered in a different part of my anatomy than most. War did that to a man. Dark hair shot through with silver rather than gray lent me a business-oriented air, but the marled, inked, and damaged flesh beneath my button-down shirt denied any idea that I spent much time driving a desk.

Unless said desk was situated in the middle of a desert shitfight playing a deadly game of Whac-A-Mole.

I paused at the edge of the group of suits. Every hair coiffed in place, chiseled jaws on prominent display. The male contingent had been declared Team Beauty, and if the men—I used the term lightly—had been declared the beauties for the term of *Geekily Yours*, then I assumed the females were Team Geek. *Sexist Division, anyone?*

The one-sided setup meant I'd get a better conversation with Team Geek than the model pack who wore their three-piece attire like they strode a catwalk even on the brief trip to the port-a-loos.

One primed and pumped city kid in a lilac suit curled his lips derisively as he spoke out of the corner of his mouth to the small crowd huddled around him. "Look, Santa's arrived." He smirked outright as the men—said with tongue firmly installed in cheek—around him tittered like a flock of drunken canaries. "Maybe he'll let us sit on his lap."

The laughter grew louder as I strode around the group, getting right in the face of the ringleader. He backpedaled in a hurry, his brow dipped as though appalled anyone would call him out on his bullshit bully prep school behavior.

I snorted and stepped into his personal space, just close enough to make the younger man seriously uncomfortable. "Rearrange those letters and it spells Satan, kid." I winked, and he blanched, mouth gaping guppy style as I invoked the devil's name like I was announcing a Sunday fucking picnic. I leaned in a little closer for the hell of it. Assholic intimidation might just be my favorite sort of game. "Promise I've got my hearing aid turned on."

Cue sideways glances and closing ranks.

*So fucking predictable.*

At least I'd established a wide berth between me and the rest of the cast for Team Beauty. Except for one guy at the far back corner.

*Outlier.*

He slouched a little, and he'd swapped his set-required suit slacks out for a pair of ripped black jeans. Graffitied Converse

were his foot attire of choice, though his hair was as primped as the rest, shorn tight to the back and sides and strategically messed at the front. A hint of black glitter sparkled under the reflected lights, and I assumed this was what Bettie had meant by *sparkly*. Engineer or IT department? I could bet a month's salary in my own business he was the former.

I slipped one hand into my pocket and turned side on to the group, leaving the rest of the open space in clear view. "Leon." I cleared my throat and waited for movement.

Four out of twenty odd heads turned in my direction, including the kid who'd decided to mouth off at me, but only one man rocked forward off his Converse-clad heels.

*Ahh, the engineer.*

I broke pose to step around the group, not bothering to introduce myself. "You've done your clip?"

He grimaced, his gaze tracking in my direction, though he still faced forward. "Yeah. Fourteen takes. Almost as many as you."

"Good to know I'm not alone. I believe we're camping out together."

He snorted. "Yeah, I've seen the accommodations. Don't think I'll be spending much time there." His fingers joggled in his pockets.

"That bad, huh?" Maybe I'd pegged him in the wrong hole, and Leon required more mirrors and primp time than I'd previously assessed.

"Nah. I mean, orange isn't brilliant, but those four walls are a touch too close for me."

I grinned. "Small spaces aren't my thing either. I'd suggest a run, but I think we're meant to stay in this a little longer." I gestured to the blue and black brocade button down vest that barely closed around my chest. I could have sworn wardrobe had pulled it from a period costume shoot for a pirate commercial.



“Sounds about right.” He rocked on his heels once more, though the tight line of his shoulders relaxed a touch.

“I’ve been banned from working by my brothers who threw me into this shithole, so ... bar?”

“You speak my language.” He grinned and jerked his head to one side. “Shall we?”

“Damn right.”

I followed Leon to a side door off the set, closing it discreetly. Maybe this whole reality TV show thing wouldn’t be so bad. I mean, it wasn’t like an audience was going to want to watch a grumpy assed ex-soldier for the entire season. Despite my brother’s aims I’d be out on my first week and back to my regular job by the end of the month. I flicked my phone over in my palm as a stream of messages filled the screen from my brothers’ group chat.

Mitch: Don’t forget to smile for the cameras, pretty boy.

Jameson: Give him a break. He hasn’t been laid in a decade or more.

Sirius: Seriously? I remember giving you pointers when you gave up your V-Card not so long ago.

Jameson: No harm in holding out for the right lady.

Mitch: The right lady who ran as soon as she saw that shlong. Going with the wrong brother there, Miss Sage.

Jameson: Don’t say her name, man. You’re killing me.

Mitch: Might use some of that kitty money and get you a girl for hire.

Sirius: Don’t screw with my business while I’m out playing, pretend cop.

Mitch: Good to see you still have a little fight.  
You'll need it in the piranha pit.

Sirius: Remember to feed Mrs. Rawlings' corgis.  
Those things get rabid.

Mitch: Sent Jameson to do the job for me. He  
came back in rags. Loving this delegation thing.

Jameson: Things are vicious AF

Mitch: Pussy

Sirius: Until you remember you have to lead by  
example. And get your ass out of my desk chair.

Mitch: Nah, I like it here.

I snorted. Mitch had better not get comfortable in my office. If his ass left an imprint in my desk chair, I'd toss Sothis' lawyer out the window strapped to it.

Two weeks. Three, tops. That's all I had to manage. A game of survival amongst primps and stylists.

I'd never been so wrong.

## CHAPTER 2



## SIRIUS

THREE BEERS and a suit change for the cocktail party later I leaned against a fake, rose-covered, Romanesque column—*also plaster style fake*—and tried not to count the minutes until the session was due to close up. The beers sat well. The wasted time didn't.

I tapped my fingers on my bottle green suit leg and tried not to look like I should be part of some trendy period drama.

“I'm gonna buy you a fidget spinner if you don't stand still.” Leon spoke between his teeth and flashed me a sideways grin while still managing to pose perfectly in his creased, charcoal suit that matched nothing about him including his—yes, Bettie was right—*sparkly* personality.

Bettie primed and primed every other man in our contingent but steered a wide berth around the pair of us, though her lips pursed as she took in Leon's rumpled state. I suspected he'd dressed so far from his personal brand of *engineer-I-don't-give-a-fuck* and part-time drag queen just to see how much he could piss Bettie off.

I admired his effort and resolved to back him every chance I could. A man's got to have hobbies, right?

Staring around the small gathering in the sunken garden that had been yesterday's washing commercial scene, Bettie made eye contact with both of us, shaking stiff blonde hair back over her shoulders as the gleam in her baby blue eyes took on a speculative flicker.

“Watch out. She's got her eye on you,” I muttered under my breath, not bothering to smile back at our host.

“Nah, those eyes are all yours, man. She scares me.” Leon stared straight forward, his green and purple manicured fingers twitching at his back.

“Boys, you don't have to fight over who's going to be the bitch.” Dean, a newspaper intern and radio DJ with a face to

match his smooth voice, threw his opinion over his shoulder. Dark hair cascaded over a straight nose in ringlets more suited to an eighteenth-century courtesan than a mini media mogul. He twirled each curl in a constant flurry of movement.

“You can use it for your press release, Fabio. I’ve gotta stick this one out, but hell— make it a fun break.” *Just stay the fuck out of my business, and we can be bosom besties forever.* I grinned down at the younger man. He reminded me of my baby brother, not that Brandon was little by any means. All face and action to hide what he kept secret inside.

“Reckon I can find a nice old photo of you in black and white,” he mused, tapping his forefinger on his chin. “Or were photographs in sepia when you were a boy?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, and my mother wore a bustle.”

“He was never a boy. Came out of his mumma’s vagina with a full head of gray streaks and a fluffy beard,” Leon added.

“Those are silver streaks, thanks so much.” I pretended to preen using my middle finger aimed in Leon’s direction, though the Santa jokes were starting to wear thin.

My trailer-mate laughed. “Keep telling yourself that, Papa Bear.”

“Now you just need to nail Goldilocks over there and you’ll have a story book ending.” A red-haired man wearing enough fake tan to match his natural locks sneered from the other side of the room. Three surrounding men in their mid to late twenties snickered into their hands like a group of school kids.

I scanned the area, but purple suit boy was conspicuously absent. Maybe he’d called it a day already? Nah, more like he was still in with make-up, fixing his face. The biggest bullies frequently had the most fragile egos. In my experience with the muddied breed of men who weren’t worthy of the title, covering the cracks in the façade became a habit, whether with big coats or in other ways.

I shot a hard look in the group's direction and Ringleader Number Two's sneer faltered. "Nail? Jesus, fuck. If I use that term with you, it'll be when I'm holding a firearm." I flashed him a smile with teeth. "And running won't save you, little man."

Just because I didn't agree with Bettie's plastic surgery habit didn't mean she deserved to be spoken about by the men she'd spent the better part of fourteen hours wrangling for her show. She'd been running since before daybreak, a work ethic I respected

Hell, I only had to organize my three brothers for eight hours on weekdays, and that was tough enough. Give kudos where kudos was due. Maybe that Botox prevented us from seeing her roll her eyes every few minutes.

Red's mouth opened, but a bank of brilliance from across the set lit us up like the Fourth of July. His eyes watered, and his mouth closed. I might have laughed if mine weren't doing the same.

"Man up, dude. You'll smear your foundation." Leon elbowed my ribs. "Got your present for your Geek?"

"Yeah." I grunted, though the contact didn't even tickle.

Nothing along that side did, though pain would have been a nice distraction from the make-up caked over my face. One stylist had approached with a tube of lipstick—albeit skin colored—but my toothy smile had given her the option to skip me and move onto her next victim.

Naturally, Leon wore his lip gloss with aplomb, though the unique purple tint suggested he'd brought his own for the occasion rather than be smeared with the studio's communal petri-dish collection.

"Gentlemen, my beauties," Bettie cooed from her place in front of us, her bright red heels and red sheath dress matched to the roses overpopulating the small pedestal. "Welcome to the brand-new season of *Geekily Yours*."

The bank of lights fixed in both her direction and ours, leaving everyone in a halo of retina burn. I hoped she'd

checked everyone's medical backgrounds for epilepsy or migraines.

One of the men in the front row offered a wave I could see over his head of hair. Bettie glared at him, and he desisted.

Dean snuffed a laugh at my side, not discreet enough to avoid a glare of his own though he didn't appear to care all that much. My estimation of his entertainment factor rose an inch.

"Now that you've created your introductory clips," Bettie said, "it's time to reveal your chosen Geek. This year we're pairing you up from day one, and it's time for you to meet. Each week a couple will be sent home, but not in time for us to reveal a winning pair at the Galaxy Gala dinner at the end of the season. The event will be hosted by Nevada's newest Observatory where we shall wine and dine beneath the stars before the grand finale event spotlights our winning couple. They will be presented with a cheque for half a million dollars courtesy of Cimmerian Studios and Georgia's Senator Cannon Pillington." Bettie smiled blandly, surveying us all with bright eyes and bared teeth, daring any one of us to defy her will to move from our pedestals.

Spoilers: we didn't.

We held our positions like an army of cardboard soldiers, each as unprepared for our first challenges as the next man, whether we recognized the sordid fact or not.

Satisfied with us, Bettie continued her introduction to the series, listing a never-ending reel of sponsors. Finally, her attention returned to us. "Survive your challenges to reach the dinner, and we all get a bit of a show. When I call your name, come and collect your rose"—she indicated to a bucket of roses in various colors a stagehand whisked to her feet before darting away—"and head through yonder door."

"Yonder? Who says *yonder*?" Leon muttered.

It was my turn to try not to crack a smile.

"Each Beauty is to find their matching Geek in the cocktail garden. Mingle, chat, and enjoy yourselves. Get to know each

other, what you like and ... don't like about yourselves. Give us a taste of your reality. We will meet again at the end of the evening to announce challenge one before closing the cocktail party for this evening." Bettie smiled magnanimously and called a name.

By the time mine was called, only a single black rose was left in her bucket.

"Thank you." I took the rose, thumbing its stem and finding only smooth ridges.

"Her name is Annie," Bettie muttered out the side of her mouth, displaying an impressive set of white teeth and ventriloquist skills. "She's fucking terrified to be here, so go easy on her or I'll rip your balls off. Dark hair with bangs. Head for the begonias."

"Noted." I gave her a bland smile of my own and strode for the door, already searching for another black rose to match mine.

*Annie.*

I repeated her name over in my head and stepped around the partition that led to an opulent garden setting. Fairy lights filled the space, offering the sunken garden with its vines, trellises, and loveseats a soft glow that disguised hidden microphones and cameras dangling from each strand.

Couples talked quietly, spread out across the broad fake lawn created to give the camera crew a chance to get right up and in-your-face personal while they sought the stars of their new show. Unlike Team Beauty in their coordinated designer outfits, the girls of geek were dressed dowdy, the picture of the stereotypical librarian, the not-so-sexy sort.

Shapeless, balloon-like dresses, rumped linens and cottons. Frumpy, button-up cardigans. The military man in me, programmed for sharp creases and exact lines, gritted his teeth, but I'd been in the private sector for long enough to kill the worst of the oldest ingrained habits.

Not one of them held a candle to their suited companions or to the roses they carried. A tight knot loosened and swirled



at the base of my gut, leaving me nauseated. It looked like no one had taken the time to look after the girls, leaving them to their own devices to prep with little scripting or style work while the men had been primed within an inch of our lives.

Bowed shoulders and hidden faces was the order of the geek world, and the contrast of it all struck me as cruel. My stomach flipped. Perhaps I should have done a little more of my own research rather than let Mitch tell me about a project I had zero interest in. My focus had been on preparing to pitch to the dept of defense, should the opportunity arise, rather than research a reality TV show I'd never heard of, though I'd been assured the season would be huge by both sibling and production company.

Just fucking perfect. Perhaps I could defect to Team Geek. They looked the most approachable of the lot, though I did like my choice of trailer companion.

Swallowing back bile at the obvious circus surrounding me, I walked the perimeter, outside the range of the cameras for the most part, searching for a lone female. The few remaining wallflowers standing on their own gripped drooping roses while their partners stood at the bar drowning their worries as fast as they were served.

The sense of cruelty raged in a low-level fury inside my chest, my steps becoming stomps as I headed for a shadowy section of the garden surrounded by hedges and shrubs at the back of the set.

I wondered how long the geeks had been left alone, waiting, then I hated myself for using the term, but my exhausted brain couldn't come up with anything better. As I worked my way to the back of the garden, movement in my periphery drew my attention to a gabled arbor. Wisteria draped the structure in green and purples while potted begonias brought a flash of color to the drawn, pale face and dark bangs I sought.

Making my way around the side, I broke through my pity-party, keeping my step light and my gaze sharp. White, lacy material slipped between the arbor and a razor-sharp hedge.

Moving on instinct, I reached out to snag whatever I could and caught a wrist. “Excuse me, I’m looking for—”

Dark eyes emerged from between the shrubs she’d been hiding behind, and what exactly I was looking for disappeared from my mind. Fathomless, star-sprinkled eyes matched almost black hair curled in short bangs around her face, curving down to the middle of her back in wild waves. A wisteria bloom tangled near her cheek, and my hand was halfway to picking it out before I caught myself.

Rosebud lips fell open as the girl stared at me.

Girl, because she had to be more than half my damn age, though that didn’t stop her from looking tempting as hell. *What sort of romance am I supposed to have with a kid like this without being labeled a cradle-snatcher?* Another headline broached my addled brain: *Tired soldier pretends to be tomcat with young girl in new season of Geekily Yours.*

Hell, I wouldn’t have to worry about Bettie castrating me; the media would do it on her behalf.

Annie—assuming I hadn’t screwed that up, a distinct possibility with today’s track record—was anything but a kid. A white cotton dress flowed from her shoulders over curved hips and almost to the grass beneath her bare feet. Pink toes peeped out from the edge of the lacy hem. The swell of her chest hinted at sumptuous curves hidden by the thin material, making me want to rip it off to check. Pink cheeks matched the begonias Bettie had warned me about along with the girl’s fear. She looked more like a damn sacrifice than a contestant on a reality TV show.

Unlike the other girls, her shoulders didn’t curve in. Instead, she held them straight and defiant, her chin tipped up, a black rose clutched to her breast. Her gaze drifted to the bloom gripped too tightly in my own hand, the stem slightly bent, and back to me. Alarm, along with a decent dose of fear, flitted through her bottomless eyes.

Brief, but I witnessed it all the same.

Sweet, innocent, defiant, and quietly stunning. Her feet shuffled backward as she retreated into the shrubbery, her body swaying to an alluring, unheard tempo. She had the sort of understated beauty that took a man by surprise. A swell of emotion dug a hole in my chest where my heart had been once.

If I believed in destiny, it would have been in that moment, but my belief system lay in damn hard work and knowing one's opponent.

I hadn't put any work into her so she couldn't be mine, and as for knowing her ... instinct told me everything beautiful about this woman was far more than skin deep, and I was only scratching the surface.

Her wide eyes disappeared with the rest of her body into the shrubbery until only the twin pools of glittery blackness remained. *Maybe she should have been paired with Leon?* Hot on the heels of that thought was another that screwed with every damn plan I'd put in place from the get-go.

*She's mine.*

I grated my teeth together, the shuddering sensation leaving me trembling like a virgin on sacrifice night as I stared at her slipping away. On impulse, I reached into the bush, grabbing for whatever I could before she escaped me. My fingers curled around a wrist—*fuck, it'd better be a wrist*—and I drew her forward where she tripped and splayed at my feet in a puddle of chocolate curls and white cotton.

Fine, I yanked her out of the shrubbery a little too hard.

*Exuberance much, Sirius?*

I snarled at my conscience, cussing silently in three different languages as I reached out to haul the girl to her feet. She scrabbled at my fingers, though with the amount of calluses there it was about as effective as a day-old kitten attacking a weathered cactus.

There's a sexy image right there.

My mouth opened but nothing came out. She held my gaze, her lips parted, and I swear on the grave of my first goldfish that she fucking well *mewled*.

I didn't know whether to laugh or take the hit of arousal seriously. Or was that Siriusly? Christ, my brain had gone on hiatus alongside my cock. Perhaps they could go off and get married, and I could be left here in enemy territory, in need of a rescue.

An image of me in the dress and the girl wrapped in shining armor flitted through my mind.

Hell, I'd been in worse situations in the desert than this, and I suspected that this time I wouldn't come out half as unscathed.

## CHAPTER 3



ANNIE

*HOLY SHIT, let me out. Evict, evict, evict.*

Or eject. All I wanted was to survive the show with a minimum of embarrassment and leave the production as early as possible, exotic location be mudpuddled.

Fail on fronts one and two.

That was it. I was done. Already.

*Eject me from this hell ride please.*

I craned my neck back to stare at the behemoth of a man towering above me and tried not to vomit, though some other truly pathetic noise slipped out before I had the presence of mind to stop the freaking thing in its tracks. *Blow me a hydrogen bubble and let me escape this nightmare, a la Good Witch Glenda style.*

The suited man holding a black rose like an assassin's weapon glowered at me. Something primitive in me warned that this man was the sort of predator who would take that tiny noise and turn it into something hunted. Someone like me.

"Fuck me."

I blinked. Those were the first words out of his mouth when he saw me? I was that small, frail and pathetic? Screw that. *Track change: uranium blast from the Wicked Witch of the West.* My brain weighed in six times over on these *beauties*, and I wasn't about to let a disgruntled predator take his shortcomings out on me. I might not be able to outrun him, but surely I could make better conversation than that.

"No, thank you." The words left my mouth cool and concise, not a tremor to be heard, though I expected them with every breath, in the manner I'd been trying to hold a conversation with my boss for the past three years.

This man was ten times more intimidating than Jansen, but I didn't stammer before him as I did my boss in our stunted lab environment. Clearly, my mind had started the day broken and

was determined to finish it in the same vein. Symmetry was fine on a non-polar compound but not so fancy in a social situation. Clearly, this wasn't going to be the typical princess rescue. More like the green-ogre sort saving his ass, facing down the dragon with a kickass princess in tow.

I just wasn't sure if I were the princess or the donkey in that scenario. I suspected the latter.

I'd always admired a kickass royal who could beat up baddies in several layers of skirts, probably because I lacked the coordination to put one foot in front of the other on a daily basis. Current example of gumby level existence—I was crumpled at a man's feet in a stupid white sundress that looked more like a colonial nightie.

I clung to my pride for a long instant as I clambered to my feet. Cotton tangled around my toes, the dew studded fake grass offered no damn purchase, and I slipped. Black suit pants came up fast as I pitched forward a second time and face planted into the man's crotch area.

"This wasn't how I planned tonight going," I mumbled, inhaling a mix of musky memanscent and whiskey.

So much for savoring the chance of slipping away from the giant blocking my path back to the alfresco area, which was draped in enough pot plants to set off a plethora of allergies.

Broad hands descended onto the back of my head. The man let out a guttural groan I couldn't decipher as frustration or disgust but the hardening length beneath his wool mix suit pants solved that problem for me.

I swallowed hard, scrabbling at his thighs as he swore copiously above me, words that sounded like more than one language though my ears weren't my focus for the current time. I wriggled backward but his hands were my savior, yanking me upward with as much strength as he had dragged me out of the bushes a moment earlier.

I stood straight and stared at him, horribly conscious of the cameras hidden in the same shrubbery I'd used for concealment before the silver fox had brought me back into

the spotlight. A crunch behind me only confirmed my fear. I imagined the shorts cut together to look like I was giving a man I'd just met, who I hadn't exchanged more than five words with, a blow job on the first night of the season.

Just another humiliation in the life of Annie Pillingston. How furious my father would be.

Cold, abject horror washed over me head to toe. Oh, God. He'd be mafia grade furious. How dare a daughter bring such shame to a politician's house. The senator was fanatical about his reputation and ongoing campaigns he heroed, taking on nothing unless he scented success.

I, alone, was his constant reminder of failure.

The daughter who couldn't be a socialite. I sucked at the most basic level of social graces, and now I was on a show where I was guaranteed to fail. I still didn't understand why he'd pushed so hard for me to be a contestant. It was just as mysterious as Jansen's insistence the show would be good for my work life. After tonight's Rotten Tomatoes worthy performance, I'd be lucky to last another day let alone the first week.

At least my humiliation would be swift and short, as always. Then I could disappear back into my safe space and deal with carbon dating and concepts the rest of the world had neither heard of, nor cared for.

Which suited me just fine.

"This is going to be a fun weekend." He sluiced his hands through his dark, silver-streaked hair and frowned at me.

*Well, aren't we just Mister Ray of Sunshine?*

"You'd think a little hard on might solve that chemical imbalance in your brain that brings your inner asshole right to the forefront." Then my brain caught up with his words." You think you're only going to be here for a weekend? Places like this eat people like you and me. We're camera fodder, nothing more."

One very sexy eyebrow arched, paired with a smirk, both of which sank my snark right back to the covered pit it usually



resided in. “Oh, no. You’re stuck with me for a full season, sweetheart,” he assured me in a patronizing tone.

My stomach tightened. Did he think this was all a big joke? “Are you being serious?”

“Dead Sirius.” He held a straight face, but the odd inflection he used to lilt the word gave me pause.

“What’s your name?”

“Sirius. Weston.” He bared his teeth at me in a grin that was both feral and repulsively sexy.

My mouth dried under his perusal. I swallowed hard. Bad idea, that, as it turned out. My tongue adhered to the roof of my mouth. I attempted to dislodge it but only made the suction worse. I fought with the whole tongue-roof-mouth thing, snuffling like a rooting pig while he stared at me like I was some sort of social experiment.

*You are.*

Not that I’d volunteered for it.

“You are being Sirius.”

*Damn, I just lowered the IQ of the courtyard.*

“You are.” He smiled, and the entire garden melted away.

His face transformed from predator to almost *suave*, which hadn’t been a thing for decades. But he—Mister Sirius himself—pulled it off nicely.

“You’ll blind people with a supernova like that. Weapons shouldn’t be permitted,” I mumbled, half lost in his radiance.

“A weapon like what?” His smile dimmed as he craned forward as though checking I did in fact have brain function.

My cheeks blared my embarrassment until I imagined myself as a lightbulb head on a white dress. *So appropriate, right there.* It was the same in every social situation for me, and I suspected that was something I’d have in common with most of the girls on Team Geek. Not that we’d spoken much, each as terrified as the next girl as to what we would face and how demoralizing every knock down of hope would be.

*Daddy will be so proud.*

Not that I particularly cared what he thought, but my father had significant reach, which limited my freedoms, though I'd moved out of the family home to seek my independence long ago.

Unlike what I suspected the beauties had been subjected to, Team Geek were left to our own devices while the men were dressed and polished like bronzed gods. Maybe it made good television. I had no idea. I didn't even own one, but to me it seemed almost ... heartless. We were just entertainment for the masses, and the masses must be pleased.

"Uh—" My social skills stretched to their limit, I stumbled around looking for an answer, but my mouth dried up as I shredded the stem of my flower.

"Annie, right?" He leaned against the arbor that—according to the stretch of that waistcoat pulled tight across his chest—shouldn't have been able to hold his bulk.

Not that I was an expert on manly chests, having experienced a grand total of three in my entire adulthood, but I was rather intimate with the lower half of him now. My cheeks flamed like a star nursery waiting on the next big bang.

*There goes my ego.*

"Yes. Wait, did I give you my name?"

"No." His smile dissipated, leaving him almost as fidgety as me. On edge? As if, like me and the rest of team Geek, he didn't quite fit in with the minor deities and gleaming Adonises who strutted their way through the garden. Eden might have been a better choice of reference, but my religion had to do with facts, not fantasy. Mister Sirius Weston might suit a CEO's office or a boardroom, but something told me he preferred to rough it a little.

Maybe one day he might like to rough it with me.

I emitted enough heat to burn up a small moon. "Okay," I managed. Wait, what was I agreeing to? Our fledgling conversation stuttered and died a silent, drawn-out death.

Sirius twisted his rose in his fingers then proffered it in one hand. “I think I’m supposed to give this to you.” I swear he stepped backward when I reached for the thornless stem.

“Thank you.” I added it to the one I’d begun to shred. “Ah, who—what do you do? On a normal day?” I strove for a smile and shoved the closest thing I could garner across my mouth and tried not to think of the perfect length of his cock filling it.

*Fail.*

I closed my eyes, letting out a small moan.

Sirius took another step back.

Well, almost. He rocked on his heels at least.

*What does a normal day look like for you? That’s the best you’ve got, Pillington? May as well have said ‘I carried a watermelon.’*

I gritted my teeth and forced a smile, and his alarmed eyebrows told me what a cock-up that attempt was. *Annnnd* we’re back in penile land.

“I run a security firm.” He tripped on the words, and I was relieved to know his nerves matched mine, desperate to form common ground of any sort.

“Like radios and alarms and things?”

He paused, studying me. “That’s right.”

“Oh, good. I’m a geo-astronomer. I study non-earth rocks.” I blinked and clung to my fake smile.

For the first time in my life, I wished I’d been able to say I was a hairdresser or a makeup artist, but I’d never been very good at either of those things despite the early childhood coaching my mother had thrown my way in a daily increasing bid of desperation to make me fit into our family. More than once I’d asked if she adopted me, and more than once she hesitated.

I’d hoped for the sort of smile a fairy godmother was supposed to give in granting a wish, filled with platitudes even if they were fake. Maybe a cuddle. All I received was a dying

smile paired with thinned lips I knew too well. My mother offered the sort of bone-deep disappointment only a parent could inflict on the offspring they professed to love. Well, were supposed to. I wasn't sure mine had ever done that. Funny, how family had the everlasting ability to leave the deepest scars.

Sirius rocked on his heels again and slid his hands into his pockets. "What's your favorite earth rock?" He stared over my head, searching for something. The exit, maybe?

"I study non—" I started to correct him then caught on. "Oh. Opals. I love the flashes of color in the boulder ones." I bit my lip on asking what his favorite rock was because, let's face it, no one else other than a geologist or a lapidarist actually *likes* rocks.

"They're a beautiful stone." His gaze dropped back to meet mine.

Intensity streamed from him in a constant flow and being the single target of his attention, I was relieved when he didn't smile again. I might have swooned or something else ridiculous and entirely unbecoming of a scientist.

"Yes." I hovered between biting my lips and squeezing them tight, though that brought the image of sucking on a lemon to the forefront of my mind. Our conversation petered and died, and ... we were back to a standstill. I cleared my throat. "How did you get on the show?"

*What makes a man as formidable as you do something so facetious?*

His smile returned, though this one was lopsided, lending him a boyish look. Huh. Maybe he wasn't as old as I thought. "My brother—my *second* brother—put my name in then tied it to the business so I couldn't back out."

"Really? Typical second child." I smiled ruefully. "My big brothers are *both* like that."

He jerked as if I'd slapped him. "You have older brothers?"

“Two. Frank and Ben. They ... walked away from the family a long time ago.”

“Ben? And Frank?” His eyebrows shot for the sky. “As in ...”

“Benjamin Franklin, yes. The inventor. My parents had high standards, and they both found it hugely amusing to avoid politics at all costs,” I offered with no small sense of pride. “But they’re just as clever as Franklin was. Frank is an architect and lives in London. Ben is in Iceland working on clean energy theories.” I didn’t mention the sister who treated me like a servant from the day I could walk, her *competition* for a mother’s attention I’d never wanted.

“They sound ... nice.” His mouth snapped shut then opened again. “Why on earth would they let you go on a show like this?”

*Does he think I’m a prostitute or a hopeless case?*

“I beg your pardon?” I stared and took my own step back. If we kept retreating, one of us would end up hitting the opposite wall. *Maybe that’s a good thing.* I could go back to my bush and hide there indefinitely for the season. “I make my own choices, thank you very much.” I ended my comment on a sharper note than intended, but as long as it got my point across, decorum be damned, though every word was a lie. Because I hadn’t made my own choices, and that was the reason I was stuck in a garden with fake grass and a cameraman so close behind me that if I opened my mouth, they’d see a first person POV of Sirius up close.

My mother would be dually horrified and bemoaning her woes, as usual. The joys of a martyr. I hoped she was watching, then I remembered the show wouldn’t air for months, long after the series finished filming. The additional reminder that cameras and microphones saw and heard everything sent a ripple up my spine, straightening it.

“Why did you sign up for the damn show?” Sirius demanded. “You don’t need makeup to catch a man, and you probably don’t want any of these fools.” He snorted and waved a hand to indicate the crowd mingling behind me, doing

their duty while I managed to turn a humiliating moment into a bitch slapping tourney with my opposite.

“I didn’t come on because I wanted to *catch a man*,” I retorted.

“Fine. Then why are you here?” He took a step forward—a large one—and ended right in my space.

A hand slipped around my waist as he dipped his head, preventing me from backing up, foiling any chance of my desperate need for escape. His perfectly arched eyebrows raised as he closed in the space between us. I followed the line along the five o’clock shadow that highlighted a strong jaw, and the beginnings of a maybe-beard. A light breath brushed my cheeks, all pine forest and leather with a hint of whiskey.

*Do I want to escape from him?*

My body urged me to lean into the intimate touch of a man I’d just met while my head bounced off the walls, insisting I run.

## CHAPTER 4



## ANNIE

I DID neither because my feet merged with the lawn and locked me down, indicating a primitive lack of choice right there in my *freeze* response. I wanted to raise my gaze to the heavens and beg for a meteorite from the universe. I'd done enough discovery over the years on asteroids and meteorites to earn a solo event hadn't I? Go down in flames and all that jazz.

Bettie clapped her hands as she entered the garden, school teacher style, though her smile was anything but sharp, or kind and doting. The gleam in her baby blues held a predatory edge that sent a shiver along my spine.

Around us, camera crews retreated, tiny red lights flickering off to leave us in a media void, if only for the moment. My relief was short lived.

"Everyone on the steps, please. Shoulders back ... yes, let her go. I said"—Bettie pivoted on her heel as she flicked a thumb our way in an unmistakable *hurry up* gesture—"Let her go. You can hide behind her later. I thought Beauties were meant to be bold. She's got more balls than you'll ever possess." Her glare became a touch fanatical, and the Beauty in her sights retreated, releasing his Geek.

The girl rubbed her wrist and backed into a cloister of girls dressed just like me. Team Geek closed ranks around her. My heart lifted a little, and I stepped forward, away from Sirius Weston, leaving a whisper of cold air at my back.

"You didn't answer my question," Sirius murmured softly.

Clearly, a single step away from him wasn't anywhere near enough to get out of his range ... if I wanted. Wait, hadn't I just backed into a shrubbery to avoid him? The man had some Sirius magnetic pull. I choked on a giggle that lodged in my throat.

Tears prickled the edges of my eyes as Sirius looked on with no small dose of concern, but his question had raised a



different sort of response in me, and it wasn't his voice I heard in the back of my mind.

When nothing fell from the heavens to save my ongoing humiliation, I pulled my head in, Jansen's voice taking up residence in a private gray matter space I'd prefer him never to have access to. *Work through each day nice and slow. Talk about earning your degree if you get stuck and need to be social. Anything you're comfortable talking about.* And as always, hot on the heels of comfort came the real Jansen. *And fuck, you need to be more social in the office. Your unfriendliness is killing your career.*

Jansen had coached me, as he did in everything, putting his words into my mouth until he could have used me for a ventriloquist show on Broadway.

"Because my boss wanted me to be more approachable in the office and to have a social life," I blurted. *And because my father always gets what he wants and offers zero explanation.*

*Burn baby, burn.*

My eyes fluttered shut, blocking out the shock on Sirius' face.

"Your boss set you up," he asked slowly, as if seeking clarification.

Oh, Jansen was going to have a field day with this interaction.

I cracked one eyelid open and peered at him. "Yes. And my father."

The shock reflected on his face turned to hard rage for an instant before that, too, was shuttered away. "That's damn irresponsible. Wait ... who do you work for?" He waved off the second half of my comment and focused on the former.

"NET?" I offered it up as a sacrifice, waiting for judgment to fall.

"The space agency that fights for footing against NASA?" He raised an eyebrow. "I've had ... dealings with them

before.” The eyebrow wiggled a teensy bit. Those things were getting a workout. Not that he needed more muscle.

“Yes?” I winced.

“Why are you embarrassed about that?” he demanded.

“Why are you in my face?” I snapped back. My eyes closed, and I sucked in a short, icy breath. Icy, because cold air swarmed between us where he’d let go of my waist and retreated a step away.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. You just—” The corners of his eyes crinkled, but it wasn’t in humor or even anger. Bare, downright pain clouded his eyes for a moment, then that too disappeared.

“I just want?” I asked softly, extending both the roses that I’d twisted together until the stems tangled in tight turns woven together. “Sirius?”

He stared at me for a long moment, unspeaking. Then his hand rose, and he picked something out of my hair. A single wisteria blossom dropped on top of our roses, the pale purple petals resting on a sea of black velvet. “You remind me of someone.” His gaze flickered over my head again, catching onto some sight behind me.

Curiosity finally won out. I twisted, peering over my shoulder and came face-to-face with a cameraman. Well, face to lens. Bettie waved frantically over his head at a distance, urging us forward. I backed up in a hurry, eager to recreate my personal space bubble while my mind whirred. Sirius hadn’t connected with me much until he saw something over my head.

Then he’d been all attentive and connected on an emotional level, taking the conversation up a notch. He’d been facing the camera at that point. Which meant ... had he been posing? I swallowed back bile that rose to the back of my tongue. The last few minutes while I connected with my person had been an act. I’d struggled with my own lack of response, mentally slapping myself into shape for an interaction that hadn’t been in the least bit real.

Acid retreated to my stomach, nesting in a deep pool there, and I wished I'd puked it straight onto the camera, or maybe onto Sirius' glossy patent shoes.

Hot on the heels of my fear reaction came the programmed anger. It washed over me, but it didn't win out against the wave of disappointment that followed. No stranger to betrayal and power games with my family, this was what I'd expected when Jansen informed me I'd need to be present at auditions for the firm's reputation and to increase my *lacking* social parameters. Want to know the best way to take romance out of anything?

Get a scientist's take, verbatim. Because believe me, a doctor of anything can suck emotion out of most things and replace it with technical gobbledygook. Just like Jansen had when he coerced me into agreeing to take part in the show.

Apparently, his facade and Sirius' act had a whole lot in common.

My heart ached as I twisted back to face Sirius. I wanted scathing words on the tip of my tongue, ready to lash out, but all I had to offer was an already broken heart with a little more sheared off the side.

Sirius stared down at me for a long moment, something familiar etched into his eyes that I almost understood.

*Don't forget, Annie Pillsington. Everyone here is just another act. Nothing is real.*

But part of me so wanted the previous moments to be real, even though that was a fairytale sized lie I told myself of Sirius, the brightest star in the sky and the moon who tried to outshine him.

His lips tightened and his demeanor paused, as though he might say something. I leaned forward, my blooms pressed to my stomach, and waited.

*Give me a shower of stars to wish on, another shrub to fall out of, or a man who I can trust.*

Silence stretched thin between us. Without another word, Sirius pivoted on his heel and marched back the way he'd

come, a dog to heel, leaving me alone with a shredded stem and a fierce grasp on my damaged ego.

I stood in the shadow of a tall, albeit fake, Romanesque column while Bettie spoke to Team Biscuit. *Team Beauty* just didn't roll off the tongue as well. Our host mostly ignored the girls, though she offered me a small wave before the cameras started rolling. Probably ensuring I didn't puke all over her steps in my panic of what came next.

A glance around the courtyard told me that yet again, Sirius was nowhere to be found, despite checking out each male and every haunt left in the garden. He'd been absent for the rest of the evening while I milled about on my own around the arbor. My pet cameraman maintained his position in stoic fashion for the first hour, then took pity on me and found a tray of fresh champagne flutes and new prey.

I downed four glasses before the bubbles took effect, leaving me in a cloudy, pleasant haze where anxiety couldn't touch me, at least for the next hour or two.

Vomiting the lot back up in front of all the cameras and a clear shot was *not* out of the question.

“Challenge number one.” Bettie waved a card over her head like a fifty at a strip show. “I want to introduce our wardrobe crew for this season of *Geekily Yours*.” She gabbed on with her housekeeping items while I scanned the garden again.

Sirius must have walked off the set. What did that mean for me? Jansen would be furious if I didn't at least appear to try. My father, too. Jansen had recruited him as backup to pressure me into participating. I hadn't realized they even knew each other.

Whatever had been filmed so far left me with less than a stellar social status—always good to stay true to form—and I doubted that would be enough to appease ... whatever in the hell my boss had tried to set up. Or maybe it was a big nothing, and Jansen's plans could be taken at face value. Though, as always, I remained in the dark, a tactic both my boss and my father had in common.

Sirius' response made me question my reaction to my boss' most recent demand. I'd worked alongside Jansen, and then for him, over the past three years and had long learned it wasn't worth the effort, panic, or residual anxiety to avoid keeping the peace with him while getting my work done.

Fighting wasn't really in me. I loved my job and hated when anything threatened it. Including when my boss threw me on a reality TV show. Hell, how pathetic had I become? No wonder Sirius had walked away from me. I couldn't blame him in the least.

A light touch at my elbow brought me back to the performance unfolding before me. I stifled a squawk and leapt backwards a clear foot. Or would have if a stable-sized chest hadn't been in my path. Sirius' body blocked my departure from my hidden spot, and his hand closed firmly around my upper arm, his fingers encircling the limb with ease. His dark eyes—charcoal, almost solid black—stared down at me in both challenge and humor.

I swallowed back the need to be the thing, the person, who challenged him.

“I don't blame you for drinking the champagne. I'm bored out of my damn brains too. Did you know you were sliding down the column? Thought I'd offer support before you found the ground a second time since I'm on Team Annie for the foreseeable future and all.”

Visions of his body pressed to mine, curled around me on the floor while we snored in tandem like drunken college kids spread over international media crooked the corner of my mouth up.

Sirius' gaze traced the action, lingering on lips that tingled beneath his study. Breath caught in my throat as I leaned back a little, enjoying his warmth far too much despite recognizing him as a potential poser.

“Where did you go?” I murmured. “I sort of thought maybe you weren't coming back.”

*Succinct, Annie. Brilliant.*

His hand tightened on my arm, and he drew me back into him in a slow, discrete movement that left every part of my body contacting him from ankles to where my head pressed to his shoulder. “I shouldn’t have left you. I—” He cleared his throat softly. “I’ll explain another time. My intent wasn’t to abandon you. Just to work out my own shit.”

I smiled. “You don’t have to parent me, or whatever. I’m not your responsibility.”

Sirius lowered his head, brushing his lips against my ear. “Maybe I want you to be my responsibility.”

His voice grated deep and rough, and I got the impression he didn’t mean in the sisterly way.

And my rollercoaster of a stomach was just fine with that. Providing it stayed in exactly the state it was and didn’t head north while my body went south.

“It would be nice to have someone to lean on, especially when I’m scared out of my wits,” I whispered back. Had someone slipped me truth serum? What the hell was Blabber-Buttons Annie doing, letting out all the state secrets? It wasn’t like I had secret clearance or anything critical at all.

Sirius’ hand dropped to my waist, sliding around to my stomach, which fluttered with an influx of butterflies and a mob of squirrels that chased them. *Stay down, down, down.* My body took the instruction a little too literally, my knees bending at the merest suggestion.

*Shit.*

*Up, up, up.*

Closing my eyes briefly as I regained my sense of gravity despite the solid mass behind me, I slipped my hand over his, tracing roughened knuckles and smooth, long scars. Knowing I’d been right about him roughing it gave me pleasure.

Bettie finished her spiel and opened her envelope. “Challenge one will be a coordination situation. Hair, makeup ... wigs. Study up, Geeks, because tomorrow one of you will be going home.”

My hand closed over Sirius' as my heart beat fast in my chest. I'd fail that first challenge and losing would send me home. I had zero coordination in any field, but least of all in the hair and makeup department. Going home. The realization should have filled me with joy. But that meant facing my boss' wrath and ...

I closed my eyes, willing the desire to go home back to my heart, but my body seemed intent on betraying me. Instead, I wound my fingers through Sirius' thicker, harder ones and wondered what I could do to not lose tomorrow's challenge.

Because for the first time in the last seventy-two hours, I didn't want to go home

## CHAPTER 5





## SIRIUS

PANIC DIDN'T SIT WELL on Annie any more than it did on any other person. She froze in my arms—arms I'd promised myself I'd never wrap around her petite frame. Though in the skyscraper heels someone had strapped her into before filming resumed on the steps, she reached above my shoulder. The perfect place to tilt her head back and kiss her senseless, if there hadn't been a dozen not-so-hidden cameras waiting for their perfect shot.

My hard-won resolve offered the perfect example of how not to screw with my evening, my business, or the promises I'd given my brothers. All rational thought deserted me as my control frayed instantly with this woman, and it had a whole lot more to do with how she reacted to me than how she looked. I knew I'd be dreaming of her tonight.

Dean crossed his eyes and wiggled his shoulders as he sauntered by, his ringlets bouncing around his shoulders. "Off to destroy careers with key taps. Want to join me, princess?"

I snorted and shook my head. "Get out of here."

"Sir." He saluted, rigid in a decent impression of the director earlier in the day.

That had been this morning? I rubbed the back of my neck. No wonder a headache beat a bongo drum with a mad-ass monkey clanging coconuts as cymbals behind my eyes.

"That was intense," Annie breathed, still right where she'd been from the moment I'd put my hands on her. "I'm going to fail so bad."

"You'll be fine," I murmured. People began to filter away from the set. Bettie eyed me as I pulled Annie away from the fringes of the mob and used the shadows for a poor version of concealment. I turned her in my arms, keeping my hands firm on her waist, not letting her move back. "Some basic makeup skills and brushing out a wig, put some clothes together. It

might seem mind blowing but keep it simple and don't over-do it. You'll be fine."

Her hands came up between us, squeezed into tight fists, but she didn't push me away. Nor did she press her hands to my chest where my heart pounded against my ribs, blood pumping too hot for the spring night.

"Is this how you manage your brothers, too?" She swept dark tendrils from her eyes and tilted her head back, letting me stare right into her stunning dark eyes and thick lashes, every inch of her face devoid of makeup. "I'll fail this, Sirius." She shrugged it off, but her fists pressed to my chest, betraying her tension. "Then you'll be free to go home, back to your shop, or whatever."

*I don't want to go home.*

The admission surprised me, twice over when I didn't vocalize the thought. Lost in my head a moment, I didn't correct her, and the lie of omission sat poorly in my chest. "Didn't you play dress ups as a kid? This is just like that, only swap a princess costume or a superhero outfit for a brand. Same difference."

She smiled then bit her lip. "I would have made a terrible princess. But no, in my house we never did anything silly ... like that."

I squeezed her waist. "And you thought being awkward stopped when you grew up, huh? You've got this, Stardust. If you can organize your pretty moon rocks—"

"Sirius, there's a bit more to it than that," she protested. Her lips pursed at my comment, though her eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Then you can make colors work. Are you with me?" I leaned a little closer, working hard not to take the invitation those pursed rosebud lips offered. Talk about your teenage urges. Send in the hormone patrol, stat.

Her bottom lip wobbled, and she bit it hard. "Imphclorbind." Her words came out all muffled and garbled.

I broke every promise I'd made to myself about keeping my hands off her, of being the standard I held myself—and my brothers—to when I walked the perimeter of the studio's boundaries under close security supervision, the sort I could have slipped past at any time. The only thing that kept me coming back was *her*.

"Say that again, Stardust." I brushed the pad of my thumb over her bottom lip, prying it free. Warmth blistered through my digit where a drop of her saliva covered the calloused pad. My cock jumped to attention, though I wasn't taking this any further, right now.

But by God did I want that pretty little mouth back where it had been when she hummed on my cock, dress hitched up and pliable in my hands.

Urges be damned. Time rewound until hormonal me replaced cynical Sirius. Uncontrollable need flooded my system until I nearly came where I stood. Inhaling her was a secondary mistake. I leaned back, aching to be closer but needing the space, but her lips parting froze me halfway.

"I'm color blind," she whispered, opening her hands to press against my chest.

*Damn, but that feels good.*

She'd feel a whole lot better if I could turn her around, press her back against the hedge and—

I cleared my throat, focusing on her words and urged my blood to flow north with a gargantuan effort. "That's a decent problem. Can you get one of the wardrobe girls to help you?"

"No coordination accepted." Annie's hands flew up from my chest and I narrowly avoided being smacked in the face by a pair of flying palms. "I checked with Bettie earlier, because I knew it would come up."

"Good call." I ran a hand through my hair, squeezing her waist with the other. "Sure you don't want an easy out?" Seeing her sent home meant I'd never speak to her again. Our paths would never cross, and I had no intention of impinging on her privacy at home, wherever in the hell *home* was for her.

“Not ... Not anymore.” Annie dropped one hand to grip my wrist where I still held her, but when I expected her to pull my touch away, she squeezed, wrapping her hand around my forearm as far as it would go. Which wasn’t much, but she got points for a valiant effort.

I swallowed hard and raised my head to scan the area around us. We were alone apart from a sole cameraman innocuously filming from behind a shrub. “These guys have no life. You’re in the purple trailers, right?”

“Yes?” she whispered back.

“Good. I’m at the end of the orange lane, rooming—*trailer*ing?—with Leon. Knock. I’ll be up. I suspect he has a few trays of his own makeup we can play with if we ask nicely, and I can give you tips. Not too late because you need sleep, and I think they’re going to wake us pretty early tomorrow morning.”

“You can give me tips?” She smirked, a cute little smile tinged with the sort of sarcasm I loved. “Good to see a man in touch with his feminine side.”

“I knew a princess, once.” My heart clenched at the memory of swirling pink skirts and glitter tiaras, and I shut it away. “It doesn’t matter. The point is that I’m a bit of a pro and I can help you with this one. Will you let me?”

Her expression shifted from snarky to bemused as she shook her head, dark bangs brushing her soft, rounded cheeks. “Of course, I’ll let you. I’m sorry I’m being a pain in your ass —”

“Stop apologizing. You don’t need to, Annie. Not with me.” Her name rolled off my tongue with ease though it was only the second time I’d used it. “Get changed or do whatever, then come and find me. We’ve got this thing together, okay?”

Her soft smile as she turned away gave me the one thing I thought I’d lost forever.

*Hope.*

---

ANNIE KNOCKED on my trailer door less than twenty minutes later. I swiveled off my bed and threw my phone on the mattress where I'd been giving my brothers hell in our group chat.

“For you? That’s fast, man. Need me to vacate?” Leon waggled his eyebrows at me from the top bunk that lined one end of our small trailer.

“Not that kinda midnight stop.” I tugged my shirt straight as I reached for the door.

“Sure, sure. What do I know?” Leon flicked me the bird and rolled onto his side so he faced the door, flicking idly through his phone. “What?” He asked at my low growl. “I’m just here for the show.”

“I need your makeup kit.” I pulled the door open, effectively cutting off Leon’s banter. “Annie.”

“Sirius.” She clutched the ends of a soft lavender cardigan that she’d pulled over the same white, flowy dress she’d worn to the cocktail party. She was barefoot. Again. *More sprite than geek*. I held out a hand to help her up the steps. Bare toes poked from beneath her skirt.

“You could cut yourself wandering around barefoot like that,” I murmured, hopefully too soft for big ears on the top bunk to hear me.

Annie glanced up at me, surprise written across her wide eyes. “I didn’t think anyone noticed.”

“Seems that I notice a lot of details about you.” I closed the door behind her and waved a hand in Leon’s direction. “Roommate, Geek. Geek, roommate.”

“Annie.”

“Leon.”

They both spoke at the same time. Annie erupted into soft giggles. Leon grinned down at her while I glared at him. “How

come you get the giggles?" I mouthed behind her back.

Leon ignored me. "You here for some tutoring, science girl?" He hopped down from the bunk before she answered, already ferreting through his bags. "You'll need these to practice for the challenge and ... this." He plopped her down on the edge of my bunk and pressed a long tray of makeup into her hands, followed by a long, golden blonde wig.

"Do you usually carry a mannequin around in your luggage?" I rubbed the back of my neck and offered Annie a one-shouldered shrug. "Not that it's not helpful and all." Though I expected as much. Bettie's comment paired with Leon's low key, I'm-a-brainiac-hiding-in-plain-sight, too-practiced façade hadn't fooled me.

"No apology necessary. Wait until you see me in full drag." He winked at Annie who gave him a shy smile in return.

"What are your pronouns?" she asked softly.

I froze, cursing myself for not having the nous to ask earlier.

Leon, however, grinned broadly, his lips split wide. "I, geek girl, am fluid. He/him is fine for now, but if you see me in heels and a dress, it's safe to use she/her. Though occasionally, I'll accept them. Thank you." His smile turned gentle.

Annie nudged his shoulder. "You're welcome." Her head ducked, and she muttered something under her breath.

"Louder, Annie. Shout it from the rooftops," Leon encouraged her.

"I said you should be on team Geek." Her cheeks flamed.

"Funny, Bettie said the same thing." Leon tossed the wig on her lap.

Her fingers twinned in the golden strands, braiding them into a four-strand plait. The longer she worked, the steadier her hands became.

“Well, looks like you get two tutors, Stardust. Ready for your one-hour intensive?” I rubbed my shoulder blades against one end of the bunks.

“Best lesson you’re ever going to get.” Leon sank down beside her and flipped the case open, already working his way through the colors and started with skin tones. “The things they don’t teach you in law school.”

I frowned. “I thought you were an engineer.”

Leon looked up briefly, raising an eyebrow. “I am an engineer. I pursued a dual degree, majoring in contract law for the hell of it.” He shrugged. “What can I say? I’m easily bored.”

My estimation of him rose several large notches. “I need to set you up with my brother.”

“Oooh, a date?” He flicked a trio of glitter cases to Annie. “Pick one.”

“No. He’s got the same problem as you. And I have trouble keeping him in line.” I grimaced. “He’s the reason I’m here.”

“Maybe he was trying to tell you it was time to put on your big boy panties and swim on out to the deep end. Nice selection,” he added to Annie as she passed back aqua and purple glitter but kept a rose gold container.

I blinked at the pair huddled over the make-up tray, the same sort all of us used to play around with back when we had Millie. The thought sucker punched me dead center as Leon’s words sank in. Here I was trying to be the benchmark, but what if they’d been using me as that goal the entire time, but it was *me* who hadn’t measured up?

I shoved that sobering thought aside to look at later, though the memory of Mille gallivanting about the house like a unicorn with rainbow hair stayed with me. We used to paint astro scenes and pink comets around her ceiling, and part of me wondered what Annie’s childhood had been like, if her brothers had given her the time they’d been blessed with over a little sister. But there the similarities ended. Annie got to grow up.

Millie didn't.

Emotion engulfed my heart as Annie glanced up, a sparkle in her eyes as she flicked glitter dust my way. I smiled back, though my cheeks ached at the motion. The memory hurt, but I clung to it all the same. The memory of my sister slipped away. I focused on Annie, taking her in as she was now and put family aside to deal with another day.

*Or never.*

I could face bullets in the field, but not the memories I boxed away.

Leon grabbed the back of her hand and started applying thin stripes of color with his fingertip. "What you're looking for is something that blends. Don't go dark unless you're emulating an Oompa Loompa and keep it warm enough that you don't end up looking like an ice queen. Unless that's your aim of course." He raised his head at my snort. "What? Give a girl some options." Leon kept talking while Annie raised wide eyes in my direction.

"Are you okay with this?" I mouthed, extracting the wig from her hands. Leon fussed over her, still chattering and blessedly ignored our silent conversation behind his back.

"I'm good," she mouthed back with a nervous smile I was coming to recognize as her I'm not-quite-out-of-my-depth-yet expression.

She settled in just fine with my secretly ostentatious trailer mate. I was surprised he didn't burst out of his skin any minute.

"Coffee?" I said aloud.

"Yes, please." Annie nodded, her attention waning fast as she turned to focus on my roommate. Watching her engage with him let me settle back, both of us taking in his epic tutorial.

I barely needed to talk until we got to the wig, then I demonstrated directly on Leon's head, showing her how to work the makeup and the seam for a flawless finish and which direction to part it for whichever hairstyle she needed to use.



Annie took it all in and put an end to the lesson as she yawned widely. “You two are amazing. Thank you.” She made eye contact with us both, though spots of color brightened her face.

Leon lurched forward, crushing her in a huge hug. “You are welcome back here anytime you like, Princess Pea.”

Annie rolled her eyes. “Well, come find me when you need all the sciency geeky stuff. I’m actually good at that.” Her smile lost its wavery edge as she washed her hands free of glitter and concealer.

“Glad you have something to be proud of. Let me walk you back? You know I’m just going to stalk you anyway.”

“All right.” Her shyness returned in an instant, raising its head in a pretty, sweet kind of way.

I ushered her out the door as she rained thank yous and waves on Leon who reclined on his bed, flicking through photos on his phone, though the tell-tale clench of his jaw reminded me just how much he hated those close walls.

“Think you’ll be okay tomorrow?” I jammed my hands into my jean pockets.

“After that? Are you kidding me? I actually understand something about fashion and makeup and wigs now. How did you learn all of that? And Leon! He’s so sweet. The polar opposite of you ...” Annie’s one-sided conversation hitched as we meandered toward her trailer lane, but when I gave her no reaction, she kept on talking, giving me a small insight into her mind.

I didn’t interrupt, letting her talk. She came out of her shell the moment the cameras and pressure was off and made friends just fine. Whoever her ignorant boss was, he didn’t deserve an inch of her time or energy.

Annie paused at the end of my lane. “I’m the third one,” she murmured, hanging back to the darker shadows. “My roomie is Keira, and I think she’s Leon’s girl. Well, geek,” she corrected herself, then frowned. “Wait. Maybe it’s dean. Gah,

it's all so twisted in my head. Brain space is at a premium right now," she muttered. "You do get along with him?"

"Leon?" I raised an eyebrow as she changed topics at lightning speed. "Seems to. I had a few beers with the man. He's not an asshole, can talk shop fairly well, and who he likes, fucks or how he dresses doesn't matter much to me." *As long as I'm not in the room if he gets romantic with anyone.*

Even I had my limits, hard won from years of training and bunking with men I didn't know in remote locations. Living in close quarters meant I understood most people's habits to an intimate degree, but I'd done my fair share and would happily vacate the trailer if Leon got his mojo on. Which might be the pot calling the kettle black, but then, I'd never paid much attention to my mother's never-ending list of proverbs.

Annie tilted her head back, looking up at me. "You're an unusual man, Sirius Weston. "It was nice to meet you. Thank you for the tutorial. It was ... educational. I enjoyed it," she whispered as she rose up as far as she could on her bare toes and wrapped her arms around my neck in a tight hug.

I pressed her body to mine, all soft, feminine curves that fit perfectly in all the right places against the hard, tortured planes of my body. "Goodnight, Stardust," I murmured into her hair, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

She stilled, processing, then squeezed my shoulders before she untangled herself, sliding down my taller frame. "Goodnight, Sirius."

I stayed in the shadows, waiting until she slipped into her caravan. A soft light flickered on in the small, solitary window. Her figure remained in sight for a long moment. I turned away, not wanting to be the stalker who watched her change on the same night I'd met her, the warmth of her body imprinted into my palms.

## CHAPTER 6



## SIRIUS

ANNIE TURNED out to be a model student as well as a smart and sexy girl. Leon and I waited on either side of her, offering tips and making her laugh while the other geeks got their chance to wow the judges in private.

I sat on her right, offering support as she twitched in her seat. “You’re going to be great, Stardust. Think of those opals you love and why the colors work so well together.”

She raised an eyebrow. “They have different colors?”

Too late I recalled she was color blind. “Damn. I meant—”

Annie broke up into a peal of contagious laughter while I frowned.

“What?” I asked.

“She’s kidding.” Leon rolled his eyes.

“Is that right?” I tugged on a lock of her chocolate dark hair, bringing her attention back to me. Hell, as much as I got on well with Leon and appreciated his help with her, I wanted every minute of her time, unwilling to share a single moment with anyone at all.

*Fall fast, fall hard.*

The old adage irked me. I knew I was falling for her in a matter of hours, and it annoyed me that my brothers would get a kick out of my romantic demise, considering the lightbulb moment I’d had the night before. I hit rock bottom fast with Annie. My emotions weren’t something I understood, but for the very first time in my life I indulged in what I wanted without the distraction of work or duty to get in the way.

Annie flicked me a look over her shoulder, and I could have sworn the little minx was flirting with me. “I can sort of see a difference. Oranges and blues are contrasting shades, though greens and reds sort of get lost. The white ones are easier to see.”

“White opals for Annie. Noted,” I murmured, lost in her gaze.

“And here’s her guide.” Leon coughed into his fist.

My head came up with a jerk that twinged something in my neck. “Good luck.” I squeezed her hand as she rose to follow her guide into the studio.

“Now, we wait.” I returned to my seat on the step and tilted my head to one side, watching Dean approach in his easy gait. “Shouldn’t you be with your own girl?”

“Should I?” Dean sat with an overly dramatic sigh, resting his elbows on his knees.

“Don’t go there ...” Leon looked at me askance.

Dean shook his head, irritation replacing bemusement on his face. “Keira knows more about skincare and makeup than me, though we had a small disagreement on brands. She’s a consultant.” He grimaced. “No idea how that slipped through. Maybe they saw cosmetics and thought she tortured animals for fun. Not that I’d know. She’s ... evasive. Blocking. Massive blocking.”

“Because you’re so welcoming,” I offered.

Dean glared at me, and I swallowed a laugh. Beside me, Leon wasn’t so successful. He succumbed to the death stare Dean shot him, clearing his throat, his façade back in place with the swiftness that came with so many years of practice.

“Not your sort of ... person?” Leon hedged.

I watched on in interest. Annie’s comment about how we all got along the night before piqued my curiosity.

“Hell no.” Dean snorted. “I’d like a nice, sharp girl but not one who’s going to blow my balls off ... or turn them blue.”

“So crass.” Leon lit up a cigarette, bracing back on one arm against the flower bed in a decided pose.

“What about you?” Dean flicked the comment my way.

I stiffened.

Leon took one glance my way and grabbed the metaphorical reins in case I ripped everyone a new one. “Are you asking my boy if he’s straight? Pretty damn obvious last night,” he muttered.

“Well, are you, cowboy?” Dean jiggled on the spot, his irritation mounting.

“Soldier,” I corrected automatically, then looked for the cameras, spotting one off to the side. “Damn.” I reached up and tugged the cord out of the back of the miniature lens.

“Ha! I knew it.” Leon slapped his knee. “Scarred and tattoos and all things deadly, am I right?”

“Close enough. Keep it from Annie, though. For now. My history could scare her.”

“Perhaps,” Leon mused. “Though I don’t think she’s as flighty as you make her out to be.”

“Probably not, but she’s ...”

“Cute, stunning, gorgeous, and not suited to this show or life by a green mile.”

I nodded, agreeing with him on every point, but also ...  
“Mine.”

The word slipped out, and though I should have reacted to the claim it felt right and good to say.

“Damn, man. You have it so bad already.” Leon smirked and sipped cold tea from his mug.

Dean raised both eyebrows, wiggling them suggestively. “Gimme a scoop the moment we’re free of legalese?”

“Yeah.” There was no point in fighting it. “Got a headline for that one?”

“I’m sure I can make something cringe worthy enough just for you.” Dean winked, though his gaze skittered to the studio exit, the door that held our potential futures within its confines.

I snorted and focused on the task Mitch had set me when I’d decided to hold the high moral ground. “Appreciate it.”

---

NEARLY AN HOUR later the studio door opened. Annie flung herself through it on the run.

I rose, catching her as she launched at Leon and me. “How’d you go?” I caught her chin in my hands, checking her for tears, but her eyes sparkled at me. “It went well?”

“It went great,” she gushed. One arm looped around my neck, the other reaching for Leon. “I would have been so screwed without both of you.”

Hearing her swear—even in a minor capacity—was like watching a squirrel stub its toe and dance about in indignation.

“Damn, girl. You’re far too cute.” Leon patted her head and backed off discreetly with a wink. “Gonna go find me a geek. Keep it safe, kids,” he called over his shoulder.

“Thank you!” Annie yelled loud enough for the entire studio to hear.

“So, you did it when you thought you’d fail.” I tried to eradicate the smug tone from my voice and failed in magnificent fashion.

Annie rolled her eyes, slapping my shoulder. “Yeah, it’s all you, Mister Motivation.”

“I thought I was Mister Sirius.”

“That too.” She dropped her arms, winding them around herself. “We had models. Well, we were supposed to. I hung back cause ... you know ...”

“That’s what you do.” I nodded. “And?”

“So, I got Bettie. She subbed in for someone who didn’t turn up.” Her cheeks blazed.

I tracked the spread of color into the neckline of her sundress. “That must have been a joy.”

“I was so intimidated! There was blue eye shadow. Blue! I had this vision of her turning out like an old biddie straight

from the seventies, all cringe and tacky. How do you think she would have reacted if I painted her up like a clown? I wouldn't last a second!" Annie twisted her hands in front of her.

"But you didn't ..." I prompted.

Her hands continued their figure eights.

I closed my fist over them. "Annie?"

"It was fine. I went through, starting with base and then continuing in the order you and Leon showed me. The wig was fine. Well, sort of." Her lips twitched this time, and I had the urge to cover them with my own.

I blinked, taking a step back and releasing her in a hurry. Where the hell was my brain?

Annie's eyes widened. "Oh! I mean, I still did just fine. I didn't not do what you said at all, and I—"

"Annie." I stalled her mid panic rant. "It's okay."

"Um." Annie nibbled on her lip.

I averted my eyes and turned away to adjust myself discreetly and stared straight into a camera lens. "Fuck me," I muttered. "Ah, were there instructions for ..."

A stunted silence fell between us.

"I think ... Bettie said to go wait on the other side, and that it could be a while, but it wouldn't be too long." Her lips twitched at the oxymoron that was typical Bettie speech, though she still curled in on herself.

"That woman is the limit." I kept watching Annie as she distanced herself from me, and suddenly I needed her to see it. "Don't do that." It came out sharper than I meant.

Annie jumped, releasing her arms to catch her hair and twirl it between two fingers. "Do what?"

I watched her movement, mesmerized. "Don't cave in on yourself like that. Don't be afraid of me, or anyone. The world. You don't need to do either, not here. Not—" My voice broke, but she didn't laugh, just stared at me. I cleared my throat. "Maybe we should make our way around to wherever."



“Maybe.” Annie didn’t release her hostage hair but fell into step beside me. Her head still hung a little, her natural, endearing shyness replaced by a fission of fear, a trauma reaction I recognized all too well from my years touring war-torn countries.

I shortened my stride, but oddly enough I didn’t mind the time lost when I was with her. The way she reacted, a break in her natural positive outlook ... I frowned. “Who hurt you?”

Annie jerked and wrapped her arms around herself again.

I cursed myself as a fool. “Don’t.” I automatically reached for her, but she shied away a step. Cool air washed between us in the space we’d shared a moment before and already I missed her body heat.

*Sorry, sorry, sorry.*

*Don’t, don’t, don’t.*

Every line was on replay. Just as I thought I’d lost her altogether, she threw out a barb of her own that hit home dead center.

“Where did you learn hair and makeup like that?” she asked. “And don’t say from Leon. You two just met. I checked.” Her gaze spoke of the defiance she’d thrown back at me when we encountered each other at the cocktail party the night before.

I hid a smile, loving that she bounced back, so resilient. And if she had the balls, then I’d offer an insult if I didn’t give her anything less. “My sister, Millie.” My mouth dried at the thought of her. I shoved my hands deep into my pockets, searching for the right words. “You asked me last night, and I avoided it. She died. Cancer. She was sixteen.”

“Oh, Sirius.” All nerves and humor left her face. Annie’s hand wrapped around my arm, and she pressed her soft body against my side. “You doted on her?”

I sent her a broken smile. “We all did. She had four brothers who spoiled the shit out of her. We adored her, took turns playing with her, reading together. Whoever was home, who wasn’t studying ... games turned to sitting with her

during treatments, helping her recover. Then we sat at her bedside at the ... end.”

My throat closed, and I knew there was no point shoving my words at the blockage. Everything Annie needed to know was right there.

“I’m sorry.” Annie rubbed her cheek against my arm.

I pulled away from her grip. She stiffened but let me go, looking lost until I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and tucked her into my side. Her soft sigh at the contact would keep me awake for nights to come. I delved deep but couldn’t avoid a simple truth. “The thing is, you ... remind me of her.” I offered her a smile that started to slide off my face the moment it appeared. “She loved space rocks too, in her own sort of way. Lot of glitter went into decorating her room. My brothers and I were constantly covered in it.”

Annie did stiffen properly this time, tugging at my arm. “Sirius—”

“Let me finish.” I held up a hand and tucked her right back where I wanted her. “When I saw you last night, my first thought was how beautiful you were and that Bettie had put you on the wrong team. Then I started listing your features in my head, and I swear she could have looked like you. *Could have* because I—we—lost her ten years ago. But she wouldn’t have looked exactly like you. Your nose is a touch wider, and her hair was straight, even after chemo. And your eyes are darker. Hair, too.”

“Not like you. Yours are black,” she whispered, reaching up to cover her palm across my cheek. “I’m so sorry that you lost your baby sister. No wonder you reacted like you did about my brothers and the show. But the truth is that my family is nothing like yours. Mine pushed everyone away because they wanted us to fit in neatly labeled boxes. Never do anything out of line, always be the plastic-perfect family who smile and wave. Just call us penguins.” She grimaced. “We learned not to rely on the sort of support you and your brothers offer each other, you offered her. Millie.”

Her name floated between us, hovered in the spaces, and though my heart still ached for my sister it didn't hurt quite as much, not with Annie there. "She was strong, you know. She rarely complained, and she never told us if she was scared. She fought, every inch of the way. That's what I see in you that's the same. You have strength like that, and you fight even when your fear is right in front of you. That, and you don't judge anyone. Those things make you beautiful and sexy as hell."

Annie blinked slowly at me. "I don't think anyone's ever said that to me before."

"What, that you're beautiful?" I slipped my hand beneath her hair, stroking the back of her neck. Hell, I had to stop, or I'd end up scaring her, or myself, by doing something way outside her comfort zone. And inappropriate to boot.

"Geeks and guys, over here please!" Bettie's voice sharpened with a dreadful clarity that broke the moment.

Annie slipped back from me, but I wasn't about to let her get too far. I caught her hand, winding my fingers through hers. "Let's go conquer this thing, huh? Then teach me something I have no idea on."

"Why would you want that?" Annie whispered as we rounded the corner to the studio's broad street scene area. "My head is a jumble. You'll be bored out of your mind in a few moments."

"Not if I'm with you." I squeezed her fingers, leaving her slightly dumbstruck in the middle of a neutral zone between Team Geek and Team Beauty.

Annie wandered to the gaggle of girls who hovered quietly on their side of the set and started up a conversation with a girl with a mass of red curls. Keira? I shot a look at Dean, who nodded, his gaze fixed on her. I had no idea what was going on between them and had zero intention of asking. My focus was on one girl and one girl only, with the intent of staying in the game with her for as long as possible.

## CHAPTER 7



## ANNIE

MY HEART SANG as Bettie announced me the winner of Challenge One. Unable to keep the stupid grin off my face, I let fly, knowing my mother would be streaming the show on the other side of the country at some future point once I was home for her to show off, proclaiming my natural talents were all because of her rigorous training. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Leon cheered loudly from his corner of the Beauty group, waving with both hands. I gave a shy little wave back, my heart bursting at the happiness written all over his face in a display of triumph. In my periphery, Keira tossed her head, and though I couldn't see her rolled eyes, I could certainly imagine her expression. My trailer mate was of the loud variety. I worked out she was paired with Dean when he wrapped on our door early in the morning. She'd tumbled out of bed, hair afizz and told him in no uncertain terms to head back to his own side of our impromptu trailer park setup before he lost an important part of his anatomy.

She tumbled back into bed, snoring the moment her head hit her pillow while I lay awake recalling the night before and wondering what time my Beauty rose for the day. I guessed he was an early riser. Sirius had that feel about him, kind of like he'd want the quiet morning hours to himself before the world filled with chatter. He was that sort of man.

My gaze flicked to the shadows where I knew I'd find him, though his presence was undeniable, even at the short distance that separated us. He leaned against a white painted strut beneath an enclosed portico, his face half shaded by the plethora of wisteria and roses that bloomed above him.

The half of his face I could see offered a quiet sort of confident pride, and my heart swelled inside my chest.

"Thank you." Bettie tapped my shoulder, shooing me off the stage as she picked out a short girl with lanky blonde hair to go home.

Her Beauty turned his back in a silent tantrum that would be splashed across the media while Team Geek held our collective breath at the obvious rejection. Every one of us, I suspected, shared that sting with her.

Part of me cringed for the girl. I didn't even know her name. The other half of me only wanted to celebrate with my boys. *My boys*. Sirius and Leon. When had they become that? I snuck into the Geek ranks between Keira and Harriet Noseworthy. Leon's Geek, who I'd met over breakfast, indeed sported a nose worthy of her name. Curly, light brown hair stuck out at odd angles, and her slightly bucked teeth stuck out when she smiled. But her smile was genuine, and her laugh relaxed her awkward stature.

"Congrats on stealing my boy away from me," Keira drawled out of the side of her mouth. Her eyes narrowed though she didn't look at me.

I snorted in true geek fashion and covered it with a cough. I had little to do with Dean, though my association with Leon and Sirius apparently meant I'd stolen the attention of every male in the vicinity.

"You haven't spoken to him much then, have you? Maybe check up on that before you turn all green."

"*Shh*. Trying to list-en," Harriet sang on my other side, adding an elbow in the ribs to the mix. She sucked on a lollipop I wasn't sure someone had given her as a prop or if she was trying to break a habit.

"Noted." Damn, I'd already started picking up Sirius' lingo. I shoved a fake smile across my face.

Keira eyed me sideways and edged closer. "If you're in the boy's trailer again tonight, I'm interrupting the threesome and picking a man of my own."

Harriet's lollipop flew out of her mouth and tangled in the hair of the woman lined in front of her.

I stifled a laugh and shot Keira a look. Her face turned red, and her cheeks puffed out. By the grace of a social media god alone, I avoided returning her elbow just in case she blew.

“Today we move into the *Geekily Yours* house.” Bettie glared in our direction, her toothy smile wavering. “You’ll all be excited to know that your current roommate ... stays that way.”

A few groans came from the boys while a pair of girls high fived in front of us, wiggling their fingers in secret handshake style.

“You’d better become a party princess if you want to survive living with me,” Keira muttered, staring forward.

“Too bad, the party princess lives with my guy.” I didn’t miss a beat but couldn’t resist a second poke. “I did tell you that you need to talk to him. Don’t stress. He’s a sweetie. Helped me with the wigs.”

Keira blinked, her expression priceless as the cogs turned almost visibly in her head. “Oh. Dayum. He’s still hot though. Trade for Dean?” she offered cheerfully to Harriet on my other side.

Harriet shook her head, lost in her lollipop rescue attempt.

“Maybe you could try to make friends with Dean?” I offered.

Keira rolled her eyes. “Puh-lease. Not going to happen. That man was born with a firecracker shoved up his behind.”

“So ... light the fuse?” I suggested.

She grinned and relaxed as Bettie turned her attention to the men lined up like not so innocent choir boys. “Maybe I should. You could have mentioned it, you know.”

“You could have been less of a bitch.” I stared at her frankly. My walls crumbled around the handful of people I’d met in the last few days, or maybe it was just being outside my regular comfort zone. Being away from my boss, my family. “Those boys helped me when I was shit scared of that challenge while you could have aced it in your sleep.”

“Yeah, but you were the one who aced it in the end.” She eyed me speculatively. “Are the guys a couple? Or do I have a chance with Mister Grump over there?”

“No chance at all,” I answered breezily, flicking a look over my shoulder to find Sirius’ gaze locked on me as he totally ignored Bettie’s commentary.

“I can tell,” Keira snickered. “Come on. I don’t want a crap room near the stairs, counting who has nocturnal visitations while I have exactly this many.” She held her fingers up to resemble a donut.

“I don’t think that’s what this is about, you know,” I murmured in a low voice, watching the girl in front of me rather than ogling Sirius from across the room.

*Not what it’s about? Yeah, right.*

Harriet reached out and started to detangle her lollipop from the hair in front of her. “You are soooo naive, Annie,” she sang, twisting strands between her fingers in a delicate dance. The lollipop freed up, and she waved it in a victory dance before popping it straight back into her mouth.

“Eww.” Keira and I made identical sounds and winced together.

“What?” Harriet followed us along the line of girls and offset to where Bettie had organized a pair of buses.

The men filed into a blue bus made to look like it wore a tuxedo—all class, black glass, and fine touches.

The women boarded an old school bus decorated with a pair of giant, lurid pink sunglasses that protruded above the roofline and *Geekily Yours* branded all over it.

“I get the sense we might be on the crappy end of this stick,” Keira muttered. “Oi, Bettie! Can we man up and get on the luxury bus?”

Bettie smiled and waved from the gent’s line, mouthing, “That one’s yours!” while climbing into the boys’ bus.

The three of us swapped glances as a camera poked into our sympathy circle, and a disembodied hand waved us into the poorly ventilated vehicle. I kept my comments to myself, but knew I’d have some stories to share with Sirius and Leon later.



Maybe the TV show wouldn't be the hell I expected.  
Or maybe Harriet was right, and I was hellishly naive.

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“COME AND GET ITTTT,” Keira sang at the top of her lungs. She had the right idea, getting us into the apartment block first to scope out all the rooms we didn't want and claim the one we did.

“Coming.” I detangled my phone charger from where it wrapped around my ankles and drew my graphics tablet out of my satchel with my other hand, ending tangled in another charger. “Fabulous.” My focal ratio had diminished along with a few brain cells over the past few days. Go Team Geek all the way.

“You do look it,” Keira agreed, poking her head inside my bedroom. “If I gave you a few lightbulbs we could put you out front like a wishing tree.”

“And the pigeons would come and poop on me.” I wrinkled my nose.

“Not a fan of birds?”

“Not really. Prefer my static moon rocks.”

“You're weird.” Keira wrinkled her nose.

“Right back atcha, girl.” I managed to waddle a step forward and collapsed on the bed looking like nothing more than a semi-embalmed mummy. “Help?”

“Wow. You really did need Leon's help.” Keira started at my ankles while I freed my arms.

We met in the middle, cords dangling from me like a whacked-out kraken. I managed to take a large breath. “Thanks. I did. And good find on the room, by the way.”

“Told you. Strategy.” She booped my nose with her finger. “Dinner. Come on.”

I followed her down the stairs, hesitating near the closed door that led to the hall. We had ended up with the room closest to the stairwell and small elevator bank, but only because the oddly shaped rooms were split between two levels. Bedrooms were situated higher up, leaving the living space on the Team Geek floor.

The Beauties were on the ground level. Something to do with needing to access the gym or wander at night. I didn't bother to argue with the producer's warped and somewhat sexist logic, but the limitations set on the geeky girls tribe reeked of a curfew.

The bus had been a Petri dish of epic proportions, and I wasn't prepared to relive that experience just yet. The apartment building was set above Montego Bay, of which we managed a three-minute glimpse through grime-encrusted windows on our drive across the island. Not even our accommodations gave a view of the water, our rooms set on one side of the building that faced another identical concrete tower.

I suspected the audience would see more of the bay's natural beauty than we would.

Wandering around the building gave me a sense of the space that would be my home for the next few weeks. The place already felt more like home than my family's manor ever had. "What did you make?" I shot another look at the door and pushed into the small kitchenette I shared with Keira. I hadn't seen Sirius since the buses left to transport us to our new homes. "And how do you think the guys are going to get on tomorrow?" Filming moved along a whole lot faster than I expected.

"Who knows. Should be fun to watch though. Popcorn and chicken."

"You mean popcorn chicken," I corrected absently, heading for the fridge. I'd filled a jug with fruity iced tea earlier and was already regretting my choice of drinks from the night prior, though I decided to save a good *I'm too old for*

*this shit* for later in the season, should Sirius and I make it that far.

“No, I mean popcorn *and* chicken. See?” Keira waggled a bowl under my nose she’d filled with both popcorn chicken and the real thing.

I raised an eyebrow. “Is this a Southern thing?” Her accent gave away plenty to my own Georgian ears.

“It’s a me thing. Wanna watch reruns?”

“Of?”

She rolled her eyes and flung her hands over her face. “You were put in here to test me, right? Are there cameras around?” She made a show of peering into corners.

I didn’t have the heart to tell her there probably were. *Wow, cynical much, Annie?* “Sounds good.” I settled next to her and picked at the snack bowl, covering a yawn.

Three episodes later, the bowl was empty, my tummy was overstuffed, and Keira snored.

I left the TV running as a cover for my covert activities and sneaked to the door, squeezing the sides of my nightdress. Did the show post guards around the apartment building? We’d been given the usual run down on no social media, no contacting tabloids, and no sharing anything across media by proxy or otherwise. Mind, every one of us had signed a sheaf of NDAs before we set foot on set, but apparently the reminder was a necessity.

Bettie’s challenge announcement had included something about sunrise, but no one had explicitly said we had to stay in our rooms and not wander ... right?

*Too bad, Betty Boopsy. This girl has a mission.*

Caught somewhere between feeling like a sneaky teenager and mischievous college student, I slipped out the door and headed for the stairs. Sirius had helped me with my challenge, and I didn’t want to leave him in the lurch.

Chickening out on the elevator, I pressed down on the stairwell door handle and waited for the ominous screech that

would announce my unapproved activities.

The handle turned smoothly beneath my hand in utter silence. I beamed at it and pushed the door open, my hand out of the railing. The door flew shut behind me with a *boom* that could have woken the dead a county over.

*Who needs a big bang when you have me around?*

A blanket of darkness fell over me, thick and heady and nauseating.

## CHAPTER 8



ANNIE

OF COURSE, the stairwell didn't have automatic lighting. What reasonable fire escape did? I flapped about taking shallow breaths and smaller steps. Tumbling down the cement stairs or over a railing was not on tonight's to-do list.

By the time I'd taken three steps, I'd turned myself around to the point I couldn't find the door, let alone the stairs.

*So ends the life of Annie Pillington, lost in the depths of a stairwell void of her own making.*

At least I'd have an interesting obituary.

Trying not to pant, I reached out. My palms hit something hard, solid, and ... warm? *A person. It's a person.*

*Oh, good. I don't have to perish alone.*

That thought took its time to process in my panicked state, and by the time I realized that there was, in fact, another person standing nearby in the darkness, a primal part of my brain intent on survival activated my vocal cords.

I belatedly screeched like a banshee and lurched backwards. Hard, warm arms wrapped around my back, yanking me into the unseen chest again. I gasped for breath, and a familiar pine and leather and whiskey scent filled my head.

"*Sirius?*" I hissed into the blanket of nothing that stalled my flight.

"Stardust?"

I blinked into the darkness, but I couldn't see my hand let alone a full-bodied man. *Oh, and what a body.* I cursed myself silently despite the fact he wouldn't be able to see the mounting flush that set my head ablaze with enough heat to consume a small comet.

"Annie?"

I started to sweat as I hit nuclear point. “Why do you call me that? Stardust, I mean,” I asked grumpily as my heart rate slowed.

Sirius’ chest rumbled. “You’re a smart girl. Work it out. Ah, here we go.” He shifted as I became all too aware of the long arms wrapped around my back.

A light flickered near my eye, blindingly bright. I curled into a small, nightie-clad ball and stumbled with his hold.

“Retina burn,” I gasped. Salt streamed into my eyes as everything—including Sirius—lit with a halo of blue and yellow light. “You’re glowing.”

“Shit. Sorry.” The light lowered, leaving me with a Sirius-shaped shadow.

I stared forward, willing my eyes to adjust. Sirius appeared to be dressed in jeans for once, and a tight, form fitting white tee that clung to more muscles than I knew what to do with beneath his open leather jacket. “It’s okay. What are you doing wandering around in the dark?”

My eyes got used to the odd lighting in time to recognize the shifty expression that crossed his face.

He shifted on his feet. “I was—ah. Why aren’t you in bed? Don’t the geeks have a curfew?”

That he picked up on the thing that irritated me most about how the house—apartment building—was set up stung.

“Is that an invitation?” The words flew out of my mouth faster than I could recall them. I held up a hand and stepped out of the circle of his arms, supremely conscious of the cool spots left in his wake. “No, don’t answer that.”

*Please, for all that is noble in the table of elements, don’t answer that.*

*Because what do I do if he says yes?*

I knew the answer to that, and I didn’t like it.

Sirius paused, and his hands flicked up as though seeking me. He dropped them and faced me, his jaw tight. “I was

looking for you. Maybe I could cash in that favor I did for you yesterday.”

“I was looking for you too. Sorry. I don’t like ... well, it doesn’t really matter what I like. I wanted to offer you help too. For your help yesterday. It was good help.” Could I be more awkward? *Run, Mister Weston. I might be contagious.* I nibbled on my lower lip to keep my words in check and cussed at my brain for not engaging under pressure.

“Yeah.” He ducked his head, reaching back to rub his neck looking all the world a schoolboy caught out of bounds.

“It’s the academic one, right? All about science facts or something?” I hadn’t really paid attention to the announcement earlier in the afternoon, too busy trying to avoid old gum stuck to every visible surface in our bus while a disembodied Bettie spoke to us from the relative safety of a dozen muscle bound men and clean air.

“That’s the one. My general knowledge is strong but ... I’ll flunk science facts fairly well.”

“You might know more than you think,” I offered, though a small grin crept across my face. “But I’d love to help.” I peered at the stairwell below us. “No Leon? Just you?”

“Just me,” Sirius confirmed. “He’s asleep.”

I grimaced. “Keira too. Okay. Where do we do this? Is there anywhere decent outside? I didn’t look about much earlier.” I wrapped my arms around myself, suppressing a shiver that had little to do with the muggy night air that assailed every space, including the non-ventilated stairwell.

Sirius’ attention drew to my body, flicking over me. He shrugged off his leather jacket exposing a whole world of body beneath that tight white tee. Hard planes of muscle met tight cords over his bulked up scarred forearms, the thin fine lines visible in the filtered light.

For whatever reason, those scars made him extra sexy when he was already drool-worthy enough. I didn’t need to raise my gaze higher.



“Here. Literally, here, plus, take the damn thing, Annie. Outside there’s a ... patrol.” He shook his head in disgust.

“I’m not cold,” I murmured, taking the jacket between my palms. His residual body heat seeped into my skin. “How are you not sweating up a storm? Wait, a patrol? Really? Like we’re prisoners?” Curfew didn’t quite meet the bar, apparently.

“More like they can’t get their shit together. Sorry, work—or more to the point *not* working—is ... bothering me. I went outside and made it as far as the parking lot on the other side of the yard before someone stopped me. Thought I was a fan.”

“Your ego must have taken a battering.” I suppressed a smile, trying to work the arms on his jacket, but the thing was entirely oversized on me. I sweated instantly and slipped back out of it, clutching the Sirius-scented leather garment to my chest.

“Mortally wounded,” he agreed, reaching out to assist me. “Damnit, stop struggling. Give me the jacket, Stardust.” He fussed for a moment, fixing the arms draping the leather around me like a giant dressing gown. His lips twitched as he stared at me, but he didn’t say anything.

Sweat trickled down my back. “What? It’s too hot.” I peered at him suspiciously. I bundled the jacket back where it had been.

“Nothing.” The corners of his mouth curled up in a sweet, caring smile. His air of innocence didn’t fool me as he sank his bulk to a step and patted the cement beside him. “Come here. I need to pick your brain.”

“Brain is overtired. What do you want to know?” I narrowed my eyes, clinging to his jacket like life support.

“No fu—” He coughed into his hand under the pretense of clearing his throat. “No idea.”

I pursed my lips. “Did you just prevent yourself from swearing around me?”

“Maybe? Will it get me answers faster?”

I poked his bicep and half bent my finger back. “Ow.”

“Goose.”

“I thought I was Stardust.”

“Only when you’re being smart. Help me, please, Annie.”

“All right. Facts. The earth revolves at ...” I rattled off stats as they filled my head from some long dormant college memory.

“Reasonable ones.” He held up his hands. “I’ll never remember all that.” He scrubbed his knuckles across his forehead.

“Like what, then?” I threw my hands up. “I want to help, but there’s a lot rattling around in my head. I need to know what sort of help you need.”

“Okay. Ah ... period table. No, scratch that. I have no idea.”

I grinned. Periodic table I could do. The tune to Tom Lehrer’s song started in my head to the familiar notes of *The Pirates of Penzance*. I tapped out the first verse, only stumbling once before I hit my stride.

“There’s Hydrogen and Helium, then Lithium, Beryllium

Boron, Carbon everywhere, Nitrogen all through the air

With Oxygen so you can breathe and Fluorine for your pretty teeth

Neon to light up the signs, Sodium for salty times.”

SIRIUS’ mouth dropped open as I worked my way through the next ten verses, stuffing up only once, though by the stunned silence I chanted in, he missed it.

Clearing my throat after the last *Organnesson*, I pressed my knees together and hunched forward a little. Leather and spicy aromas filled my senses. I’d never forget the scent of him wrapped around me, even if it was only from his clothes. Which all sounded way too wrong in my head.

“So, that’s that,” I said. “Anything else?”

“You really are a little knowledge bomb, you know that?” He ruffled my hair then smoothed the same strands, tucking locks behind my ears. “I like your hair out like this.”

Something in his tone softened my building anxiety, though his words flared it out again.

“You’re meant to be the pretty one, not me, you know that?” I stared down at my bare feet.

Sirius crooked a knuckle beneath my chin and tipped my head slowly back, stopping before the movement became uncomfortable and giving me all the time in the world to move away from him.

I didn’t.

“I think you underestimate how pretty you are, Stardust.” His fathomless eyes told me he spoke the truth, though my heart refused to hear it.

My chest squeezed, and I gave him a tight smile, my features frozen though I wanted to nuzzle into his touch. “I think someone would have told me if I was ... you know, by now.”

Sirius frowned. “You don’t think you’re pretty?”

“Correction. I know I’m not pretty.” I swatted at his hand, expecting him to release me, but he didn’t. “Stubborn man,” I muttered.

He didn’t smile. “No one ever told you that you’re pretty? No boyfriend, girlfriend?” He raised an eyebrow.

“No boyfriend.”

The eyebrow went down.

“I’m straight, Sirius. At least, I think I am. Sort of never had the chance to test that out much.”

His brow knitted, and his chest rumbled again, though this time it wasn’t a happy sound. “We’re going to fix this misconception about yourself, starting right now. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.” I rolled my eyes and pulled my chin out of his grip. It hurt to realize how much I craved his touch, how my skin heated whenever he came close. “Let’s get right on that.” I shook my head. It had been a mistake coming out to find him. Shrugging my shoulders, I offered his jacket back.

Sirius caught it halfway. “Stop, Annie.”

I froze at the sharp note in his voice. “What’s wrong?”

“You.” He cleared his throat, pressing the leather into my arms again, encompassing me in his scent. His fingers lingered over my wrist, but otherwise he didn’t touch me. “You in that nightie thing you’re wearing might be the single sexiest sight I’ve had to deal with. If I saw a woman looking at me the way you do, dressed like that anywhere else ... she’d be in my bed damn fast. That’s how not-pretty you are, Stardust.” He offered a lopsided grin to combat his rough-spoken words, though his eyes burned with an intensity I didn’t want to escape.

“Oh.” I gripped his jacket tight. “I— The intimate part ...” I blinked at him as my cheeks returned to flaming status.

Sirius tugged on the jacket, drawing me closer. My breath stalled as I stared up at him, every moment of playfulness eradicated from the scant air lingering between us.

“What about the intimate part?” His head canted to one side, whiskey-spiced breath brushing across my lips.

“I’ve never—” I swallowed hard, unable to break the hold his gaze and hands had on me. Didn’t want to break it.

“Say it, Stardust.”

“I’ve never had se—” I closed my mouth, chickening out at the last minute. “I’m a virgin, all right? My boss—my male, sexist, and arrogant boss—threw me in here in the hopes I would *loosen up* in his office. I have no idea what my personal life has to do with my work life, but there you go. All out in the open. Satisfied?” I yanked myself backwards and swayed on the step. My heart pounded away at my chest, running a sprint I wasn’t prepared for,

*Yes, I'm a virgin at twenty-six years old, and I just fessed up to a man who might once have been interested in me, but now there's zero chance.*

“Hardly.” Sirius’ brow dipped deeper and the thunder cloud he personified threatened to erupt.

“What?” I blinked at him, prepared for the slap rejection would offer while I still clutched his jacket.

“I know why your boss sent you here, and believe me, the man is an ignorant ass of the highest order. When you get back, quit or go for the job above his. Believe me, you’ll get it.” He rose suddenly, catching my hand to bring me up with him.

My fingers folded around his, the memory of so many callouses already making familiar indents in my hands. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, begging my embarrassment to flare, but it didn’t come. Nothing did. “Take your jacket,” I mumbled, staring down at my feet.

“Nah, keep it. Give it back to me tomorrow.” Sirius squeezed my fingers and dropped my hands. “Good night, Stardust.”

My head jerked up in time to catch the thoughtful look that slipped across his gaze. “Goodnight,” I whispered, confused, tired, and dismissed all at once.

Sirius nodded, slid his hands into his pockets and headed down the stairs. He made it to the landing below before he looked up to where I still stood, unmoving. “Annie?”

“Yeah?” I blinked, breaking out of my reverie.

“Did you only come out tonight to help me with a song??”

The flush I hated returned in force, but I refused to answer him with anything but honesty. “I was looking for you. For ...” What, exactly? I didn’t want to admit to the answer to that question because wanting him made this—whatever this was becoming—too real. I wasn’t sure I could cope with that.

Sirius nodded slowly, holding my gaze with those deep, thoughtful eyes for a long moment. He hesitated, one hand

half-raised toward me.

My stomach fluttered in a riot of butterflies as he watched me, considering. Heat and white noise filled my ears as he leaned forward but checked himself. His lips quirked up in a secret smile I wasn't privy to.

“Good night, Stardust.” Sirius gave me one last, lingering look and headed down to his level, and he didn't look back.

## CHAPTER 9



## SIRIUS

I STARED at the phone in my hand and attempted not to throw the damn thing. Not even Annie in that flimsy damn night dress could distract me from Mitch's smug voice.

"Say that again," I spat, keeping my voice low.

"I've sent you a link. Read it yourself. But if you want a lucrative future for Sothis Security ... for fuck's sake, Sirius, keep it in your pants. I thought you were the one who wanted to *be* the example. Not the one who was made an example of." His voice scathing, Mitch ripped me a new one for God alone knew what and hung up on me.

I cradled my silent phone in my hand, staring at the blackened screen. *Headlining already, Sirius? Keep it in your pants.* Mitch's earlier words floated through my brain. My chest tightened, and I opened the link he sent through on a deep growl.

### *Geek Girl Capitalizes on Bodyguard Duty*

I read the headline and scanned the article, which didn't say much, though it implied plenty more than what had actually happened the first night when Leon and I helped Annie out, intimating details that could never have been unearthed because there *was* nothing to damn well unearth. What *did* capture my attention was the grainy photograph that accompanied the text. Shoving back the rage rising in me, I slowed my breathing and read the article in full.

*Geekily Yours' next season ... blah, blah ... new contestants, blah, already sharing each other's glamping accommodation on their first night on set. Wannabe Geek Annie Pillingston spent most of the night in a black-light colored trailer with notorious drag queen Leon Shribner and Nevada business owner, Sirius Weston, walking back in her nightclothes after several hours of trailer partying to her own accommodations where she engaged in afterparty festivities with ..."*



I snarled at the hinted orgy, though fortunately, Sothis didn't come directly into play. *Relief town there.*

Annie's full name—where the hell had that come from—was displayed front and center in what looked like a personal attack, though I wasn't sure why the media would want to target a scientist who preferred the company of bits of comets to people.

Not that I blamed her, after this.

Mitch was right. I needed to be aware of the public face we presented. Which wouldn't need fixing if he hadn't damn well thrown me on the show for a lark in the first place.

"Aren't you all growly bear?" Leon leaned into the kitchen where I stood frozen before the coffee maker.

"What?" I glanced at him then back to my phone, blacking the screen and locking it while my mind started to turn on. "I'm ... actually, that's bullshit. Fine. We've got media leakage. Bettie's gonna twist her knickers."

"Worse than they already are?" Leon snickered and flipped his hair, which seemed to have grown several inches overnight. He paused, taking in the tense line of my shoulders. "Are you okay?"

"Didn't know you cared." I offered a bland grin that bordered on a grimace and shoved my phone into my pocket. "Did you see anyone out the other night when Annie came in?"

"They're targeting her? Geez. They are hard up for hits." Dean waltzed into our apartment without knocking, clutching an empty coffee cup emblazoned *Read it Write*. He rolled his eyes. "Desperate, desperate, desperate."

"They ... who?" I eyed the younger man who refilled my coffee as well as his.

Leon bounced away from the newcomer as though stung and looked like he was due to make a run for it.

"The production company, of course. Media leakage rarely comes from inside reality shows. Contracts are airtight, and

they make sure loopholes are closed. Breaking said contract is hella expensive and worth a serious legal suit. Sugar?”

“No, thanks.” I mulled on the idea. “So Bettie’s PR company chooses who they hit? For what? Ratings?”

“Ad buy in, and yes, ratings, which raise each other in commercial terms anyway. Don’t ask what some of those fifteen second commercials are worth. You’ll have to sell your company.”

“Looks like it’s in jeopardy already.” I sighed and sipped the scalding cup Leon passed over. “My younger brother—the one who shoved me in here—is pissy that my very non-existent sex life is overshadowing all the branding he and Jameson put together. Fun times.”

“Indeed.” Leon’s look turned speculative, and he stalled his mid-flight path. “What if we got you a sex life? Raise your profile a little? You protect C-listers and up-tight, rich-ass CEOs, right? That ink isn’t going to give a shit if you get raunchy on TV. A sweetheart dalliance with Miss Annie might give you a lift in the public eye, get people talking. When you do whatever it is your business partners want you to do, Mister Secret Squirrel, then you can capitalize on it.”

Annie’s confession of the night before ripped through my brain. She’d been so vulnerable, throwing up her v-card like a defense or shield. Maybe that play worked in her social circle, but I planned on making her first time a whole lot memorable. That thought stopped me cold—a chill that turned hot too fast.

I shook my head, my mouth set in a tight line. “Not going to happen.”

“Pity. Could have used that, I’m sure. So ... we set you up as a stellar example so that all your rich, royal, and defense friends will want to engage your very expensive services. They are expensive, aren’t they?”

I didn’t laugh. “Damn right they are.” They had to be, for licensing, equipment, and danger pay. Every client we took on brought an additional risk factor to my family. Beautiful people brought out the ugliest obsessions and the worst in the

paparazzi who broke rules like privacy was a public thoroughfare.

“Well, I’m sure we can help you and your brothers capitalize on that ...”

Dean snickered into his coffee.

“Don’t you go breaking any damn laws,” I warned.

Leon arched his back and poked a finger at his chest, the epitome of innocence. “Moi? But of course not. I’ll find a minion or five to influence.”

I snorted into my coffee and drained the lot, taking the burn in my throat as a reminder of what we were supposed to be doing. “You said Bettie wanted to see us?”

“The Queen awaits.” Leon pranced out the door, jiggling his assets.

Dean topped up his coffee mug.

I sent him a hard glare. “Don’t you have your own damn coffee maker?”

“The air in my room is slightly toxic. My roommate likes to call his sister—half or step maybe?” He mined retching at the imagery. “And he watches porn while they chat. His personal habits are fucking feral, and I’d rather sleep on your floor.” He wiggled his eyebrows over the rim of his mug as he gulped another serving then used the dregs to top up a third time.

I shook my head, sighing as I followed Leon out the door. The atmosphere in both camps heated up faster than I’d expected. High school level bullshit in breaking contracts, the temper tantrums on set—those had no place in a professional environment. But apparently the studio brought its own version of Hollywood limits across oceans that had a different level of tolerance.

Dean and Leon chattered away while I tried to work out how I could remain near Annie without screwing my company’s reputation into the ground. By the time we’d made

it to the gathering, our host had called, and I'd searched every dark head for her chocolate curls and came up empty.

Finally, on my third scan of the group, I found Annie. She wore a yellow sundress at least three sizes too big, a floppy straw hat with a giant yellow sunflower perched on top, and a pair of cute as a button yellow ankle boots. The other team geek girls clustered about, forming pairs and trios I ignored altogether.

Only Annie caught my attention despite the garish getup she wore. I was fairly certain someone else had dressed her and she'd had little say in the matter. Or, more likely, she'd little to say about it. The girl might be shy and quiet, but she needed to stand up for herself.

The boots and the hat, I could keep. The dress had to go.

I sucked in a sharp breath, unable to shake the image of her minus the dress. My hands clenched into fists at my sides, nail digging into my palms to quell the wave of arousal that slammed into me.

"Did I step on you?" Leon called over his shoulder, shoving his way through the rows of silent beauties.

I didn't bother to answer my roommate. Too many thoughts twisted about in my head. Mitch's words bounced back at me, which irked the shit out of me because I knew he was right. I had the answer to the question I'd asked myself earlier because it was so simple. How could I protect Sothis?

Quick answer: by staying the hell away from Annie Pillington.

My skin prickled just being near her. I didn't even have to look her way to know where she stood in the overpopulated space. Stay away from her? Mitch would chew me up and spit me out for Sunday roast if I didn't. But I couldn't. Staying away from Annie Pillington was as simple as exhaling and not taking another breath.

And that was going to be one hell of a problem.

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MY FIRST CHALLENGE went just fine, thanks to Annie's song. More stuck in my head than I would have expected as Bettie tossed question after question at Team Beauty in the style of a seasoned Quiz Master. Cardboard planets, double helixes and molecules decorated the plain room set up as a school room, our names handwritten on cards propped up at our desks.

"Could have made the chairs a little bigger," I muttered, wiggling my ass in the munchkin sized seat.

"Could have put out a little more in the props department," dean added.

I nodded as Bettie waved a hand to start the proceedings. An assistant dressed as Saturn orbited the room, his arms held wide in an effort to avoid bending his multiple rings.

"Which pale metal on the periodic table is mixed with yellow gold to create white gold?" Bettie smiled and flashed a wide, sparkling band of diamonds set in white metal adorning her middle finger when the cameras were off her.

I recited the song Annie had chanted at me the night before. Something about silver ... war? Rhodium ... "Palladium!" I yelled.

Dean choked on his spit beside me. "Christ, Weston. Bit enthused there?"

I slapped his back far too hard in an effort to assist him with the choking, praising Annie and her odd little song silently inside my head.

"And platinum, also." Bettie scored me a point on her board. "Which body of water flows through the Panama Canal?"

"Atlantic and Pacific oceans," Leon answered in a bored voice.

"A little louder, Mister Shribner, if you please." Bettie gave Leon a point and a frown. "What is a star nursery also

called?”

“Nebula.” I grinned, taking the fist bump Leon offered.

Dean groaned, dropping his head to his hands. “Will this never end?”

I dropped a shoulder to lean closer. “Talk to your geek, man. She’s got the goods.”

“Are you implying I don’t?” Dean looked at me askance.

I shrugged and answered the next question.

The hour we were at Bettie’s mercy might have seemed long to Dean and most of team Beauty, but Leon and I competed against each other. The final round of questions shot out at rapid fire for a hot minute, Betty bringing in extra quiz masters so there was one for each contestant. Leon took the day, while I scrapped a pass mark, or whatever they called it, without getting my ass handed back to me along with a *don’t come back Monday* slip.

Dean barged past me as I exited the room we’d been interrogated in, the dozen or so chairs and tables askew and suddenly empty with a hundred not so hidden mics and cameras dangling off them in an array greater than a Christmas display.

“Manners,” I murmured to the younger man’s back. Hell, they were all younger than me. That in itself pissed me off, especially after the media kerfuffle that happened the moment I’d opened my eyes this morning.

Dean spun on his heel, a finger pointed in my face. His cheeks were flushed to his white collar where moisture collected at the edges in a yellowing stain. “Get out of everyone’s way, old man. If you’re only here to hook up and make a clown of yourself, do it away from the rest of us.” His finger wiggled threateningly.

He was lucky I chose not to break it.

“Get control of yourself. What happened to *I’d prefer to sleep on your floor?*” I studied the younger man more closely. His teeth clenched, and a vein throbbed by his temple. Dean

might profess to love the media but put him in a pressure cooker up close and personal, and he cracked. “I assume you didn’t appreciate the techniques they used today?”

Rapid fire questions at volume created a cacophony designed to raise stress in a hot and windowless room. Roaming assessors were intermittently seated within each man’s personal space bubble, ensuring no one had any idea of how well they were doing and had to trust their own brain rather than gauging reactions from others. The audience would get a spotlight view of every contestant. If that wasn’t bonus material spread across social media, then Bettie wasn’t using prime footage of Team beauty cracking like she should.

Hell, I was getting far too involved in this whole process.

*Wasn’t a new perspective one of the reasons you’re here?*

I knew the aims of an exercise like the ones we’d just been through way too well, having been on the other side during early training. Hell, I *taught* most of them now for one very solid reason—they were effective as fuck.

“Screw you,” Dean snarled in my face. Sweat dribbled from his chin and dampened his French cuffs as he spun around and stumbled over his own feet.

“You first,” I murmured, watching him storm away. I hoped for his sake that the cameras didn’t follow him.

*Clown, indeed.*

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BETTIE SMILED as the camera filmed what I hoped to any Hollywood deity was the final take of the day. My cheeks ached from smiling, and flashes randomly blew up in the back of my eyes as the lighting technicians adjusted to the failing sun of the day. I blinked for the umpteenth time as the cameras stopped rolling and the camera crew shifted back.

Our host, dressed in a blue velvet sheath that had nothing to do with the weather and all to do with the men’s attention

focused on her visible assets, lost her smile and planted her hands on her hips.

“Last night, a shitty little wanna-be-big-time-rag got a hold of several pictures. Several *exclusive* pictures they shouldn’t have been able to access. They’ve since run more than twenty, count them”—she flung her hands in the air, fingers at full extension—“articles that have been picked up by the rest of Los Angeles and who knows how many others. Which is the biggest leak we’ve had in *Geekily Yours*’ history after eight strong seasons. Now, while I’m furious”—she glared at the women and smiled vapidly for the men—“I can turn this around for us and use the stories. *However*, as soon as I find the leak, they will be plugged with a restraining order and a lawsuit the size of my house. Understood?”

A few muttered “*understood*,” and “*yes ma’am*” echoed from both sides of the exposed area. I snuck a look at Annie, who stood still, not offering an apology. A slight dip between her brows displayed her concerns.

She wasn’t the only one. Bettie’s display of anger—rightfully so—meant she knew nothing about the leak. If it had been planned, it wasn’t with her knowledge. I had the impression nothing got by that woman without a custom’s security level inspection. In this case, it wasn’t a bad thing.

*Looks like Dean’s theory on leakage and PR teams was wrong.*

Annie clasped her hands to her chest, fingers intertwined. Even from the thirty-foot distance between us I could see her knuckles turn white. Damn, she’d freak if she got a hold of any of the press leaks, especially if they were anything like the one Mitch had sent me.

Good thing the production company would want to keep them tight under wraps to prevent copycatting or other opportunists looking to offer up sensitive materials or photos for a fee. Honestly, I expected Bettie not to say anything until she found the culprit and sued the pants off them.

Leon raised his hand. “Can we get some copies of the articles?”



I groaned internally and kicked his shins. Leon turned on me with wide *what did I do?* flirty eyes, though something more calculating lurked in their depths.

*Mental note: Watch your friends, Sirius.*

I pressed my toes into the soles of my boots, needing the additional circulation. No point fainting in the lines. I needed to get a grip on my paranoia before I affected Annie with it.

Bettie nodded. “Everything will be available on the shared drive tonight. Read them once because after that they’ll be deleted. If *anyone* saves a copy or deigns to contact media or outlets ...” She smiled with teeth and rattled on while I stopped listening.

So much for the option that involved keeping Annie safe. Now I’d need to work out how to share the information with her before someone else did in spectacular fashion. I eyed the redhead beside her who laughed at Bettie the longer the host scowled.

“Damn, man. You had to go out on a limb,” Leon muttered under his breath to no one at all.

I shot him a sideways glance.

“Told you I’d get you what you need. That publicity is within reach, big man” Dean twisted at the waist to grin over his shoulder at me. Apparently, I’d been forgiven for my slight earlier. “I’m a man of my word.”

I recalled he *had* muttered something similar as we made our way to the gladiator zone earlier in the day, though the hours jumbled in my over-caffeinated head.

“Double team?” Leon put in, the shifty look still in his eyes as he watched the pair of us.

Maybe he was waiting for the impending fight that seemed unavoidable with so many volatile personalities shoved into a small space. Or maybe I couldn’t trust him.

*Fucking brilliant.*

“You’re a pain in my ass,” I grumbled to the general room, but I wasn’t angry with either of them, just annoyed that the

information was out there, and that I clearly couldn't spend time with Annie without being judged for it.

Which posed a whole new problem of its own—how the hell was I supposed to help her out while not wanting to kiss her, while keeping my hands off her? Self-restraint had always been a strength of mine, but she swiped it all away.

After talking to her the night before, the crazy ass idea of being the one to teach her what being in bed could be like had filled my head to the point I could barely sleep, and I'd had more than one cold shower before I gave into my basest urge and fucked my fist while I fantasized about her.

That made me twice the asshole.

She'd trusted me enough to tell me, which also meant she expected me to have boundaries. The problem was that I didn't know where mine ended anymore.

As soon as Bettie stopped talking, effectively dismissing the group by turning her back on us and clacking her way out of the impromptu set, I took the steps two at a time to reach Annie.

She stared at me, worrying her bottom lip without moving from where she'd stood all afternoon.

“Have your feet gone to sleep yet?” I flashed her a smile I didn't feel, stretching my own legs to encourage circulation that appeared to have stopped altogether.

“All of me might have,” she admitted, glancing up at me once then away.

“Are you okay?” I frowned. Starting off all awkward did not bode well for the conversation we needed to have. Or the one I'd scheduled in for myself. My hand drifted up, ready to cup her elbow or graze her waist with my knuckles. Any reason to touch her, really.

*Damn she's pretty.*

Which was exactly zero reasons why I couldn't jeopardize the firm's reputation, and mine.

Annie glanced up, her gaze fixed, and her cheeks flushed. “I saw the photos. And the headlines.”

“Ah.” A stone formed in my throat, and I swallowed over it with effort so it sank to the level of my belly. “I’m sorry that happened. Leon has a mad scheme to right the wrongs while Dean is off on a high horse of his own ...” I shrugged, taking on the uncomfortable mantle of not knowing what the hell to do next with both hands and clinging to it as a poor life buoy. I cleared my throat. “Did you read the articles?”

“No.” Annie hid beneath the brim of her oversized sun hat.

I took a step back to give her more room. Yesterday Annie would have giggled or made a joke. Today’s Annie stood silent and still.

“Probably a good thing. There wasn’t anything there we don’t already know.”

“Then why does half the world seem to believe that we slept together?” Her whisper emanated from beneath the brim of her hat. “My f-family—” She closed her mouth in a tight line, flushed skin paling. “They’ll believe those words.”

Swallowing, I reached out to tip her head back. My personal reminder service *you hoo-ed* behind me, and I dropped my hand, fighting the urge to lean back and slap the shit out of my housemate though I was grateful For now. “I’m sorry. Especially after ... well. Talking last night.”

“There wasn’t anything incriminating said. I know state secrets, have info about future tech, grants and patents, research you’ve never heard about, all listed under an official secrets act. If a news article was going to be about anything featuring me I would have expected it to be about that, not our non-existent sex life.”

“That’s what he said, sweetie. But don’t worry. Nobody cares about your secrets and things.” Leon joined our conversation and, his head buried in his phone, missed the look of horror and shame that crossed Annie’s face.

I didn’t.

“Why don’t you go ask the boys who spilled beans, and take Dean with you, seeing as he’s an investigative journo and all,” I muttered, unable to tear my gaze from the face I’d been trying to see, unable to get her to raise her eyes to me.

Leon succeeded where I struggled and hurt her feelings to boot. I got the impression that once low, she’d struggle to surface again, thanks to people like her asshole boss and, apparently, her family.

I knew that feeling all too well.

“Ignore him. Leon wouldn’t know a state secret if it hit him in the face. And yours are a hell of a lot more important.” I glared at Leon beneath lowered brows. My fingers twitched, and I pressed them to my thigh before I did something really stupid.

Like touch her.

Leon whistled tunelessly next to me. “It’s all sex, sex, and more basic sex. It’s not even exciting stuff.”

“Annie, it’ll be alright,” I murmured, searching her gaze. “You’ll be fine. This will die down and you can—”

*Get back to my normal, boring, compartmentalized life.*

I read the answer in her eyes and didn’t bother trying to fight it. This girl hated and loved everything about herself simultaneously. She yo-yoed between highs and lows so fast I struggled to keep up, but I knew when she was folding in on herself, hiding.

Annie,” I tried again.

She waved me away, stepping back. The physical distance between us had nothing on the emotional void I couldn’t cross that blew out in a matter of seconds. “I’m fine, Sirius. Go, do your security thing.” Her brow dipped the faintest amount.

I stared, trying to read her, but all I saw in her shy, beautiful face was betrayal.

# CHAPTER 10



ANNIE

*I'M FINE, I'm fine, I'm sooooo freaking fine.*

Also me: I am not fine.

Being part of the public eye, paparazzi mess might have been my biggest fear apart from Jansen's weekly tirade on what I did wrong and what I could do better. The only reason I stayed attached to his not-so-relevant tech department, apart from the fact that I got to dive into my world of space dirt, was that I knew he was right. I *could* do better.

So much better.

The perfectionist streak in me kept me heading for whatever goal posts he set for our small department. Call me an overachiever, whatever. Those labels, oddly enough, had never bothered me, not coming from my mother or my father, because I knew they weren't realistic. Something I couldn't gain on my own.

Not meeting up to my boss' and my own personal standards did bother me. My ongoing anxiety couldn't deal with a single dint in my professional pride, the one thing that was disassociated with my family that I had earned all on my own.

Looking at Sirius when I knew he wanted more of me felt exactly the same way.

I'd never been so disappointed in myself as I had when he caught my eye in the middle of an internal dilemma that involved turning tail and running as far and as fast as I possibly could.

*I'm giving up.*

*Quitter, quitter, quitter.*

The thought brought me closer to tears, and the cameras would eat that up. Why I'd let Jansen talk me into this, I couldn't fathom. Nor did I doubt he had his own personal

agenda. I hadn't bothered to ask what that was, and though I could call and ask now, my ego was too battered.

Had he set me up to fail?

Possible, but he needed me in the department. No one could do what I did for one simple reason—I genuinely didn't have a life outside my space rocks. Categorizing and classifying, delving into the micro levels to discover commonalities between samples, searching for that elusive new unicorn element that would change astrophysics forever.

I closed my apartment door, relieved that Keira had decided to stalk Dean for the afternoon. She'd muttered something about *I'll show him how to wear a wig* in my ear and flounced off. Quiet Hattie disappeared with Leon too, leaving me alone with only my thoughts as companions. Everyone paired up but me. Not that I minded. But where those thoughts could lead ... that did scare me.

I leaned my head against the cool painted apartment door and sighed. Silence filled my mind, replacing the chatter and grainy media images—Sirius' trailer and an insignificant white blob that might be me. I welcomed the quiet void of space, delving deeper past the samples and stars I studied in my sleep.

"Annie?" Sirius' voice broke through the sturdy barrier I'd erected around me and the rest of the world.

I sighed. *So much for a peaceful void.*

"I'm not here," I grumbled.

Sirius laughed, the door vibrating with the deep sound, and my heart leaped once. Just once, but it was enough. "In denial, are we?"

"What's this royal *we* thing?" Answering a question with a question. Yup, I was up for a good case of procrastination, arguing semantics, and ... dammit, he was right.

*Denial.*

"If you were a geek princess yesterday, today you graduated to Queen status so ... yeah, you get the royalty

clause.” Sirius tapped the door with what sounded like the back of his hand, or maybe it was his head.

Whichever way he tried to show his frustration, our limited conversation took an oddly intimate turn.

“Do I want to know what the royalty clause is?” I asked, then wished I hadn’t. What if it was like the celebrity clause? My body worked up an icy shiver filled with fear and doused me in searing hot desire all at once.

Sirius had that effect on me, even though his brand of crooked sunshine came with a decent dollop of grump. Sexy grump, though. I could go for that.

*Daddy issues, anyone?*

Add that to my growing repertoire of personal problems. Thankfully, Keira wasn’t around to witness my shame.

“Are you going to open the door, Stardust?” Sirius’ voice sent a ripple of need shooting through me.

*This is a bad, bad idea.*

I squeezed my fingers together and fought back the anticipation lodged somewhere between my stomach and my heart, trying not to sound too eager. That was the game, right? Not that I’d know. My anxiety left me firmly in the *social cues ignorance* camp.

“Fine.” I tugged the door ajar and stood in the gap. “Royalty clause aside”—I brushed off my curiosity—“I thought we talked out all the media crap.”

*Set me on fire and send me flying into the sun.*

“We didn’t talk at all, and you know it,” he grouched, though the corner of his mouth tugged upward, belying his grumpy facade.

*Ahh, there’s that ray of happiness.* I wasn’t about to let his facade fool me.

“We said some things ...” Shivers rippled over my skin as he stared at me. I swallowed and studied my shoes instead.



“We did,” he acknowledged in a cautious voice, then swore softly.

I raise my head, focusing my attention on the crinkled lines around his eyes and his mouth instead. That turned into a mini daydream of him kissing me far too fast. “What?”

Sirius drew a short, sharp breath. “I promised myself I’d stay away from you, you know that?”

“Because of the media pictures? Because of your ... your business?” I managed to get the words out without spitting them a la bitter fashion.

“Yes. And no.” He shrugged.

“This conversation is a touch one sided,” I warned him.

His lips curled into the sexiest smile I’d ever seen. “True. I promised I’d stay away from you because I’m at least twenty years older than you. Because I wish I’d had you to myself in the trailer that first night. And because the image of kissing you ... and more is stuck in my mind, and I feel like a dirty old man.”

“You do, huh?” I blinked at his honest admission. “Are all dirty old men as blunt as you?”

Sirius grinned in full, letting out a low laugh that did plenty to add to the rising need his words had made in me. “We’re too tired for bullshit.”

“Ah, so now you’re dirty, old, *and* tired? Wow. Sounds like a cracker. Don’t let the media get a hold of that stunning set of character traits.”

“Smart ass.” He reached up, bracing one forearm over my head against the doorframe. “So does a worn out, old codger earn a walk?”

“Want me to find you a walker to support those creaky knees?” I flashed him a fake smile I only partially felt. “Stick with dirty old man. It’s far less creepy. And for a walk, maybe tomorrow?” I winced, waiting for the harsh words that would accompany my stalling tactics.

Sirius nodded slowly, tipping his chin down a little to stare straight into my eyes. “Tomorrow, then.” He rapped his knuckles against the wood above my head and pushed away, the ghost of his smile etched across his lips. “Good night, Stardust.”

“Good night, Sirius.” I tracked him to the stairwell with my eyes alone, closing the door and locking it with a long sigh, tension departing with him, leaving me exhausted.

Between a hot silver fox, media madness, and filming all day with challenges coming up, I had no energy left to keep me standing. The concept of sliding down the door and sleeping on the floor wasn’t such a bad one. I lifted stiff leg muscles in a tentative step toward my bedroom.

“Hell,” I muttered.

All I wanted was peace. And quiet and twelve hours of sleep in a dark, cool room with a weighted blanket.

“Holy chili hot balls!” Keira called from somewhere within the apartment. “I thought the two of you were going to go at it right in the doorway.”

*And I thought you weren’t in the apartment at all.*

So much for peace.

I groaned, ignoring my housemate, and pushing my stiff feet up the stairs. I made it all the way to my bed before I remembered I hadn’t asked about his royalty clause.

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PISTOL ANNIES SANG “HELL ON HEELS” while I hyperventilated the next afternoon. We managed to make it through a whole day of filming and individual interviews in the Honesty box. A truly horrendous tiny space fitted with a camera, a horrid aqua-colored chair—the sort found in asylums or so I expected—and exactly zero air conditioning where each member of the cast was supposed to divulge their most intimate thoughts. There was no way that was actually

happening from me or for any of us, and our combined hatred of the room made the cast mutual sympathizers.

Unfortunately, filming our secrets in the Honesty Box was also compulsory.

But sitting in the un-air-conditioned hellhole wasn't the worst part of my day. Bettie announced the next geek challenge with the type of dismissal a person competent and confident in a skill used under pressure.

A runway swimsuit challenge.

Even Keira laughed it off.

I couldn't. The swimsuit factor bothered me on a deeper, value driven level—the opposite of what my mother had drilled into me. In her eyes, the body was simply a hanger for whatever personality she wanted to don each day for whatever event she attended. Naturally, she expected me to do the same.

Naturally, I revolted. Or was revolted by the concept, which made this challenge that much tougher on a physical level to boot. But showing skin had *nothing* on high heels. Hell it would be indeed.

“You'll be fine,” Keira whispered without a sideways glance.

“Yup.” Harriet nodded on my other side, stuffing popcorn into her mouth. “Easy peasy. Give me a kaftan and all will be good.”

“And contestants must wear the approved and branded swimwear donated by *Bikini Shores* for this challenge.” Bettie smiled broadly at the still collection of girls standing in front of her.

Harriet stopped eating, her mouth dropping open. “No cover ups?”

“None.” Bettie answered firmly. She stepped up to our group, her voice lowered as she sliced her hand through the air at her side.

The little red light on the camera beside us turned off.

“Uh oh,” Keira murmured.

“And I won’t have a fuss, or you’ll find yourself going home.” Bettie snarled in a soft manner that utterly belied the venom of her words.

“What if we want to go home?” Harriet burst out. Her hand came up to cover her mouth, though there was no popcorn in it.

“Then you’ll be the first to have that privilege for this challenge.” Bettie smiled sweetly though her sharp blue gaze swept us like she was looking at a ragtag group of soldiers who would never meet up to her standard.

*Finally, a group I fit into.*

I’d found my people. Maybe the whole thing wasn’t a bust after all.

“Come on, it won’t be that bad. I mean, I’ve got pudge, but screw them.” Keira shook her hair back in magnificent fashion. “You’re gorgeous, Harriet. Walk like you own it.” She pirouetted in a double quick step and broke away from the group heading directly for Dean.

“Easy for her to say. She has confidence.” Harriet dug into her pocket, came up with another handful of popcorn and stared at it. A long sigh left her lips as she walked quickly to the nearest potted palm and tipped her hand up, then emptied her pocket.

“Confidence is hard to come by,” I agreed wholeheartedly, leaning in for a hug. Harriet stiffened in my embrace, so I patted her awkwardly.

“What are you talking about?” she asked scathingly. “You’re stick thin. It’s not like a bikini won’t not fit you!” Her voice rose slightly.

“I’ve never worn high heels in my life,” I admitted.

Harriet’s mouth fell open. “Not even once? Like for prom?”

“I never went.” I didn’t bother to smile. The thought of school, reunions, and formal events filled me with ground

freezing abject fear. “And as much as my mother wanted me to be a socialite to adhere to her whacked out version of a class system, I just couldn’t. The idea broke something inside me. I got landed with a double whammy since I was smart and won awards. She wanted me in heels and a twinset. I chose black sneakers with cherries on them over stilettos as my form of rebellion.”

“Wow. That’s ... oh, Annie.”

“Yeah, I know. Living the dream, huh?”

“All the way. Want to get room service?” She hooked her arm through mine like we had all the choice in the world of the four-item menu. After four days with no changes, the menu had run its course, but as far as we could tell, there’d be no changes to it for the foreseeable future. At all.

Variation, spice of life, and all that jazz.

“Let’s do it. My room or yours?”

In the end we chose Harriet’s room in order to avoid Keira. The red head was fun and usually nice, but neither of us could bear another ego hit. One giant serve of gnocchi dripping in garlic cream sauce later and I had formed a firm friendship with Hattie. I yawned as I waved over my head and aimed my overtired body down the hall.

A big bowl of comfort food and sympathy had covered my fears, but the moment I stepped outside Hattie’s allocated apartment, every single one of them returned in force. I didn’t even have a pair of heels to practice in, and I couldn’t leave to go shopping. Which left me with one option: fess up to Keira and ask to borrow her boots. The things had spiked heels a skyscraper would be envious of and consisted of lace stockings that covered above the knee.

I had the feeling that Bettie intended to find our limits tomorrow.

As I neared the door, I realized a dark shadow stood next to it. “Keira? Did you lock yourself out?” I called, trotting forward.

Sirius stepped into the light. His hands slipped into his jean pockets, and he wore a gray button down shirt beneath a tailored leather jacket. His head canted to one side as he swept his gaze over me.

“Have you eaten? I was going to claim that walk, unless ...” He gave a one shouldered shrug.

“Unless I what?” I asked, bolder than I felt. Exhaustion did funny things to a body, right? Maybe I’d just found one of mine. I kept moving and didn’t stop until I stood on the edge of his personal space bubble.

He reached out and tucked a loose hair behind my ear. “Unless you’d like to change.”

“Not letting me off that easy?” Where had this flirt come from? *Where?*

“No chance. Do you need a minute?” His gaze locked on mine, unyielding and unforgiving.

Something about him told me tonight would be about truths, and I wasn’t sure I was quite ready for a *Sirius* talk just yet.

“Give me three minutes?” My mouth and heart worked together to rebel against my brain. My resolve broke the moment he turned up at my door. Despite the articles, those pictures...I did want to spend time with him away from the cameras. Even so, I wasn’t sending a thank you note to the mouth faction, purely because my foot was well jammed into it.

“I’ll be right here.” His lopsided smile broke through, easing the severe lines of his face in the half, dimmed light the corridor on my floor offered.

I dashed into my room, throwing my clothes off and heading straight for my deodorant. I might not have time for a shower, but I sure could kill any lingering body odor.

Throwing on a denim skirt I hadn’t been allowed to wear on set as it was *too boring*, I paired it with a white knit sweater that hung just below my waist and my favorite yellow ankle boots—the ones with no heel.

My gaze flicked to the staircase. Would the lace, black knife-heeled boots be better? This was a good enough opportunity to practice wearing them. Would Keira mind if I borrowed them, maybe? My lips pressed tight together as I chickened out entirely. I grabbed my room key and stepped out into the hallway. My floor was vacant except for one man as I closed the door softly behind me, knowing the rest of the girls on my floor were likely already asleep, which would be my personal option if not for Sirius and his weird nocturnal habits.

“Why don’t you sleep like a normal person?” I asked

He popped off the wall where he’d been leaning. “I do sleep. Just shorter and probably deeper than most. I learned to get rest in whatever way I could years ago, and the habit stuck.” He held the lift door for me, his hand grazing my lower back through the soft knit. “You look pretty.”

I glanced at him sideways. “What happened to no touching, Annie’s a secret siren?” I snorted.

Sirius smiled, small and enigmatic. “Is this what you wear at home?”

“Sometimes to work, maybe if I’m at the library on weekends. My home internet is terrible.”

“And your workplace lets you conduct research on public computers?” Sirius frowned as he punched the down button.

“My boss has nothing to do with my master’s thesis. Thankfully.” I gripped the rail at the side of the elevator.

“What’s it on?”

“If large scale seismic activity in a solar system can be influenced by something outside their specific gravity, and if it can be related to other celestial bodies. I’m a bore. You should see me at parties.” I grimaced.

“You go to those?” Up went that super-fit eyebrow again.

“Hell no.”

“Potty mouth.”

“I’ve been taking notes.”

“I’ll watch my tongue then.” Sirius smiled. “Your thesis sounds way above my pay grade. Though I do get decent internet at home.”

“Must be nice.” I followed him out of the elevator in a hard right where he headed for the open forest behind the main house we filmed in. “Where are we going?” I stopped at the edge of the light when he walked on into the darkness. “Sirius?”

He turned, most of his body thrown into shadow. “I thought about your challenge today and needed a reason to see you. I’m guessing high heels are a no-no in your life?”

“Maybe?” I winced, shuffling my booted feet, all too aware of their flat rubber soles. In their defense, they were comfy. “I thought of borrowing Keira’s lace thigh high boots with a knife point looking heel, but ...”

“I’d like to see that,” Sirius rasped. He cleared his throat, and a hand appeared in the light, his fingers curled up in an almost *come hither* gesture. “Come on.”

*What happened to not touching me?* My mind screamed the question I desperately wanted to ask, but I couldn’t force my mouth open. His words from the night before filled my head, and before I could put rational thought together my hand was in his warmer one, his fingers folded around mine.

Sensation zinged through my hand and along my arm at the contact. A muscle ticked in his jaw as he raked his gaze over me again. I squeezed his hand too tight and fell into step alongside him.

Sirius shortened his stride but didn’t let go of my hand, engulfing mine in his much larger one as I stepped into the shadows. The edge of the forest closed around us, cloaking us in a dense gloom that quickly shrouded the building lights from view. My eyes adjusted as we continued deeper into the trees, picking out tiny lights that bobbed and zipped between bushes and trees.

“Fireflies,” I murmured.



Sirius huffed beside me. “Did you think I was going to take you into the bushes and ...” He wagged his eyebrows at me in the ambient glow.

“And murder me?” I completed his sentence in a cheerful voice. “Yup!”

“You wound me.” He pushed between two shrubs, holding the branches back for me. I was reminded forcibly of the night we’d met, me disappearing into the bushes, him yanking me out again.

Face planting into his crotch.

My feet tangled on cue. I cast a panicked glance sideways at him, a truly horrendous groan tearing from my throat.

“Are you okay?” Sirius leapt back, his gaze sweeping the area as though hunting for terrorists, but the only thing that attacked me were tiny bugs the size of my fingernail glowing merrily around his hand as though entranced by him.

Just like me.

I shook my head, managing to unwind my feet at the same time—*excellent, multi-tasking skills are back*—and smiled. “It’s nothing.”

*Just the feel of your thick cock against my mouth.*

I clamped my mouth tight, refusing to let out any more weird ass sounds and break the mood while my head insisted on living in Hussyland.

Another firefly flitted past, its tiny wings working with more coordination than I’d ever possessed. Brilliant, now I had nature working against me. Maybe if my ass started to glow instead of my cheeks for once I’d have better luck navigating social situations. Mind, something about Sirius made me comfortable, easing the nervous jitters that usually plagued me in public.

I stepped out into a clearing filled with sharp lines and odd angles. Shadows hung in the wrong places as I turned in a circle, picking out struts and sandbags and ... “Is that a bear?” I blinked at the shape that was clearly a giant stuffed grizzly,

all teeth and big, googly eyes. “If you’re going for romantic and not serial killer, I’d say you missed the mark.”

“He’s there in case you need motivation.” Sirius’s hand grazed my lower back and rested there. He leaned over my shoulder, speaking into my ear. “Do you know what it is?”

Sirius’ breath kissed my cheek, his body heat emanating through my thin sweater. I failed to suppress the shiver that worked its way tantalizingly slowly over my skin. His hands closed around my waist, urging me to lean back.

Fighting to breathe through constricted lungs, I gave into the urge, resting my shoulder blades against his broad chest.

“You’re delving into bondage and rope bunnies?” I spouted, my trembling voice far too chipper for the serene forest and the quiet of the night.

He laughed, palming my stomach to draw me back against him. “You’ve got a filthy mind, Stardust. And now I want to check your internet history.”

I squeaked. “Nope. No way in hell.”

“And a filthy little mouth to boot.” His murmur worked its way along my spine, fingers of sensation rippling across my shoulders. He inhaled along my neck as though he was inhaling *me*.

My head spun with an excess of emotion. “Stop that. You’re cheesy enough to make a girl swoon.” Though he was far from cheesy, and I would bet a week’s income he knew it, too.

“It’s a ropes course. And you’re going to do it barefoot.” Sirius straightened and stepped back.

Cool air swirled behind me, between us, as I stared at the ropes and stepped toward it, running my hand over the smooth surface, the tatty ends worn and oiled with the desperate handgrips of many victims. “No.”

“No?” Sirius sounded amused behind me.

I didn’t turn to check. “Nope rope. I’ll sit with the bear and watch you be Mister Rigger. I think I liked the bondage option

better,” I muttered, backing off.

“If it suits you.” Sirius stared at me for a moment too long, as though imagining me as the sassy librarian with a secret who needed to be punished.

*That* image sank into my mind all too fast. I whimpered and slapped my hands over my mouth. My gaze rose to meet Sirius’ in my humiliation. I couldn’t do a single thing right, had been awkward since birth, probably before in the womb. You’d think I would be used to this kind of life choice.

But when Sirius’ dark eyes met mine, he swore softly and turned away.

*Embarrassment level complete.*

Just as I was prepared to ask him to show me the path home and hide in my room in perpetuity, he grabbed a rope and gave it a twang.

Each part of the web vibrated in a convoluted circle that started before me and ended somewhere at my back. I traced the wobbling line at my side, staring when Sirius closed his hand on the thread just behind mine, stilling the rope.

“Each course is no more than a foot from the ground, and I’ll be right beside you as long as you need.” His voice got that seductive quality again.

I spun on my heel and slapped a hand to his chest. “Is this how you do your ... your bodyguarding thing? Seduce your clients into doing whatever you want them to do? Because you seem awfully practiced at it.”

My body trembled without my permission as notes of leather and spice mixed with the forest’s cool, earthy scent. No smile curved his lips, and for the first time, I missed it.

Sirius glanced down at where my hand pressed to his very hard and well defined chest, then returned his gaze to me. “You’re afraid.”

“Of what you have planned?” I scoffed, twisting away from him. This time I broke the contact. “Walking around on oily, slippery ropes in the dark with bare feet? That has

nothing to do with me walking about in a skimpy bikini and death stick shoes tomorrow.” I huffed the last on an irritated breath to disguise the tears stifling me.

“You can conquer both this and the catwalk. It’s easier than you think.”

“I’m not afraid of heights, Sirius.”

“No.” He paused. “You’re afraid of falling. Of failing.”

I swallowed and said nothing.

Sirius ran his hands along the ropes at my shoulder height and kicked his boots off. He wore no socks beneath and stepped onto the forest floor barefoot. His weight distributed evenly across his shoulders, he stepped up to the impossibly thin single strand running beneath identical hand holds, though he didn’t use them.

“Confidence is key. Not Leon’s style, the egotistical sort or the flamboyant sort Leon naturally has in spades but knowing your body and trusting your tools to hold you up. Your feet.” He looked down at me with a slight smile, walking across the rope without wiggling, wobbling, holding out his hands, or face planting.

“I can’t do that. You cannot expect me to—” I gasped as he jumped down in front of me, right into my space. “What are you, a super soldier?”

“Ran away to the circus as a kid when my parents died in a car accident. I was supposed to look after my brothers, but I folded under pressure and ran from the responsibility. Then the military, where the responsibility heaped back on. I came home and did the right thing by my remaining family.”

“The picture of perfection,” I muttered, staring at the rope pulled taut above the ground.

Sirius laughed. “Boots off, Stardust.”

“I’m not a firefly.”

“But you are going to do this.”

“No, no, *no*—”

His hands wound around my waist, and I squeaked again.

“Shoes off. Now, Annie.” His gaze darkened and his tone took on a measure of command.

Swallowing hard, I toed my boots off, conscious of Sirius’ hands wound around my waist. Managing to yank my socks off with my toes—I added a new skill to my toolbox—I stood barefoot, toe to toe with him.

He dipped his head, leaning far too close into my space. My heart sped up as fireflies illuminated his slow smile. “You’re going to enjoy this.”

“I doubt it—eep!” I shrieked, shattering the calm of the clearing.

Sirius lifted me off my feet and straight onto the rope he’d stood on so easily without slipping or dancing around.

That wasn’t the case for me.

I skidded on the thing like some hidden goblin shook it with all four claws. “This was not a good idea.” I grasped madly at the ropes positioned at either side of my waist.

“You don’t need them. Still,” Sirius murmured, his hands still wrapped about my waist.

It took me a long moment to work out that he held me suspended at the level of the rope while my feet skittered about in a panicked, uncoordinated dance. The handrails offered little in the way of support. The thin ropes I gripped with white knuckles stretching continually out to my sides until I bent at the waist, wobbling off kilter on the single strand beneath my bare feet, and prepared to kiss the dirt.

*Still.*

I swallowed hard and stopped fighting. My hands tensed on the ropes until my feet found purchase on the rope I’d been unable to locate. The bug-illuminated clearing made the ropes all but invisible, Sirius a forest wraith at my side. His hands released by degrees, and it took me a moment to realize the loss of my silver fox security blanket I was starting to take for granted.

I shook my head frantically. “Not without you.”

“Okay.” Pressure returned to my sides. “Drop your hands.”

“I’m standing still. On a rope. In a forest in the middle of the night. I’m keeping the handholds.” *And you.*

“Trust me.” Sirius’ voice lilted.

I looked at him—still up, naturally—and sighed. “Fine.” My lungs stayed hollow, unable to take new air in even if I dared, and I pried my fingers off the rope. “I’d appreciate a push off the ledge, you know. Still got me?” I unclenched another finger but couldn’t quite let go.

“No, you wouldn’t, and yes I do.”

“Thank you.” I swallowed hard, staring at my hand as though willing it to release on its own. “Not going to offer me advice, Dumbledore?”

He winced. “Could have picked a younger spymaster.”

“Fine, Young Dumbledore. Help?”

“You’ve got this.”

“That’s not what I was after.”

“I know.” He laughed softly.

I stared at my inert fingers a little longer and released the rope. Just. Like. That. I hovered a foot off the ground supported by a pair of corded hands and a single strand beneath my bare feet and called it a win. “Now what?”

“Do you need to celebrate?”

I peered at him suspiciously. “Why?”

“Because your whole body is vibrating.”

“Shhh.” I trembled all the harder. “How about you take my nerves, and I’ll take a dose of your confidence, Big Guy?”

“All right. Step forward. Yes. That’s a foot,” Sirius sassed me, ignoring my previous comment entirely. “Lift it up and put it back down, forward.”

“Don’t make me break out the Sirius jokes. I looked a few up,” I warned him. *When I looked you up.* But I didn’t say that. The hurt was still tender though every moment around Sirius healed that betrayal a little more.

“Of course, you did.” Sirius tapped my thigh with his knee, thankfully leaving his hands right where they were. “Walk forward.”

“I’d prefer to go backward,” I offered, only half-Sirius, and giggled at my own joke.

“Do you need a moment?” He cocked an eyebrow, his arrogance returning.

“Some of the jokes were so bad,” I muttered.

“Good. Tell me when you get to the end. On your own.”

I resisted poking my tongue out. The action seemed apt. “Meanie.”

“You have no idea.”

Sirius fell silent and waited. I did, too. The forest’s silence filled the space around and between us. A firefly zipped along my path, and I took a tentative step forward. The firefly flew on, hovering as though waiting for me to follow it. So I did. All the way to the end of the rope.

It wasn’t until I got there that I realized Sirius’ touch had reduced to the lightest hold.

“Well done,” he murmured.

I threw him an exuberant grin and fell off.

# CHAPTER 11





## SIRIUS

ANNIE PICKED herself off the ground more times than I could count as moonlight began to filter through the canopy above us, but as the air cooled in the quiet hours of the night, she began to find her balance point. Her concentration remained fierce, one of the things I imagined she employed in her everyday work too and seemed to be a comfortable zone for her.

That didn't stop her from running on in a constant stream of chatter that only seemed to heighten her anxiety as she clung to my fingers.

“And J— My boss fought every which way, but eventually I wore him down.” She finished her story on a triumphant smile and wobbled.

I remembered how well the last victory grin had worked out and caught her before she toppled. “Did you talk the entire time? To your boss?”

“Um, no.” She ducked her chin bashfully. “I don't really talk much at all at work.”

I knew she was going to say it before the words came out, but that didn't stop it from making my brain churn. “Mm hm. But you talk a lot with me.”

She shrugged and caught her own balance, arms slightly extended. She hadn't noticed I'd let go. “You're easier. More comfortable, I guess. I don't know.”

“So you're usually quiet, then.” Something we had in common. I kept my own company and my boys kept theirs.

“Maybe?” She peeked at me through her lashes.

“Stardust...” I folded my arms over my chest, and she laughed.

“Okay, yes. I'm a silent salt pillar pretty much everywhere. I've found if I tell people my feelings, they usually use them against me in some form or another and I'm left feeling like an

idiot on more than one front.” She wandered across the twin strands of rope holding out one hand, fingers pointing up. “One, that I actually spoke up and believed I might have friends and two, that they betrayed me, and I trusted them in the first place.” Her voice wobbled on the last note.

I nodded. “I think that’s all just one thing. Trust.”

“Probably.”

She kept walking while I watched her from the relatively safe distance of a few spaces. She never spoke to anyone, but she’d made two friends at the house and got on famously with both myself and Leon. I doubted she’d recognize a friendship if it bit her on the toe, rather like the way she hadn’t noticed I’d stepped back to give her space and removed my immediate support from her vicinity.

“You find peace in your work and close off so no one can hurt you. Is that about right?”

“Yep.”

I snorted. “Then what in the hell are you doing in the middle of a forest, walking on a rope in the middle of the night? With a man double your age who has his hands on you every chance he can get? Not to mention, you’re conversing fluently? Cause girl, you’re making me giddy.” My heart concurred with my diagnosis, my brain cheering as I covered the emotional reaction to the girl who had the controls to the night—to me—even if she didn’t see it.

“I am?” Her brows shot up and she looked at me. Really looked at me. “Wait, what are you doing all the way over there?”

“Actually, I thought of joining you.” I gave her a sharp smile and took two steps to mount the ropes. Annie’s dark eyes flared wide. I held out my hands in a peace offering. “Dance with me.”

“To what?” she all but yelped.

“Can you dance?” I asked, stepping into her space and curving one hand to the small of her back.

*Just breaking all my own rules again. Mitch is going to have my ass.*

I'd made those rules for a good reason, but I was breaking them for a better one. Come giant sunflowers and hats or the lace boots she'd mentioned before, there was no denying I was falling for the girl.

Dancing with her was a terrible idea.

Holding her was worse. So much worse.

Her hands slipped up my wrists beneath my jacket. "Sirius, this is a really bad idea."

"I was just thinking that." I grinned into her hair, propping my chin on the top of her head. The silence we'd disturbed with our chatter sank around us, the fireflies, and pale moonbeams our only light.

*Perfect for my Stardust.*

I stared over her head in shock. When had she become mine?

My head swore I was just protecting a girl well out of her depth while my heart was on a covert mission of its own, but the truth was that Annie was a far more capable woman than she—or apparently anyone else in her life—gave her credit for.

"Wait, what are you doing, then, if this isn't a good idea?" She withdrew her fingers from their place just inside my jacket sleeves and slid them up my chest. She hesitated, then leaned her cheek lightly between her hands.

My heart cramped so hard I wondered if she hadn't heard the crack of the unused muscle. "Because you're not the only one who locks the world out. I'm not the right—" I broke off, swearing softly.

"I suppose I do lock out the world."

"Then I'm glad you let me in." I led her across the rope, moving slow enough that I could support us both or let her recover her balance when she faltered.

When I swung us in a long, graceful arc, she gripped my chest in balled fists and let out a soft squeak into my shirt.

“Sirius,” she whimpered, the sound going straight to my cock. Her feet slipped, arms windmilling as I held still, waiting with the lightest touch for her to find that sweet spot and balance herself.

Spoiler alert: she didn’t.

Annie flailed faster, skidding her toes along a rope that was slippery as ice to her thin frame, and tumbled straight at me with all the grace of a battering ram aimed directly at the enemy.

Her body collided with mine, knocking the stuffing out of us both. I clutched her waist, prepared to taste the forest floor to offer her padding when we hit the deck with our combined weight. Annie squawked loud enough to clear the island of wildlife, and a deep laugh ripped through my chest.

She stared at me, half-hunched over my arms where they wrapped around her and began to giggle. Her breath labored, and her whole body shook as she spoke. “That’s— the— first— time— Iveheardyoulaugh,” she gasped between bouts.

“Are you going to hurt yourself?” I stared down at her, my own lips spreading in a reluctant smile.

“Probably.” She heaved longer breaths, straightening on her own. Annie looked around, then back to me, her eyes glowing with her fading humor and something new. “We didn’t fall off.”

“No.”

“That’s a miracle.” She swept tangled snares of hair back from her face into a new bird’s nest, but she was still far too fucking cute for her own good.

“Trust me?” I turned her again, watching her hair fly out in an arc of its own.

“Yes,” she whispered, her breaths stilling on a sigh as she turned her face tilted up to meet mine.

I didn't have the time to interpret the sound that wrenched from my heart as I crooked a knuckle beneath her chin and tilted her head back. Her lips parted on a stalled breath. She stilled in my arms, her bare feet between mine on the single strand of rope supporting us both.

My heart beat hard as I dipped my head and grazed my mouth over her lips. I felt it, the moment she released her last tethers to her own emotional safety net.

The air stilled around us. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she leaned into my embrace, rising up onto her toes the slightest amount. Her breath sighed against my mouth as she returned the pressure of my kiss, sliding her arms around my neck to draw me closer.

A deep groan worked its way along my throat as I moved my mouth over hers, my lips open but keeping my tongue to myself. If I didn't screw this up, I'd have all the chances in the world to devour her another time, though my mind protested the level of crazy at the entire situation, my cock agreed to go it hard and fast. But that wasn't what my Stardust needed.

She returned my open-mouthed kisses, slow and tender as I cradled her against me. Not like she was glass and would break, but because I valued the connection developing between us so deeply that *I'd* break if she ran from me.

If I scared her.

Annie's hair tumbled over my fingers as I weaved my way through the silken strands, diving deeper to massage her scalp in rhythmic circles I matched to my kisses. Her soft moan ripped through me, stirring my desire to heights I knew I'd fall from one day. Blood roared through my body, urging me to kiss her harder, to deepen her kisses, but I refused to listen. This had to be about Annie. Her body folded into me until we contacted from toe to shoulder, our kisses still slow and leaving both of us aching from the mewling she made at every touch.

Finally, I lightened my kisses, grazing my mouth across her cheek to trace them around the shell of her ear. "You might

have told me a few secrets the other night, Stardust, but I'm not getting the hesitations I expected."

"Is that a bad thing?" She tried to raise her head from where I held her pressed over my heart, her hands trembling against my shoulders where she clung to me.

"Far from it. I like your sort of trust." I kissed the top of her head and laid my cheek against her hair.

"Me too. I mean, with you," she whispered, wriggling her nose against my shirt. "Oh, I have no idea what I mean. I'm a mess."

"A beautiful mess," I corrected, sliding my hand beneath her knitted sweater to brush my fingertips over bare skin, rocking our bodies together in a dance to the music of the moon.

She shivered, pressing closer with a strangled sob. "I don't think anyone's ever called me that before."

"A hot mess?" I gave her a bemused smile, trying to remember what the hell had just come out of my mouth.

She shook her head, her lips a firm line, leaving me guessing.

"Keep your secrets, Stardust. Whoever didn't look after you has no idea how special you are." "Whoever *he* had been. "Or she."

"Or family."

I stilled. "What?"

"I shouldn't have said that." She burrowed deeper, hiding, but not from me.

No, my Stardust was only hiding from a past that sounded more toxic with every tidbit she offered.

"Thank you for telling me." I closed my eyes and stood with her, suspended over nothing, my heart beating beneath her cheek.

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FIREFLIES LIT the short walk to the apartment building. A hulk of a security guard, the same one who hadn't noticed I'd wandered straight through their perimeter on the first night, glared at me as I held the fire escape door for Annie.

"Evening, Jerry."

"Sirius." He grunted my name, folding his arms over his chest.

Big, solid, and definitely not made for speed. Could possibly stop a small tank in its tracks though, so the man had some benefits. Mostly, his presence was a deterrent. I wondered briefly if one of the security team had been the leak, if I should be more careful of who saw Annie with me, and if it would be safer for her to stay away from me entirely, if I somehow made her more of a target.

"Let's get you upstairs." I pressed a hand to her lower back as the door closed and locked behind us, taking the steps two at a time as she ran the two flights to her floor.

Annie paused with her hand on the door. "I've, uh, got it from here." Her cheeks stained a seriously cute pink, and she ducked her head again.

"Don't hide from me," I murmured, sliding my arm around her waist and pulling her back into my chest. "The media terrifies you, and you don't want to have the panic of dealing with it in your dreams and when you wake up tomorrow."

Her head snapped back. She arched around to stare up at me, hanging upside down like a fruit bat against my shoulder. "How did you know?" She searched my eyes, and her mouth formed a cute little 'o', the sound coming out on a short puff of air.

I wanted to steal every breath she took.

"Because I'm starting to know you, and I'm starting to like what I find."

“Oh.”

“Oh,” I agreed. “Get in your room before I kiss you again. I won’t be so damn polite this time.”

Her brow furrowed. “What do you mean, *polite*?”

“I mean I was trying to be a gentleman out in the forest, a hell of a way away from everyone else. Here, I want to spin you around, pin you to that door and teach you how I want to kiss you every damn time.”

“E-every time?” She swallowed. Her fingers wrapped around my wrists as far as her small hands allowed.

“Every time.” I leaned closer, almost close enough to kiss her as I spoke. “And I wouldn’t stop there.”

The words had been designed to eke a reaction out of her, and it worked, but not in the way I expected. The flicker of fear I searched for was overtaken by an awareness of our proximity growing in her fathomless eyes. I lost myself in them as they glazed with desire.

“I—”

“Go to bed, Stardust.” I propped her upright before I did exactly what I’d promised if she finished that thought. Deflowering my crush on the stairwell might sound like a solid headline but if we were doing this—and it felt like we were—then I wanted to take my time with her, not scare her away because I couldn’t keep it in my pants until we found a time and place more suitable, less rushed.

*That’s not the memories I want her to keep once this is over.*

Annie whispered a soft *goodnight* and scurried through the door.

I waited until I heard her go inside her apartment then headed for my own with the annoyed reflection that Mitch had been right.

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LEON CUPPED his hands around his mouth, catcalling as the lights lowered on a mirrored catwalk I swore Bettie had designed to instill terror into every single girl being forced to walk it. The guys clustered around in the standing room below, looking up, but Team Geek would get the dual effect of having both the audience plus *themselves* watching their final challenge for the week.

Leon paused long enough to draw breath, and I nudged him.

“If you yell out something like *show us your tits*, I won’t be responsible for the fist that comes flying at your face,” I preempted.

Leon reared back as though I’d already swung at him. “I would *never*. Besides, you’re saying it *wrong*. It’s ‘*show us yer tits*’, Grumpy Bear.”

“Knock it off with the Daddy Bear shit.” I groaned under my breath. The stuffed bear from the night before still haunted my dreams. There hadn’t been another media leak, which suited me just fine, though I hadn’t had a chance to see Annie all day.

“Wish granted. Here they come.”

Strobe lights flashed in a stupidly fast staccato beat that would have left an epileptic prostrate at our feet. Shadows appeared at the rear of the stage, but with the lights flashing directly into our faces, there was no chance of picking out more details. The strobes swung downward, highlighting the catwalk as the girls emerged from the shadows.

Flashing lights framed each girl for less than a second, working her way along the catwalk. Maybe my first assessment of the challenge had been incorrect. Bettie had outdone herself.

Every man stared with his mouth hanging open as his girl strutted toward us. Some wore thigh high solid boots with a thick wedge heel, while others wore fluffy kitten heels. But every woman on the catwalk had been dressed to best highlight her figure.

Two girls in matching teddy bear onesies that stripped back to reveal bear-printed bikinis paraded along the catwalk. Silver glitter floated through the air in the epitome of every Daddy fantasy ever.

Hattie's curves were enhanced by a longer orange halter top and matching skirt while Annie's housemate, Keira, was dressed in a bright red skin suit that set off her hair, blazing out from her head in a halo of fire.

"They're stunning," Leon whispered, hanging off my shoulder. Dean nodded in front of us. I might have told Leon to find himself a room, but I was too busy searching for my own girl. Counting out the remaining contestants, I reached ten and stared around for her, but I couldn't spot a giant pair of sunglasses or yellow boots anywhere.

When she stepped onto the stage, my mouth dropped, along with most of my brain function.

Naturally, Annie had been left until last, or maybe she'd opted for it.

All I saw was two tiny pieces of sparkly black material that left far more exposed than they covered. Her body was all soft lines and smooth, petite curves ... until I reached her legs.

Lace traced over her ankles and slim calves and stretched over her knees to end in a pair of matching unclasped garters that stopped mid thigh. The heels had to be six inches or more and would have been considered weapons in at least four states.

She'd worn the boots.

The ones that had made me groan aloud when she described them not twenty-four hours prior. *Stunning* didn't do her—or any of the girls—justice.

"Yes, they are," I murmured over my shoulder to Leon, not caring if he heard me.

Annie paused at the end of the runway, her legs shoulder width apart, hair covering her face. She drew her head up, moving with the music as she stared directly down at one person.

*Me.*

The mousy, shy girl had been replaced with a confident siren, and it wasn't just my heart that burst for her.

I adjusted myself discreetly in my jeans as the lights blacked out. I almost had to slap myself for focus.

Bright white light flared into our eyes, and I wasn't the only one who swore liberally.

"Clean that filthy mouth. And your drool before she sees you," Leon hissed in my ear.

"Too late." I shrugged him off, unable to prevent the smile that spread across my face. "I won't be the only one. Hattie looked fine."

Leon's eyes narrowed. "Keep your mitts to yourself. You're taken." He wiggled a protective finger in my face.

"I didn't think you cared." I raised an eyebrow.

"Just because I prefer a good cock to a pretty pussy doesn't mean I can't support a girl in the middle of her personal crisis." Leon spun on his heel and disappeared into the small crowd still gathered at the end of the runway.

I thought of calling out to him, but he was off on his own personal vendetta to prove Hattie could rule the world, and I wasn't about to stop him.

Bettie did her own walk, announcing Annie the winner of the third challenge, but she'd lost the attention of her crowd who all peered around her. Offering a small collective agreement to a short period off from filming, our host mentioned an Iron Man challenge scheduled for after the break. She dismissed us with as sour a face as she could manage, and I used the excuse to make my way around to the stage door.

Keira appeared at my quick knock, peeking around the hallway. "Are you alone? Good." She sighed.

I frowned. "Are you looking for Dean? I thought he went off looking for you."

“Oh,” she seemed surprised. “No. Are you after Annie? I think she went back to our room. I can get you a key,” she offered, a speculative gleam in her eye.

“Playing wing woman for the night? I’ll pass, thanks. She’ll either let me in or not.”

“You’re such a gentleman,” Keira moaned, as if it were a bad thing, and slammed the stage door in my face.

I huffed a laugh as I worked my way around to the accommodation. My hand raised half of its own accord to knock on her door, though my mind wandered. She’d worn the boots on purpose, after mentioning them the night before, but why? Apart from her need to conquer any challenge, and those heels definitely posed a decent one, she’d gone for a sexy siren look that had blown away any other girl on the catwalk, including her housemate.

Which meant she’d had input and ... she’d aimed those lace covered legs at me. I could almost guarantee it, though the thought had its own measure of conceit. The way she’d looked at me when I teased her the night before left me in no doubt what she wanted, and the little minx intended to use my weakness to achieve her own goals.

Goals I was more than content to fulfill, but not without caution. This wasn’t the time nor the place to storm into her room and have her against the wall or any damned other surface I could find.

I refused to break her like that.

She had no idea how emotional the first time could be. I didn’t want to hurt her on either a physical or an emotional front. If she wanted me to be her first time, she’d damn well better balls up and ask. Consent was sexy as hell, and if she could own that as well as she rocked those boots, I’d take her up on the offer.

I smiled, lowered my hand, and took the stairs back to the room I shared with Leon, though he remained conspicuously absent. Shucking off my shirt, I tossed it onto my bed and stretched. Standing still for so long created muscle ache I’d

forgotten from basic training, though my body still reacted the way it had been trained.

I liked to relax the same way, too. I opened a beer from our shared fridge, still so focused on my daydream image of Annie in those damn lace boots and what my hands would feel like skating along her soft, smooth skin that I nearly missed the knock at my door.

“Coming,” I muttered, setting my beer down. “If you’ve locked yourself out, Leon, you can fucking well sleep out there.”

I wrenched the door open, fully expecting to greet a sozzled roommate, in for a night of D&Ms, but all I saw was lace.

The damn boots came with a matching dress.

My gaze roved along legs that ran for miles, her height raised by the six-inch plus heels attached to her feet by a few strands of lace I wanted to rip apart with my teeth. The dress carried on where the boots stopped, though she’d lost the garters, leaving a thin strip of edible flesh between the two. Judging by the peek-a-boo holes between the decorative lace, she wore nothing underneath.

Her hips curved in handfuls I was becoming intimately familiar with, her body shifting and the material—what there was of it—shifting with her. There was nothing under that dress except skin. My cock hardened painfully inside my jeans. I fisted my hands to prevent myself from touching her and knew my resolve would only last so long.

*You wanted her to come to you.*

*And as Leon would say, wish granted.*

The longer I stared at Annie, the more I wanted her. The dress hugged her figure like a second skin. Her bare breasts peeked at me from between fine strands of netting in the see-through material that covered her arms from shoulder to wrist and curved across the tops of her breasts. Her lips opened in a perfect ‘o’, and her eyes, though made up, flickered wild and wide with nerves.

*There's the Annie I know.*

I'd seen two versions of her in the last twenty-four hours, and I wanted both, whichever she wanted to be. Annie looked at me through her lashes, her chest rising and falling in fast, shallow breaths.

I hardened instantly and ripped the door fully open. "Did you walk all the way along this floor dressed like that?" I growled, the thought of another man seeing her exposed both a thrill and a threat. Possessive need hit me in tsunami fashion, and before she could answer, I caught her wrist and yanked her inside my room, slamming the door behind her.

## CHAPTER 12



## ANNIE

ALL BREATH LEFT me when Sirius glared at me like he wanted to devour me. Before I could form any sort of reasonable sentence—*yes, I ran like hell and was terrified all the way*—he pinned me against the closed door to his room, crowding my space. Broad, thick forearms braced above me. He dipped his head, leaning into the box he created between the door and his body where I stood prisoner.

*Tempt the wolf and the beast will play.*

Why had I let Keira talk me into the dress? The boots would have been enough. I knew that from the indescribably hungry look that had laser pointed on me from the end of the catwalk earlier. If he'd leapt onto the stage then, I wouldn't have stopped him as everything else fell away—the music, the audience, the camera crews.

When he stood in a crowded room and looked at me, I felt like the only person in it.

“What the hell are you doing, Stardust?” he said, his voice rough and raspy. Sirius' gaze flicked over my body again, his darkening eyes hooded.

For the first time in my life, I enjoyed having power over a man with more than just a dossier filled with what would become state secrets, filed away in a dusty corner until the world was ready for them. That a man like Sirius Weston wanted a girl like me was mind blowing, and a touch overwhelming.

I glanced toward the door, but a massive bicep got in the road.

“I wanted to—” I faltered as he leaned a little closer, his attention divided between my eyes and my mouth. “I wore ... I mean, I wanted to ... see you.” I finished in a pathetic whisper, ready to cower before the big bear caging me.

*And you're the prey.*



“You mean you wanted to tempt me,” he snarled, dropping a hand to catch my hair in a tight fist that tugged the ends, the perfect blend of light pain and pleasure. Anger and lust warred in his features, the harsh sound dropping to a deep rumble in his throat. His breath brushed my skin a little harder. “Do you remember what I promised you last night?”

“That you’d show me how you wanted to kiss me?” The words tumbled out, a ready admission to the night I’d spent with my hands between my legs imagining just that and plenty more.

“Do you know *why* I didn’t want that last night?”

“No,” I whispered, my heart sinking.

“Of course you don’t. Because I didn’t want to rush fucking you and hurt you.” The snarl returned in force. “And that lack of control over myself pisses me off. Because of you, Stardust.” His voice gentled and grew impossibly deep.

My head jerked at his brutal honesty, desire rushing through my body in a wave of disorienting heat. I gasped as his fist closed tighter over my hair, holding me in place. “I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“No, you didn’t,” he snapped. “Because you have no concept of how much damage a man like me, who’s double your damn age, could do to you in one night.”

This Sirius was fierce, raw, and full of unchecked flame. I knew to stay would be to burn, but I hadn’t slutted it up for no reason. He liked what he saw. I liked the way the dress, him—everything—made me feel and I refused not to own that. I wanted him, and he wanted me. Could it be simpler than that? The need in his gaze could have melted panties, had I had the decorum to wear any, but Keira’s *seduce Sirius* mission hadn’t included measly items like undergarments.

“But you won’t,” I whispered back. “I trust you.”

“You shouldn’t.” Holding my gaze, Sirius grazed his knuckles along my cheek and over my collar bone to brush over my exposed and very sensitive nipples, back and forth until a small moan tore from my throat. He inhaled sharply. “I

could tease you and send you home, but I'm a selfish man, Stardust. I came to your apartment desperate to touch you after you walked down that catwalk like you fucking owned every man in that room, but I held back. I wanted you to come to me, so I'd know I wasn't pushing you into something you weren't sure on. But now you're here, I don't think I can open that door and let you walk away unscathed." His eyes glowed with a dark promise, his need right there on display.

"I don't want you to throw me out, Sirius," I murmured softly, holding his gaze in a dual act of terror and defiance. Tears prickled painfully at the corners of my eyes, humiliation washing over me. I'd stepped so far out of my comfort zone, and now I paid the price for my moment of determination. "I shouldn't have ... I won't ..." My words tripped over each other, stumbling like my feet had on the rope the night before.

We'd crashed into each other, laughing like hyenas before Sirius caught me like my mind knew he would. My safety net.

That had been ripped away along with my non-existent undergarments.

My face heated, arousal washing away my humiliation, daring him to take it further.

A sinful smile curled Sirius' lips. Then his mouth crashed down over mine, obliterating every thought that followed.

Large hands folded around my body, rubbing over the curve of my spine to cup my ass. Sirius ground his hips against mine, pushing the bulge in his jeans into my flesh, lace and denim our only barriers. His mouth was rough, his kisses more demanding. I arched in his arms, my body tingling everywhere and needing him closer. Breath came in short bursts, his heart hammering against mine where he crushed me against his chest.

When his tongue flashed across my lips, I opened them with a gasp, and he slid inside, thrusting roughly as he arched me backward against the wall. My tentative strokes along his tongue elicited a long groan that rumbled deep in his chest as I tangled my hands into the hair, drawing him closer.

He slid his hands over my ass, cupping and lifting me against him. I wrapped one leg around his hip, and he lifted the other to grind into me, rubbing against bare, aching flesh. All the while he kissed me hard enough that my sense of gravity dissipated, leaving me floating in a void with only him to cling to lest I be swept away, losing both myself and him.

“You’re going to leave a hell of a mess on my cock, Stardust. I’ve got a mind to make you kneel and lick it off.”

His filthy words drew a moan from my throat. “God, yes.”

“Fuck,” he hissed, pushing me against the wall and stepping back.

The absence of his warmth left me cold as my legs slid from his hips. I danced on my toes for a moment, struggling to find my balance on the tall heels. “I want—”

“Take it off. All of it. Though I could spend my night licking those thighs and your sopping little pussy.”

I whimpered, running my fingers along the hem of my borrowed dress. Heat hit me in a secondary wave, and I leaned against the door’s cooler surface for support. “Sirius, I ...” I nibbled on my bottom lip, playing for time. Courage deserted me, leaving me pressed to the wall knowing I wanted him but too frozen to act on the need.

“Off. Now.” His voice rasped harsh, thickened with lust as he ran his hand over the tented front of his jeans. The material darkened there, and I realized it was from me.

Shame and arousal vied for prime real estate in my mind. Heat flooded my face as I dipped my hand lower, smoothing the skin beneath the hem of my dress. My need coated my fingers in slippery arousal as I touched myself, fascinated by the way his gaze fixed on my hand. I slid my fingers lower, tracing around my entrance. A shuddering sigh left me.

“No.” Sirius’ harsh command brought me back. “No, Stardust.” His voice softened as he caught my wrist, turning my fingers up. “That’s for me to give you tonight, not for you to take.” He slipped my fingers into his mouth, tasting them

with a groan and dropped to his knees, sliding one shoulder beneath my knee.

“Sirius, no,” I protested, though one hand rested in his wavy hair, tangling in the strands there. The ground lurched at the thought of him tasting me, though I wanted everything he offered. “You don’t have to—”

He shoved my dress further up in reply and buried his head between my thighs, licking in long, firm strokes that soothed and aroused all at once. My legs trembled from that first lick. Sirius palmed my stomach, pinning me to the wall. I took his support as he nibbled around my clit, flicking his tongue then retreating, sucking at the tormented skin where he’d ground against bare flesh.

Each touch brought me higher, threatened to destroy me.

I gasped at each new kiss, resting my thigh over his shoulder. One hand wrapped in his hair, drawing him into me where I fought against his hand, tilting my hips for more. My other hand pressed to the door behind me for leverage, and I rocked my hips against his mouth. My thighs trembled and the heat that coiled around me left me dizzy then sank low in a rush of whirling head spins. His name on my tongue echoed through the apartment.

I shook, clinging to the door as Sirius rose, catching the hem of my dress. He tugged it over my head, kissing me between pulls at the material so I tasted my bliss on his lips.

His gaze swept over me, standing naked before him, skin bared except for my shoes. “Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he growled, tossing the dress somewhere behind him. “Boots.”

I peeled the lace down and slipped my feet free, placing them neatly beside the door. “I should return that favor,” I whispered, though I had no idea how. That hadn’t been part of my education with previous dates. I got the impression Sirius would teach me what he liked, and I knew that making him moan was something that would increase my pleasure, too.

Selfish, in a selfless sort of way. Whatever worked.

“Not tonight, Annie. Tonight is for you.” He held out his hand, his eyes dark with lust as he focused on my face.

I placed my hand in his, giving up every inch of trust in the gesture, and let him lead me through his apartment and into his bedroom. He spun at the door, cupping my cheeks in his broad, rough palms, and kissed me hard. His tongue slid into my mouth in the same rhythm he’d used to make me come a moment before. When he broke away, both of us were gasping as though air was in short supply.

Sirius’ gaze flicked at me, wild and raw. Not an instant of indecision there. He seemed like a predator deciding the best method to devour his prey. *Me*. I wrapped my arms around my waist, then over my breasts, a constant flurry of pressure and panic building within my throat.

One short hiss and a glare left my hands at my sides, curling my fingernails into my palms as I sought a brief clenching pain that might center me. He crossed the room and pulled the covers from the bed in a swift movement, throwing them out on the floor. Then he was back at my side, kissing me while he fumbled for his wallet, thrusting it into my hands.

I opened it, locating the foil packet beneath a leather section and handed his wallet back. “You know I’m safe,” I said softly.

“But you don’t know that I am,” he countered, his eyes narrowed. “And you don’t know me well enough to have baby Siriuses running around. Don’t rush this. Be smart. Anyone you’re with who doesn’t play by those rules or any others you set, you kick out, you hear me?” He caught my chin, tilted my head back, and kissed me again. “Fuck, I want to be the only one you’re ever with, but that’s impossible. I’m still too old for you.” Grumpy Sirius had returned, his mouth curving down while mine curled up in a small, secret smile.

“You’re not.” I ran my hands over his chest, working around the hard planes of his pecs, the curves and ridges of his abs until he groaned a reply. “You’re not that much older than me. And certainly not double my age.”

His eyes narrowed. “I’m twenty years older than you, Annie.”

“Not ... quite.” I held up my fingers a smidge apart. “Give or take four years or so. You’re thirty-nine, right? I’m twenty-six.” I shrugged nonchalantly as though the logic of it made sense, though nothing with Sirius was straight thinking or reasonable at all.

Rabbit hole, meet Annie.

I was only a few consonants away from a fateful name, which made its own illogical sense. *Give me a Hatter, and we’ll call it even.* But I didn’t have a Hatter. I had a Sirius, blazing bright and strong before me.

“Hell, girl. I don’t know if that makes it better or worse.” He kissed me again, his breath coming fast and desperate despite his words.

“Better. So much better—*ohh.*”

Sirius whipped me around in a circle, ending with my back pressed flush against his chest. “I’ll make it better,” he promised. Kissing and sucking his way along my throat, he nipped at the sensitive hollow of my neck.

The room swirled around me. I whimpered, my hands pressed to his where he palmed my stomach and played with my nipples, twisting and grazing in sensual movements that left me flushed and straining.

“Oh, my ... Sirius,” I whispered, twisting in his grip wanting both more and needing to pull away at the same time.

He pressed weight against my shoulders, pushing me forward until my knees buckled. I flung my hands out to catch my weight, but his arm around my chest already held me suspended above the comforter, its puffiness soft against my folded knees.

“I thought for the first time we would, you know ...” I stammered out.

“Missionary? Maybe one day. It’s intimate being face-to-face, but this is different, Stardust.”

“Different?” A crinkle behind me left me tense. I rocked back a little, and his knuckles grazed my ass. My body reacted to the barest touch, my pussy swelling and tender. I pressed my knees together, exhaling a shaky breath.

“Give me a moment, Annie.” Sirius’ voice strained as he shifted, his body jostling mine. Breath hissed against my back. He smoothed roughened fingertips along my spine as his body arched over mine. Hot lips pressed to the back of my neck where my hair fell forward. Sirius pushed my knees apart, settling between my legs. His erection pressed against my rear, his chest melded to my back. “This way our hearts beat against each other. I can kiss your mouth, and you can control this anytime by arching back for me. But more importantly, I can touch you, however you need. If you get anxious,” he stroked clever fingers across my breasts, teasing the hard peaks until I ached then slid lower to treat my clit to the same level over attention, “I can ease that. Make you relax, go all soft and fucking gorgeous in my arms. Feel that?”

“Uh huh,” I gasped, leaning my head back against his shoulder. “Sirius, I’m going to-”

“Good,” he groaned, stroking his fingers faster over my clit.

Bliss drowned me, anchored in his arms. I cried out, rubbing shamelessly against him, giving my weight over to him completely, trusting him to hold me and keep me safe. “Please, please-”

“I got you, girl.” He tilted my head back to kiss my mouth as he pressed his thick length at my entrance.

I whimpered at the huge intrusion and waited for my body to get used to him, but after the orgasms he’d given me, he slid inside, eased by the slick of desire he’d created..

“Oh, God. That feels incredible.” I trembled everywhere, my thighs, my hands, clinging to him and trusting him to keep me safe.

“You’re telling me,” he muttered. “Annie, I’m going to push a little deeper, and when we hit that resistance, there’s

going to be pain. It will be sharp, and I'll stop moving. Tilt your head back so I can kiss you until it eases, huh?"

"I trust you, and I'm scared." My body tightened around him, drawing a low groan from his chest, reverberating along my back.

I swallowed a bulb of panic that filled my throat and did as he asked. Tilting my head back, I sighed as his familiar kiss covered my mouth, teasing me with his tongue. Heat slid through me, leaving me boneless in his hold. He surged forward, controlled but firm enough to—

"Ow," I whimpered, digging my nails into the back of his arm where Sirius held me. I froze from the swell of pain that emanated from the center of me and pulsed through my limbs. Tears welled and fell in a mash of physical and emotional battering.

"Shh, Stardust." He slid all the way in, stopping when his thighs braced fully against mine, easing me down so warmth covered my body front and back. "Kiss me."

Our bodies pressed close together, he held me as I got used to his size. I felt stretched and tender, but the pain ebbed, replaced by a gentle throbbing that built as he began to move within me. I let him curl around me and returned his kisses. Soft and sweet at first, like they had been in the forest, he became more demanding as my body relaxed beneath his, getting used to the feel of him filling me.

Sirius caught my chin, kissing me deep and rough as I arched into him, needing him closer. Needing more of everything he offered. His other hand released my chest to grip my hip, stroking along a sensitive nerve just inside my hip bone.

I writhed beneath him until he bore his weight fully over me, moving slow and long as my body became acquainted with his, learned how to flex my hips to make him moan or thrust my breasts into his palm where he cupped them to play with my nipples.



“Tell me you’re all right, Stardust,” he said in my ear, voice strained. His strong thighs braced against me. Warm spread from my toes to my lips in an everlasting tingle as he slid within me, his weight bearing down and holding me up all at once.

Sensations swirled around my body, too many to identify, overwhelming though I tried to savor each one, only for that sensation to be obliterated when he moved again. His restraint, his control, made my heart beat faster. I was relieved to know he held back, though arousal swept me along as I wondered what he would be like when he unleashed that control and gave into his own desires.

I wanted him to release that force within me, needed it.

Exquisite, sharp pleasure washed away the last remnants of hurt, and his fingers dug in a little deeper. My core tightened at the erotic feel of him sliding deeper, our bodies coated with the pleasure he eked out of mine until bliss took me again. Above me, hot breath hit my shoulder. Sirius shuddered as he slammed deep inside me and stilled. Accompanied by his roar, we crashed together in a pile of warmth and sweat and sated need.

## CHAPTER 13



## SIRIUS

WAKING up tangled around a woman I loved never got old, despite that the last time I'd had the pleasure had been years ago. My second thought on a delayed reaction slammed into me, stalling my breath and stalling my heartbeat, hot on the heels of a third.

*I'm fucking falling for her.*

My head turned the concept over as I tightened my hold on her and didn't find it as abrasive as I expected. Just like Annie, my mind found a new course of action to tangent off into the very next second. Was this the example I meant to give my brothers? Certainly, it was better than the fake relationship that was expected on set to continue through the end of the season while collecting a shit ton of cash and a meaningless diamond ring someone else chose.

The other part of me screamed that I should be protecting her, not screwing her, while my heart protested that there was no better way to protect the girl in my arms than keeping her right where she lay.

My head spun with the duality of it all. Eventually, I shoved it all aside, and savored the warmth of her pressed against my heart.

When my brain slowed and I could reason with myself again, I gazed down at Annie, taking in the gentle sweep of her lashes in the early morning sunlight filtering over her and the sleep softened curve of her cheek and plump lips. I couldn't fight the need to break my morning routine, one I'd started nearly twenty years before and hadn't once broken.

Work my body to the edge of sweating, have breakfast, work for an hour and do it all again. Rise before the sparrows, work harder than anyone else. That ethos had kept me alive when my military life failed me, helped me set up one of the most successful and elite security companies in the country.

Today was a day for breaking all the rules, and by any god who listened, she was worth it.

Annie shifted on my chest, stretching with a small yawn as she drifted through the last remnants of her sleep, wiggling to wrap her arms around my shoulders. Her warmth sank into me as I trailed my fingers along her arm.

“So beautiful,” I murmured.

Thick lashes fluttered against my chin, tickling to the point I gave a soft huff.

“Good to see you’re not so grumpy in the early morning.” Annie raised her head, a soft, small smile curving her lips beneath dozy eyes.

“Might be the only time I’m not.” I raised an eyebrow, smoothing her silky strands.

Shifting to slide up the bed a little, I propped my pillow behind my back and wrapped my arm around her shoulders, tracing invisible patterns there like some teenage kid on his first sleepover with his crush. Hearts and flowers, my name. Maybe.

Damn, I was a sentimental fuck.

An *old* sentimental fuck.

Annie gazing up at me adoringly like she was all wrapped up in love with me and still half my age despite what she said didn’t make that emotional reaction any better. Almost like I had a heart, or she did.

Hell.

That look floored me, and I could rightfully brag that didn’t happen often. In fact I could count on one hand the number of times I’d been floored in my life, and none of it had happened in this decade.

*Like she’s in love with me.*

I was her first, and it was natural that she’d take that to heart. I might adore her, love her even, but that was the innate protector in me emerging. Mind, taking a girl’s v-card on a

reality TV set wasn't the smartest of choices, nor the most chivalric, but it only had to last as long as we were on the show. Get her through the next weeks, unless we were voted off, and through the finale.

Make it to the Galaxy Gala, sign the contract Mitch had set me up with, and get my ass back home to my brothers with enough work to set us up for the next five years. Plus, there was that branch I wanted to open in Tokyo.

She slithered up my body, her hands curling over my shoulders to leverage herself up and press a soft kiss to my mouth. Her breasts brushed my chest, and when I reached for her, I found myself with a sexy double handful of perfectly round ass cheeks.

I hardened beneath her warmth, one knee pressed between her thighs until she let out a soft breath. Annie's eyes flickered open, confusion and a new awareness of her own body flickering across her luminous gaze. Her soft kiss lingered, just long enough for me to taste the remnants of last night's love making on her lips.

I groaned, pulling her along my length, and dipped my head to catch her in her retreat, unwilling to let her escape just yet. If having her again this morning, one of the few when we had nothing scheduled for the show, would damn me to hell, so be it. I'd risk even that for the chance to screw her in the early morning sunlight.

"Sirius?" She broke the kiss on a soft gasp that only served to increase my arousal and lifted her gaze from my lips to my eyes. Her hopeful tone left all the wrong sorts of emotions coursing through me. Damned I was.

I wound my fingers through her hair, knotting them gently there and drew her closer. "Are you too sore?" I searched her face, sucking in the need that rose in me as her cheeks flushed that perfect *Annie* shade of pink I'd recognize anywhere. "From last night. Did I hurt you?"

She colored darker, if such a thing was possible. "A little. I mean yes, but ... no. It hurt then, but it doesn't hurt now. Much."

“Then we can do something else this morning,” I murmured, reigning back my desire to roll her over and bury myself balls deep in her heat, love her until she wound herself around me and called my name into blissful oblivion.

“No!” Annie burrowed against me, pausing her dive with her lips a fraction of a breath from mine. “Please. I ... I’d like to. Again. Please,” she whispered.

“Since you beg so nicely,” I murmured, massaging her scalp until she moaned softly, her body loosening in my hands. “Slide your legs either side of me, Stardust.”

“You mean be on top?” Her breath hitched.

I kissed her deeply, releasing her curvaceous ass to fumble for my wallet, extracting a foil pack with trembling fingers. Who was the just popped virgin here exactly? The girl took every barrier I’d erected around me and swept them away, leaving me exposed.

Annie shook against me as I kissed her, sliding my tongue across her lips to tease us both before I delved inside her sweet mouth. Her legs spread over my hips as she straddled me, all hot and wet and panting with large eyes focused on me, terror and arousal mixing headily in their twin pools.

*I’m not the only one with no defenses left.*

Sucking in a sharp breath I passed her the condom packet, pressing the sharp corners into her soft palm. “Undo this for me?” I cupped her cheek and pressed kisses along the line of her jaw, enjoying the way she trembled around me, the entire foil pack vibrating in her fingers. “Slowly. Don’t tear what’s inside.”

She swallowed against my lips, her head jerking in a rough nod.

I smiled, pressing my lips to the sloping curve at the crook of her neck, licking and nibbling. She tossed the pack free and found my hands. “No, Stardust.” I shook my head, drawing back to look at her. “This one’s on you.”

“Why are you so intent on giving me a full run of sex ed classes in one twenty-four hour period when you could just

flip us and fuck me?” Her defiant words and sassy as hell hair toss was ruined by the deep stain on her cheeks.

I rumbled a laugh, reversing her grip on my hands and running knuckles down the soft swell of her stomach until I reached my cock, leaving her hands there alone. Mine fell to her hips, grounding her against me. Her wetness gave her away, as did her trembling hands fumbling with the condom.

Her nerves were cute, but my mind took the thought off to another direction. Or tangent. I bit back a grin. She was contagious, in all the best ways. But my smile faded at the thought of anyway—everyone—who’d sliced away at her confidence. Family, her boss, all the crucial people in her life working away until all that was left was a sexy little hot mess. I could bet good money none of them saw how incredible she was either, just the shell they’d lumped over her, blocking out her natural sweetness.

Her fingers traced over my length, breaking my train of thought. Pleasure seared through, followed by an injection of protectiveness. I growled low in my chest, my fingers dimpling her flesh.

Annie gasped, her concentration broken as she peered up at me. Whatever she saw in my face left her cheeks white instead of stained.

I attempted to school my expression back from the rage building in me and failed in magnificent style. “Not one of the people who have abandoned you deserved your time. Surround yourself with people who adore you *for you*, Stardust. Who will worship you.”

“Like you?” She peeked shyly at me through lowered lashes, her uncertainty shining through like a beacon on a dark night.

I gripped her hips tighter, rolling her against me, and lifted her up. “Like me,” I agreed, lowering her gently over my straining length.

She moaned as I filled her, letting me hold her weight and not fighting me one inch, taking every experience I offered

her. *Heady* didn't cover the riot of emotions that threatened to consume me. I ignored the giant tug at my heart and focused on the girl hovering above me.

Annie stilled, her hands curled on my chest into tight fists, her breath coming too fast, too sharp, as she pulsed around me.

*Panic?*

I straightened, leaning forward to peer into her face, her soft thighs grazing against my stomach pure hell and bliss all at once. Cupping her cheek with one hand and tilting her head back to look straight into her eyes, I drank in the sensations crossing her face as she struggled to process everything so new to her. Her hips rocked forward as she slid the rest of the way down my length and arched back, her soft cry echoing around the quiet room as I held her against my chest.

*Ah. There she goes.*

Her walls pulsed against my steel hard cock, and I swallowed, willing myself with pure stubbornness not to come inside her searing heat so soon.

I waited until she stilled, her legs softer on either side of me, her hands trailing patterns in the sweat that beaded over my stomach. Pushing up onto my elbow, I caught her chin in one hand and drew her down for a deep kiss, meeting her halfway. Her lips moved slowly as she recovered from her orgasm, and the way she looked at me—all heavy lids and swollen lips tinted in a deep rose hue—tested my own limits.

But if I was her first, then I had a responsibility to show her what she could have, if she chose to look. Hell, scratch that. I just wanted to have her, keep her, and never let her go. But that wasn't going to happen for us, so I'd take whatever memories we could make together. Those alone would keep my need sated for a damn long time.

“Do that again for me, Stardust.” I whispered the words, unwilling to shatter the heavy daze that blanketed us both in the ebb and flow of her pleasure. She responded by rocking her hips gently against my cock. I bit back the groan trying to tear from my throat, knowing that if I let the sound escape, I'd



only flip her and fuck us both into oblivion. That wasn't what I wanted for her.

Not yet, anyway.

Curling my hands around her curves, I slipped my fingers along her ass crack and drew her deeper, lifting my hips to match each roll of hers. She moaned softly, pushing her hands through damp hair, slicking it off her face while her breasts beaded with sweat. I pushed up to lick between the valley of them, drawing her slowly the length of my cock and back, thrusting up hard to meet her again and again.

Her moans grew louder, her head tipping back. The gentle milking pulse of her pussy tightened, letting me know how close she was again, though she didn't seem to recognize that yet.

*Another thing I need to teach her.*

Flicking my tongue over her nipple, I nipped and sucked at the tight bud, teasing her until she writhed in my hands. I rolled my tongue over it as she broke above me. Shoving past my own boundaries, I gripped her hips tight, pounding into her from below, seeking my own release in time with hers, but I needn't have worried.

Her tight little pussy strangled my cock, milking me past the point of dry as I bellowed my orgasm into the hollow of her throat, squeezing her tight to my body and promising myself I'd never let her go.

A pretty fantasy, if only for now.

---

ANNIE DOZED IN MY BED, the sheet half draped over her boneless form while I made us both breakfast. The best tray I could find was a large wooden slab of an unused chopping board, but it would do.

"Annie," I started as I rounded the doorway to my temporary bedroom, intent on waking her. I couldn't finish the sentence.

Her hair hung over her shoulders in a softly tousled mess cascading over her bare skin. She sat with her back to me, staring out the window. She didn't turn or look over her shoulder, but her fingers moved where they rested on the coverlet, and I knew she'd heard me come in.

"I didn't think you'd be awake." I pressed a kiss to her temple as she tilted her head back. A light kiss to her cheek became a graze over her lips, and within seconds I rediscovered the location of my morning wood. "God, you're beautiful." I placed my makeshift breakfast tray on the nightstand, letting my free hands roam over soft, alluring curves.

She huffed a tiny laugh, taking the coffee I offered and lifting it to her lips. "I thought you'd maybe gone for your run or a weights session, or whatever. Even though I thought I was alone, I felt ... safe here." She shrugged, her bangs bouncing lightly against her cheek. "Thank you." She saluted me with her mug and drank deeply.

"You should feel safe." I kissed her again, unable to keep my mouth or my hands to myself. The thought she'd developed trust around me and my space, albeit a temporary one, relaxed something in my chest. I inhaled and took a deep breath that was all sunshine and stardust. "I'm starting to like the idea of waking up with you every morning." I tipped her head back, pressing light kisses to the corners of her mouth.

"I like that too." Her breathless, tiny whimper-moan thing undid me.

"We're never going to get out of here," I grumbled. "And our breakfast will get cold,"

"Grumpy, grumpy." Her smile turned wicked. "I know just what to do with that." Her hands slid up the insides of my thighs, and she dipped her head forward.

My fingers tangled into the dark silken strand of her hair, and I saw stars and galaxies even though I hadn't closed my eyes.

By the time we got back to breakfast, it was indeed cold, but I didn't mind one bit.

## CHAPTER 14



## ANNIE

I SAT in an Annie-sized bucket lofted high into the air on a decidedly flimsy mechanical arm and stared at the green goop below me. Bubbles popped on occasion, and though Bettie had promised the primordial looking soup that lined a deep pond below me was neither poisonous nor potent, I swore I could smell decay with each sludgy burst.

Harriet and Keira gripped the edges of their own buckets on either side of me while our beauties sat in kiddie sized chairs in front of our dilemma, their backs to us, each more determined than the next to win the challenge's prize Bettie had announced earlier—a luxury weekend getaway with their geek in an island hut. Or so it appeared from my spot above them.

Dean turned around to wink at Keira, and she flipped him off. He laughed and returned the gesture, a fondness crinkling the corners of his eyes. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. If you fall, I’ll dive in and join you in a goo-wrestle.”

“And I’ll kick you in the squash balls,” she shot back with a scowl. “Don’t you dare let me fall. I’m counting on you.”

I stifled a giggle and glanced at Harriet.

She clung to the rim of her bucket with white hands, staring determinedly forward over the back of Leon’s head where he sat in front of her.

“Are you okay?” I asked under my breath as Bettie circulated before the men, a lioness prancing before a pride of predators.

I was sort of glad to be up in my bucket, away from it all.

“I’m fine.” Harriet clenched her teeth to keep them from rattling.

“You look like you’re gonna puke,” Keira called cheerfully from my other side.

I groaned and covered my face with both hands. “She’s afraid of heights. I think.” I peeked back at Harriet who nodded frantically.

“Not. Helping.” She grunted.

Sirius swiveled in his seat while Bettie continued her tirade. She shot daggers at the back of his head, ostensibly for daring to ignore her mid-speech. Not that he noticed. I doubted he would have cared if he had.

Sirius Weston was just that disrespectful sort of man in these situations.

I grinned back at him.

“Can’t promise you won’t go for a swim,” he called.

“Can’t promise you won’t get any later tonight,” I yelled back with a cheerful wave.

He laughed loud enough to draw every eye in the outside set.

Dean looked at me over his shoulder, cupping the back of his hand around his mouth in a stage whisper. “I knew you two would be perfect for each other.”

“Yes, well, don’t take all the credit for what wasn’t your job in the first place.” Bettie poked Dean’s shoulder, her assertions and annoyance poorly masked, or maybe it wasn’t Botox week. Her mouth turned down at the corners as she brought the guys’ attention back to us.

Out of the corner of my eye, Keira made a lewd gesture with her mouth and hands., Bettie continued to prance about in front of us. I started to giggle and couldn’t stop.

“Jesus, Annie,” Hattie muttered, some of the color returning to her face.

“Could you be more discreet?” Dean leaned back to tap the plastic divider I assumed would contain the goop when we dropped. After all, who wanted to see a beauty get creamed? That set off a whole new set of visuals, and my giggles devolved into minor insanity. I sank low in my bucket. Bettie would be furious.

“Mother of God.” Sirius said that, I was fairly sure. “We need to have a talk when you climb out of there, Stardust.”

I grinned, managing to catch my breath. By the time my giggles subsided and I emerged from my bucket, the game had started.

Bettie shot rapid fire science questions at Team Beauty, and the boys attempted to answer as best they could. From the stories Sirius had told me, it seemed to be a repeat of Team Beauty’s first challenge, but with fun stakes. Larger stakes. The girls hovering in their buckets on either side of the long row were the first to drop into the goop, and their beauties got up from their seats, grumbling at not having their shot at a prize.

“Dean, the period abbreviation for gold.”

Ohhh, I knew that one. Well, I’d known all of the answers, but seeing as I was banned from helping from my bucket, I couldn’t answer or assist any of our other halves.

“Alum,” I could hear Sirius whispering out of the corner of his mouth, but Dean either didn’t hear or couldn’t respond.

“Ahhh ... G?” He threw his hands in the air, knowing he got it wrong.

The buzzer above Keira’s head glowed, deafening us as her bucket dropped.

“You mother fu—” Keira’s scream was drowned along with her as her red head went under. She came up gasping and retching a moment later, swiping goop from her eyes and cackling madly.

Dean rose from his seat, swept a flamboyant bow in Leon-esque style toward the cameras and leapt over the divide in a spectacular, chivalrous gesture. Well, it would have been if he hadn’t caught his foot on the divider and splattered face first next to Keira. She howled with laughter as he slithered into the ooze, spraying her with a fresh wave of goop.

Dean emerged, floating on his back and waving lazily before pulling Keira back under.

My stomach ached from laughter as Bettie waited stoically for the actual fun to cease. Finally, we settled, though Keira's frequent snorts nearly made me miss Sirius' next question.

"Sirius." Bettie smiled winningly at him and wiggled her bosom. "What is another name for the constellation of your namesake?"

I snorted. "Too easy."

Sirius didn't say a word.

I started counting in my head.

He sat stock still, and though I couldn't see his face, his shoulders tightened in a hard line that stretched his blue cotton shirt to its limits.

"It's your company, dumbass!" I yelled the words a moment too late.

The buzzer above me blared a warning alarm. I plummeted through the bottom of my bucket, still yelling as I hit the goop. I forgot to close my eyes, and the world turned green. Fortunately the viscous liquid didn't sting, though a fine layer of goo covered my mouth as I rose out of it, and a giant bubble distended my view of Sirius' face as he leaned forward to swipe the stuff from my face.

"Sorry, Stardust." He looked apologetic, though the corners of his mouth turned up in a suspicious smile.

"Geez, you crack under pressure. What sort of alpha male are you?" I muttered good naturedly.

Sirius opened his mouth and closed it again. He struggled and ran his fingers through my slicked hair. "You're feral."

"Thank you." I rolled my eyes, relieved to be able to see out of them.

Dean poked my back, reaching forward from where he floated in the primordial stew.

I mirrored him by reflex alone, both of us grasping a handful of neatly pressed shirt. A moment later Sirius toppled



over the barrier, splashing the divider with goop as he hit the bottom of the pool.

Even through the mess his expression was clear. *You're in trouble, Stardust.* His unspoken promise hung in the air. Keira watched with interest as he launched out of the goop, hands outstretched as ours had been a moment before. I dived sideways a moment too late and found myself pulled under yet again.

We came up laughing and spluttering. His arms wound around my waist, squeezing me to his chest in a slimy bear hug while we played and ignored the rest of the set.

Harriet cheered from her bucket above us, twice as loud as when Bettie declared her and Leon the challenge winners.

“Your first one!” I hollered, the goop washing away my social anxiety for a moment, or maybe it was Sirius’ firm chest pressed to my back as he floated in the pond with me. Mind, it wasn’t the only firm thing about him, and I hustled off to the shower without a backward glance, knowing my cheeks were flaming.

---

“DID you see the look on Bettie’s face when you flew into the goop?” Dean cackled that evening, his wet hair slicked back. He leaned forward over the small table the six of us shared.

Leon gave him a slight smile. “Well now, I couldn’t just let the geeks have all the fun. Shouldn’t our host be included too?”

“It wasn’t that you wanted her to join in on the wet T-shirt competition?” Keira asked, her mouth jammed open by two large stuffed fried pickles.

Dean watched her with narrowed eyes as she swiped aioli from the corner of her mouth after inhaling the frickle whole. Keira stopped talking and tried to swallow all at once, ending with her red-faced and choking. Dean thumped her helpfully on the back.

Finally, she came up gasping for air and shot him a glare of mixed anger and lust. “Don’t do that again.”

Dean ducked his head and whispered something in her ear that none of the rest of us could hear, but the tomato red her face turned post coughing fit made it pretty easy to guess the topic of their one-sided conversation.

Under the table, Sirius wound his fingers through mine. I enjoyed the privacy of the moment, despite being amongst friends. He seemed to sense my need to not be overtly public with the dubious contents of my private life. It was hard when there were cameras constantly in our faces, even at a casual dinner.

None of us knew which parts would end up being broadcast internationally or streaming viral on an international stage at any point. There had been more leaks about the show, but fortunately they hadn’t been about Sirius and me. I kept waiting for the other shoe to fall. What Sirius and I had couldn’t possibly last, and sooner or later, something would sabotage the quiet slice of peace we’d carved out for ourselves in the middle of this chaotic swell.

He lived across the country, and he had his own successful business. I tried to imagine him working in a small shop or retail outlet and couldn’t get my head around the big man constricted within four tight walls and a load of stock. He wasn’t even particularly good with the public to start with.

Sirius paused with a frickle halfway to his mouth and looked at me sideways. “Got your knickers in some sort of twist? I can help with that.” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Harriet watched us from across the table with interest, seated a good foot from Leon, who ate in relative silence.

Leon’s silence hit me on a deep level. Some of his flamboyancy had dropped away over the last weeks. While Dean, Keira, Sirius, and I had developed a firm friendship and made our own pigeon pairs, Leon’s natural sense of glitter and glam had faded. Harriet hadn’t come out of her shell either,

and it made me realize just how rare what Sirius and I had was, even in our own small found family group.

“I’m fine.” I speared a frickle with a bamboo fork. “Just thinking that all fun things come to an end.”

Dean threw back his head and started singing Ben E. King’s ‘Stand by Me’ at the top of his lungs. Keira joined in in an unlikely duet that missed more notes than it hit, though that was fun nonetheless.

“Oh, hell. Just don’t start on ‘Thank You For Being a Friend’ next,” I groaned.

“Andrew Gold, huh?” Leon turned to me with a mischievous glint in his eye. It didn’t take long for the group to break out while I covered my ears chanting *la la la*.

That spawned a whole new conversation that left me compared to Betty White’s vague Southern belle character Rose. I wasn’t sure that it was the right position for me, but if they saw me as someone fun and cute to be around, although probably a bit off kilter, I could live with that.

The sense of community and friendship was so alien to me, though comfortable enough that I fell into it with little thought. I would miss it all terribly when filming closed up.

“Want to go for a walk?” Sirius tipped his head and brushed his lips across my ear as he spoke.

Goosebumps erupted all over my skin. I pulled my shawl tighter around my shoulders. The gold and tan lace shawl was something I would’ve expected Leon to pop out with, but it was Keira who had thrown it over to me earlier in the afternoon, telling me I had to keep warm after my goop swim.

Mind, she was wearing a strapless mini tube that left very little to the imagination. Dean didn’t seem to care, and she wasn’t shivering. But then, what had started to develop between them hit the incendiary level.

Sirius and I were ... a touch more subtle.

The corner of my mouth curled up. We were no less fiery in the best moments. I could still feel him between my thighs

as I had rode him that morning when I woke curled around him in his apartment.

One challenge to go, and then the finale. That was all the filming left for *Geekily Yours*. Five couples remained, but only the three socialized. The others kept their distance as much as possible. God only knew what it would all look like once we hit release date for the series, but oddly enough, I'd stopped worrying about that and started to consider the emotional and physical distance that would open up between Sirius and I in less than a week's time.

"Where can we go?" I extracted numb legs from beneath the small picnic table set up outside our apartment block. Double the usual number of security guards surrounded us in a tight ring as though they expected an unruly media mob to pop up and stick a microphone in our faces.

"Don't you think they're a couple of weeks in advance?"

"Don't be surprised of what the paps will do to get attention, or their scoop." Dean waggled his eyebrows across the table, mimicking what Sirius had done a few moments before but with a different intent.

"Do you think they're going to get past Team Secret Service here?" Leon scoffed, shoving a chip into his mouth. "We're not interesting enough. Not yet." More eyebrow wagging.

"Keep doing that, and I'll get my wax tub." Hattie spoke to her plate. She raised her face to meet mine when I let out a snort-giggle. A secret smile, hinting at her wicked sense of humor, curved the corners of her mouth.

Leon patted her head, and she squawked at him.

Beside me, Sirius rose, pulling me alongside him with our fingers still entangled. "Yup. Walk."

"Group session?" Dean called lewdly as Sirius towed me towards the edge of the woods.

We left their bickering and chatter far behind, heading for a small path that led to where he'd taken me for the ropes course that night. He ignored the outburst of laughter from the

table and whatever comments came after, walking straight towards one of the security men and speaking softly.

His fingers released mine as he talked, leaving me a few places behind him. I wrapped the shawl and my arms around myself in a bid to keep warm, but the sudden space between us grew insurmountable

In a few weeks, I'd be home. Back in my job, back to boss I hated to work for, back to my space rocks.

After the last months away, after coming to understand more of the world than I ever had before, even despite my upbringing in a public family, my space rocks suddenly seemed ... dull.

Sirius returned to me, capturing my hand firmly and drawing me forward. The guard ignored our progress and took a large step sideways, leaving the house open for us. I trotted to catch up with Sirius' longer stride as he powered into the forest.

Darkness and cool, earthy air enveloped us in an instant. I chanced a look over my shoulder, but with the fireflies absent, the pathway closed in our wake as though there was nothing to return to at all.

"Are the guards coming too?" I waved a hand backwards and my shawl slipped. I grabbed for it, knotting my fingers in the fine lace as Sirius slowed long enough to let me catch up.

"No." He considered me for a moment in a motion as familiar as he was to me now. "No, they aren't coming with us tonight."

"How do you do that?" I mumbled, trying to pick out my steps and stumbling over an invisible rock.

"What's that?" Sirius turned back to me, his gaze heavy and too warm on me as I fumbled with the slingback heels—also courtesy of Keira—that seemed determined to slide off my foot with every step.

"I don't think taking them off is a good idea," I muttered.

Even in the darkness I could almost hear Sirius's lips twitch. "No, probably not." In the next breath he slipped his arms beneath my knees, lifted me, and cradled me against his chest without breaking stride as he carried me toward our destination.

I leaned into his black shirt which blended in with the forest night so well. "Are we going to get eaten by something out here?"

Sirius' chest rumbled against my cheek. "You might."

"That's not reassuring." I responded before the words made it through to my brain. "Oh." That came out a little breathless. I set my lips firmly together, determined not to say anything else incriminating.

Sirius' laugh echoed around the darkened space loud enough to scare off any predator, and I was surprised that the rest of our small group hadn't joined us in an afterparty attempt.

After a few moments' silence, curiosity got the better of me. "Where are we going?"

"I found something ... somewhere the other day. While I was jogging. I wanted to share it with you."

I pressed my lips together, burrowing into Sirius' shirt. Okay, fine, his chest. "I take it you have a plan then." I talked to his shirt, unable to speak to his face.

Sirius made no answer, so I subsided into silence, listening to the sounds of the forest around us, or the distinct lack thereof. Which only fueled my theory that something large might find us both tasty for a late-night snack, though I wasn't sure Jamaica *had* wildlife like that.. It was like nothing moved out there.

Maybe this was one of the reasons he loved jogging here so much. After the chatter and the constant background white noise buzz of the reality TV show, it was a relief to have quiet.

Silence.

The trees opened out to a very small clearing, different to the ropes course he had taken me on last time. Sticks and leaves turned to soft moss as Sirius dipped a knee to place me on a flat, fluff-covered rock. My fingertips grazed its furry fronds.

I didn't have a second to breathe before his mouth was on mine. Not hungry and devouring like I might have expected in the secluded privacy of the forest but slow and sweet, heavy and warm. Sirius tasted of all the things I knew I shouldn't have, had never had.

A place to call home.

*Hope.*

His lips grazed along my collarbone as he unthreaded my shirt, draping the shawl on the moss beneath me and pushing me back. My own fingers worked at his buttons in equal silence, though the air around us remained charged and still.

I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but Sirius' dark eyes conveyed everything I felt. Shivers washed over me as his mouth traveled down my body where he bared me in the darkness of the forest, sucking and licking and drawing tiny whimpers from my throat until I lay shaken beneath him.

Only then did he rise up, nudging his way between my thighs, and enter me in a single stroke. Sunburst and fireflies exploded overhead as I arched against him, moving the way his body urged me and seeking my own pleasure.

Sweat gathered between us in the natural pools and hollows of our bodies. His chest pressed hard to mine as his breath slowed, and he kissed me just as slow and languorous, until he hardened inside me, his hips moving at the same pace as his heady kisses, testing both our limits in silence and hot breaths.

Not a word was said between us from then to the walk back through the forest. My legs trembled with every step, and I clutched my shawl around my disheveled clothing to keep everything from twisting askew. Sirius left a lingering kiss on my lips that should've been everything I wanted it to be. He

waited while I fumbled at my lock, keys refusing to work, my lips still pressed to his. The twin fathomless pools of his eyes drank me in as I kissed him back, my body aching and sore for him all at once.

My heart clenched, watching him walk away as I closed my door and leaned back against it. His kiss hadn't tasted like the need I craved, or something more I could cling to and revel in.

No, his kiss tasted like goodbye.



# CHAPTER 15



## SIRIUS

WE STOOD in twin double rows of half crescent moons, boys versus girls as usual. Bettie smiled her best, bright white, shark toothed smile and unfolded an envelope.

“This week you’ll be traveling. Some of you will be close to home, while some of you will travel a little further afield. You’ll be meeting some new people, and for the first time your challenge won’t be with your beauty or your geek. For this challenge, you’ll be flying solo.” She flipped the unopened envelope in her hand, and I knew she didn’t need it. Her smile grew wider as she surveyed the two remaining and much depleted groups. The knot in the pit of my stomach tightened. “This week, you’re going to meet the family and workmates of your opposite. Many of our beauties and geeks have formed attachments in the past weeks, and with a few couples remaining, Geekily Yours wants to see what the other side of your life, the not so public one, looks like. After the time you’ve spent together, now it’s time to be apart and let the family of your treasured one decide if you make a good match. This is a chance to shine socially, to show us your best side under the pressure of interrogation of the ones who care most about your partner for the season.” Bettie sent a benevolent smile around the group as though her announcement should be met with joy.

Not a single cheer was uttered around the set.

I breathed easy, and my heart kept beating at its regular pace. Annie meeting my brothers was likely a recipe for a whole swath of embarrassing stories, but they’d be good to her. The lot of them might be arrogant arseholes but chances were they would be quite sweet and welcoming to a girl they didn’t know, as opposed to how they behaved for me on a regular basis.

Still, they were family and that’s what family did. She wouldn’t have a problem, and her trip should be a pleasant one.

I glanced over at her to give her a reassuring smile and met wide, terrified eyes. Even from this distance I could see she shook, and hers wasn't the only terrified face in the crowd. Around me a few of the boys muttered, swearing softly beneath their breath, some not so softly.

Next to me, Leon bounced on his heels, muttering, "Can't wait, can't wait, can't wait, can't wait," like a kid in a candy shop.

I offered Annie a reassuring smile, trying to get across to her, but Bettie shooed the girls out of the courtyard before I could offer her anything more secure than a saucy wink.

At the doorway, Annie looked over her shoulder, her knuckles white where she gripped the frame. Her expression almost begged me for something, though in that moment I was too filled with relief that her trip to meet my family, my workmates and brothers, would be a simple, easy challenge for her.

It wasn't until Team Biscuit had filed away to their own rooms to collect our things and head for the buses did it occur to me that she might have been worried less about herself than she was about my own trip.

---

I STEPPED out of the luxury SUV in front of a white Romanesque palace situated deep in an up-market suburb of Georgia. I knew Annie came from the area, but for all my security training years it had never actually occurred to me to look her up.

*Resent that failure now, huh?*

A pair of rent-a-cop security men stood on either side of the wide double doors. Their firearms created obvious bumps in postures unused to carrying, and their earpieces were too shiny and new to be of any real use. I wondered if they were even plugged in.

The black suits stood in a stark contrast to the painted white plantation house, its tall columns stiff and formal. White gleamed everywhere. I'd never seen so much of it in one place, with the exception of a tour to the Arctic once.

The doors opened as if by magic, though neither of the faux Secret Service types posted nearest the doors touched one. I squinted, but both men stared over my head. Their stiff stances told me I could probably take both of them in a matter of seconds if a need arose.

Just like everything else on the show, they were obvious props set in place to enhance the drama of the situation.

I wondered how much of the whitewashed house was a facade, too.

The SUV pulled away to park on the opposite curve of the circular drive. I slipped my hands into my pockets and took a measured step towards the house. The camera crew followed my path on squeaky wheels, and I hoped the sound would be covered with porn music or some other sort of dinner song.

By the time I reached the top of the stairs, the camera crew had stopped following me and somebody called for a can of oil. I ignored them, running through in my head what I knew about Annie's family. The answer was a simple—*not much*. The dark hole inside the house yawned, deep, silent and unfriendly. My heart stilled in my chest, and I resisted the urge to reach for a sidearm I wasn't carrying.

Maybe the oil was needed for me because I reverted to tin man status, more nervous than a kid on his first basic training course.

Inside, the house was cool, but sweat glued my borrowed suit to my skin. My lips were dry from too many nights sleeping under air conditioning, and I felt slightly crackly on the outside.

I walked an unspoken line straight to the end of the hall where the space opened out into a broad open conservatory, for lack of a better word. I paused in the doorway. A different camera crew than the one that had followed my travels was

already in place surrounding the small area. It looked as though the furniture had been rearranged, pulling it away from the walls to create a more private space. Three people dressed in colors and tones that matched the sofa sat straight backed, looking at me.

*Fake, fake, fucking fake.*

After nine weeks on the show, I shouldn't have been surprised, but for whatever reason the amount of effort that went into creating a visual effect for a fifteen-minute piece that wasn't real still stunned me. My version of normal was going to need a rejig as soon as I got home. I was pretty sure Mitch would take on that job with no small prodding and disrespectful jokes of glee.

*Please let my brothers look after my girl.*

Not that I needed to send the prayer. They were good kids, all of them, and I knew she was in safe hands. Falling into the part I knew Bettie expected, I smiled, flashing teeth at the three people seated in the small, staged space.

A young woman with blonde hair, slim features, and a pointed chin perfectly perched on the edge of one lounge in a twinset matched to the other occupant who could have been her twin in twenty years—Annie's mother, I assumed. Her mother to a T. I'd heard her once or twice mention the mother, and never the other. A sister?

The dark horse in the room was her father. He could've been a mafia man, but even I recognized Senator Cannon Pillington as he reclined in his chair beside his wife. Legs extended to cross at the ankles, he wore Italian loafers freshly polished and on display. Long, smooth fingers held a cigar in one hand and a small tumbler of dark liquor in the other.

Annie Pillington.

*Senator Cannon Pillington.*

My infatuation with the Senator's daughter had blinded me to the facts right in front of my eyes.

*How the hell did I not put that together?*

Had Annie said anything on set? Bettie? I scraped my face clean of emotion, but the feeling of walking into the wrong side of a court-marshaling constricted my chest.

I half expected to see a slave—ahem, a servant—dusting up his ash before it hit the white leather lounge. The collection of cameras and our suits were the only dark colors in the room. Everything else was a sickly and uninspiring shade of pastel.

*White, white, white, fucking white.*

Spittle lodged in my throat, but I didn't dare clear it while the camera crew filmed my entrance and Annie's family's response to me.

Inside, I seethed. I'd known she hadn't gotten along with her family. She'd intimated that enough times. But that I hadn't looked up to see who she was and where she came from left me in the lurch. What were the Senator's most recent, and more importantly, failed policies?

I couldn't remember off the top of my head as he lived half a country away from where I'd based Sothis in the north. The thought that Annie and I would soon be parting ways left a gaping pit in my stomach. I fixed a smile on my face, muscles aching and my mask of pleasantries fraying, and prayed Bettie didn't have a body language expert who would go through the footage later and pull all my fake ass reactions to shit.

"Welcome to our home." Annie's mother didn't rise, though she swept a grand gesture across their coffee table.

I paused for a moment, but introductions appeared to not have made the agenda. Maybe the names would appear on the screen for viewers. Two women stared vapidly back at me, their expressions fixed in a way that made Bettie look like a facial contortionist. Neither moved nor spoke without a directive from Annie's father.

Maybe Senator Cannon Pillington was the sexist prick I assumed.

Their skewed family values weren't the only thing off kilter as I resumed a discovery tour of the space with my gaze. From the small section of the grand house I'd seen so far, it

seemed as though their lives were as sparsely decorated as their home and their emotions. The empty space spoke of secrets and omissions, and weren't the type of client I ever wanted to take on, knowing the lies would bite my ass in some fashion at a later date.

No wonder Annie removed herself emotionally from them. Maybe her family should've been on the show instead of Annie.

But fake people never made for good drama, and for that reason reality shows scored so well in the ratings department. People like Annie made excellent media fodder. Lives like hers could be lifted or destroyed in a matter of moments.

So many people craved their fifteen minutes of fame on the silver screen, but many more should have been terrified of it. Most people didn't understand the power the media held to cripple an individual, a person ... or a business.

If this was the family Annie grew up with, no wonder she had been so scared when she'd first walked on the set. The media leak and articles naming her must have terrified her. I wondered if her father hadn't called to take her off the show. Being out of touch with media and public opinion throughout the filming season left me with less information than I'd like going into a hostile situation.

I said a silent prayer again that her experience with my brothers would be so much better than mine here and stepped into the room. A man I hadn't noticed before, wearing a cheap black suit and white shirt, placed a draught of whiskey in my hand and disappeared discreetly between the cameras.

A trickle of sweat ran down my spine, my body already in a state of heightened awareness of the situation Annie hadn't wanted me in and had tried to warn me about. I waited until the senator waved a graceful hand in my direction, his eyes barely flicking my way though I knew he saw everything.

I knew, because this was his game face, so similar to mine if I sat at a negotiation table with a celebrity or potential client. I flicked open the top two buttons on my jacket, mirroring his posture as I sat opposite Annie's silent, emotionless family.

His eyes narrowed, though he said not a word and puffed on the cigar, pocketing the spare into his suit jacket. His upper lip curled the slightest fraction as I studied him.

Not quite emotionless after all.

I could work with that.

“Sirius.” Annie’s mother glanced at her husband stiffly and paused for effect.

“Ma’am.” I swirled my whiskey, waiting.

This was their interview, not mine. I was simply cannon fodder. The annoying silences could be cut out during film edits later on or left in to emphasize the stalled vibe in the room, twisting the constricted ambience into something larger. I really didn’t give a flying fuck either way.

The Senator flicked a finger in the direction of his wife, the gesture low enough to be unnoticeable on camera.

“They tell us you’re a military man,” she prompted me without asking a question.

I fought against raising an eyebrow. Her speech came out so stunted and halting that I knew she relied on someone else’s words. Who had written the questions—Bettie or the senator?

“I’ve completed several tours in the Middle East and some other places. Retired now, though I opened a security firm with my brothers a few years ago. I’ve been trying to give them some form of responsibility or ethos to look up to.” I stared straight at the camera with the little red light filming currently and sent a silent one-fingered salute to my brother without moving a digit.

“That must’ve been a step down,” the Senator murmured into his whiskey. A halo of smoke surrounded his head, and I could barely see his eyes. But his tone—that was unmistakable. Derogatory, almost sneering.

*A step down from what, asshole?*

It wouldn’t be terribly diplomatic to take on a political powerhouse on a national front, and that would only give Mitch more reasons to hand me my ass the moment I got home



for jeopardizing everything we'd built together and the reason I was here-supposedly-in the first place.

I refrained from saying that my "stepdown" had resulted in a multi-million-dollar business that set my brothers and I up for life. I wanted to say *who's counting*, but clearly the Senator claimed that right.

The moment shifted, bought with my silence while I argued with the remnants of my conscience. I remembered I was supposed to talk to the asshole seated across from me during a stacked game of poker. Pity I didn't know quite what we were betting for, though I could take a guess.

Hint: not my reputation.

The Senator puffed a cloud of smoke between pursed lips, leaving the room in a haze. Behind his head, one of the camera crew waved energetically and mimed bonking the senator on his balding dome.

I suppressed a smile, glad someone else saw the ridiculousness of Cannon Pillingston's theatrics. "Playing politics was a waste of time. I did no service to anyone in the few years I wore a higher rank, and I can save more lives this way."

"Such a hero," the sister whimpered sympathetically from her solitary perch. The pale-yellow twin set she wore made her look like a canary, and I imagined that if I stuck my hand up her ass, she might sing like one as well.

"Just like to be useful, ma'am." I lifted my glass to my lips and polished off half of my whiskey. The servant reappeared and topped up my glass past its initial level.

I should have checked to see if it was poisoned.

"And how do you find Annabel?" The mother continued.

I blinked, and it took me a moment to realize she was talking about Annie.

Annabel? Sounded like a great name for a cow. Maybe mother dearest was trying to make fun of her own image.

My dislike for her family filtered through my veins, and I peered in the direction of the corner of the room just behind Annie's mother's ear. Hopefully it would appear like I was looking at her, but in fact I studied the camera crew at her back. One waved a pointer finger in the air in a circular motion, the universal sign for *hurry the fuck up*.

I forced a smile. "She's lovely, actually. Wonderful sense of humor and a sharp mind to go alongside it." Plus a wildcat in the bedroom, but even she didn't know that's how she played.

I loved every curve on that girl, from the wild shape of her brain to her sweetly rounded ass that I smacked whenever we were together in private. A grin wanted to spread my lips, but I kept them in a firm line and kept my attention on the man in front of me.

The senator puffed more smoke around his head. "Yes, that's what we all want in a woman. Fun times. And money to boot. It's why I invested so heavily in the show, after all. To protect my daughter, of course."

*Who knew the senator had a sense of humor.*

My heart ached in my chest. Of course the senator would have fingers in every damn pie in the country. Money talked, as I knew well in my line of work, fighting against the payload pitted against my clients week after week. Hate flowed hot, and I recognized it easily at a ten foot distance.

"Good to see a father doing his duty." I barely cracked a smile, keeping my face clear so the senator couldn't read it. I might not have liked playing military politics, but that didn't mean I wasn't good at it.

Cannon snarled over his whiskey but otherwise held his tongue.

A finger went up in the air behind his head, a silent salute rather than the *giddy up* circles of before.

I suppressed a grin and glanced sideways at Annie's sister, catching the hint of a smile flickering at the edges of her mouth. I wondered if she was the younger sister, or the older

of the pair. They looked nothing alike. Annie's sister was the spitting image of her mother, while Annie herself favored her father.

I made a mental note to ask Annie when we got back.

My attention wandered. I opened my mouth to reply, but the senator wasn't finished.

"So, Weston. I have the money, and you have my daughter by design, is that correct?" The dark gleam in his eye glittered though his smoky fire, daring me to challenge him.

I smiled emotionlessly. "The draw for partners at the beginning was out of my control. But I'm glad I met Annie. She's been a lot of fun to work with, actually."

*Actually, actually, actually.* If I didn't get my PR face on, Mitch would bitch slap me from across the country.

"But you put in a preference, of course." He pushed, leaning forward to rest his elbows onto his knees. His perfectly pressed suit wrinkled at the shoulders, betraying his stress.

I studied the man. He was trying so hard to intimidate me and failing magnificently. I had no idea if the senator realized that his tactics wouldn't work on me. No, the only thing I felt for Annie's family was disdain for their limited outlook and relief that she'd had a chance to get away from them and live a little.

The senator downed his whiskey in one, placing his empty glass on the table. It didn't get refilled.

"We were shown headshots before the initial cocktail party," I said, "and I picked out a top three. There were some job descriptions, and to be perfectly honest I found most interesting. That was about all the information I was given." I offered an abbreviated version of my first task for the show that had honestly scared the utter shit out of me. Far more than the man across the room did. I sipped my whiskey and watched the Senator.

"I do hope they've given her some sort of professional makeover. I could never get Annie to do any of the things I

wanted her to achieve in life.” Her mother tittered and smiled rapidly over her shoulder at the camera crew.

I hoped she wasn't looking for sympathy.

The sister sniffed her agreement. Tension rose in the air, or maybe the senator simply drained all the oxygen from it with his cigar smoke. Cannon Pillingston glared at me, and I sensed that the daughter who was supposed to be under her control was no longer there by her own choice. Somehow, Annie had managed to turn the tables, and she certifiably didn't need me to do it, regardless of how she doubted her own ability.

“Annie was never suited for our family.” The sister spoke softly, and the already permeating silence that stunted the conversation in the room ratcheted up a notch.

“Annie did excellently in the etiquette challenge.” I searched for my tame camera dude again with a raised eyebrow, silently asking if I had permission to talk about the challenges. He gave me a quick thumbs up, and I continued. “And she's helped me survive quite a few science-related quizzes.”

Her periodic table Song rang through my mind, and my mouth pulled up in an involuntary smile. How would they all react if I started bellowing the lyrics out in their perfect home? I could put a substantial sum on the bet that none of them could tell me what she actually did for a job.

The cameraman's attention became predatory, and I knew they'd grab my reaction as some lovey-dovey moment at some point in the future, but right then I didn't care.

“What are your intentions towards my daughter?” The senator snapped out, transitioning the topic away from whatever he thought was no longer in his control.

*Bettie definitely wrote the questions.*

I kept one eyebrow raised as I stared him down. “I'd like us both to survive the reality experience and not ruin any egos in the process.” The camera man's face fell, and he slid a finger across his throat.

Plastering a bland smile across my face, I ignored him and fixed my attention on the Senator. Whatever he wanted to say was coming, and I didn't want to be distracted when he threw out whatever dirty bomb he'd planned to drop onto my side of the coffee table.

His smile was slow, almost lethargic, but I knew the cogs were turning inside that dark head all too well. Annie had the same look when she worked on a problem, and it occurred to me that she was far more like her father than she was like the other half of her family.

"You're very taken with my daughter, no?" There was no capitalization or emphasis on that last word, and I knew he used it as a barb, one I couldn't opt to ignore.

"Annie is a wonderful girl."

"Wonderful enough to marry?" He lowered his whiskey and sat back.

My eyes wanted to narrow, but I kept them as neutral as the rest of my expression. *Is that really the best he has?*

"I don't believe marriage is the point of the experience." The moment the words fell out of my mouth I knew he had me. I cringed internally.

The senator's smile widened. "Not part of the experience despite the diamond I've generously donated for the purpose? If that's not part of your ploy, then what is, Weston? She's young enough to be your daughter or sister." His smile remained as I winced and knew the cameras caught it. The senator wasn't done fucking with my reputation. "Not marriageable, hmm. Only worthy of a quick fuck on the sideline, is she?"

I held my silence and let him think what he liked because I couldn't even try to rebut that. Any answer would be shredded, and not responding gave him nowhere to go.

His eyes narrowed as he held out a single finger. His employee filled his glass to the brim, and he downed the entire thing, letting the heavy tumbled clatter to the coffee table's surface without protection.

The mother whipped a coaster out of ... wherever and slid it beneath the glass, scrubbing at the wooden table.

“I understand this entire farce is just a game to you, Weston.” The Senator surveyed me, almost smiling, in a sinister sort of way. “I suppose that a twenty-year age difference between the pair of you doesn’t matter either, does it? Not if my daughter is just a seasonal fling.”

I wanted to cross the room and throw the senator into the camera crew just to smash something. While that would’ve made for fabulous viewing, it certainly would put me in a tight spot with the brothers.

*Be the example. Don’t lose your shit.*

Keeping my cool around her family was critical. I hoped that whatever happened between us in the coming weeks, we would be able to laugh at the footage together after it was all said and done. I hoped she would be around then because it was far more likely that Annie would be back in her home, halfway across the country, and I’d be back at work.

*My little Stardust and her space rocks and crazy views of everything around her, including me.*

I nodded to him, an easy gesture that revealed none of my emotions, and a sense of calm broke over me. “Your daughter is worth far more than a fling, Senator. One day she might even meet the man who will be worthy of her. It might be within your social circle, though I doubt that. For now, I’d be grateful if I retained a genuine friendship with her after the show is finished filming, should your daughter agree to it. Anything more is strictly between us. As for my business, I intend to return home to work with my brothers. I’ll even try to look after them.” I left the conversation to falter on that comment.

The sister and mother talked for a while about menial things I knew would never make the final cut while Annie’s father and I remained cloaked in silence. By the time we were finished, I had a headache, and the air conditioning may as well have failed for the cloying heat that permeated the room.

When the cameras stopped filming, everyone in the room sighed their relief. The sister was the first to leave while the mother flirted with the director. Her husband ignored her indiscretion, refilled his glass, and wandered off in the direction of what I assume to be a study or den, or maybe to a private stock of whiskey.

He turned back once, his lips curled in a slice of a smile designed to decimate. “Enjoy your trip, Weston. I’ve had a little hand in the transport arrangements.” He raised his glass and carried on down the hall, the echo of his words a vague threat that hung in the air.

That little red light that would haunt me in my dreams followed me down the hall, filming my exodus from the house. I made certain my steps were slow and measured, so it didn’t look like I wanted to escape from the place. Even the walls and floors were white, polished to a high sheen.

I could watch myself walk the length of the hall to the open door at the end. Everything in the house was a facade hiding the brittle, hollow underbelly of their very surreal lives, and contempt crawled beneath my skin with every purposeful step. I finally made it to fresh air to find the fake security men gone and the SUV waiting for me at the bottom of the steps. The vehicle was still painted black, though I half expected it to have the senator’s name and logo emblazoned across the paintwork.

I climbed in, closed the door, and discovered that I had company.

*Not off your stride, Weston?*

I could cuss myself for my weaknesses later. Right now, I needed to focus on yet another male I assumed had some part in Stardust’s life.

A dark-haired man with a slimy smile and expensive suit offered a hand from his seat on the other side of the car. “Luther Kingsman.” White teeth flashed in a smile I recognized as my own under pressure, except that this seemed to be a real one for this man. “I used to date Annie in college.”

*Two of the assholes who screwed with my girl's confidence in one day. Shall we go for the hattrick?*

A little red light flashed behind his head. My nose twitched at the additional tech that had been installed in the vehicle since I sat in it last.

I noted it and took his hand in a firm grip. A droplet of sweat that wasn't mine clung to the inside of my palm. My skin crawled. "Annie's ex."

"From our college days." He repeated, nodding like a bobblehead dog on a dashboard. "I wanted to warn you about Annie, her ... family situation, how they're trying to save her and all. They're trying to get her away from that shitty, going nowhere lab she works in and back on the senator's campaign crew. Her father likes to know what his ... children are doing. Such a hard worker, Annie is. She'll hate being under the thumb again. She just doesn't know it yet. Her daddy and her little boss... Surely you know of Fenwick Jansen? A leech of a man who wrangles himself into every pocket he can. Surprised you haven't come across him before. Whatever her father thinks, pushing Annie into a pretzel shape of their making won't turn out the way her family expects." That twisted smile stayed fixed on his lips, becoming more and more similar to the senator's.

He sighed theatrically and swept a hand over his hair, grazing his fingers through it and tossing it stylishly, though his skin never seemed to make contact with a single follicle.

My stomach coalesced into stone at his words. *Fenwick Jansen*. There was a blast from the past. *My* past that seemed to be entangled in Annie's life in every which way. The ex had Jansen's number; the way he described the little weed sided up with my personal experience about the man, and if he was the boss who kept screwing Annie's confidence into the ground... well. Then there was the matter of him being in bed with her father. That the senator would interfere in her life didn't surprise me.

What did shock me was that Annie had said nothing about her father's sponsorship to the show or his plans for her future.



Unless she didn't know? That seemed a Cannon thing to do. I tucked the information away for later.

"The Senator?" I murmured, my mind still working how to discover if Annie knew without breaking her trust, a fragile thing made of shattered promises, I suspected. "Yes, we've met."

"Of course, you have." Luther tapped a foot on the carpet in a brief rhythm that stalled and started. The motion remained out of the line of the cameras, and I got the impression that was the only out he let himself have during the conversation.

His conversation seemed a lot less scripted than the one with Annie's family. That didn't make it any less dangerous a rendezvous.

"Her family is very professional." I gave him a bland smile and fixed another neutral expression on my face.

If I kept having to fake everything, I'd forget how to really be me over time.

And I couldn't wait to get back to Annie.

"If the Senator thinks you're a threat, he'll have you removed." The ex blinked at me, as though expecting a reaction.

I slid my hand into my pocket and started sending a message to Annie. The idiot just threatened me on what would be international television. Now any accidents or any incidents would be directly related to the senator. Annie had spoken fairly of an ex in passing, but he might have his own grudge to bear. Mind, he wasn't the only one. I recalled Annie's fear of me tasting her, of being intimate with her. Chances were the culprit for that was sitting opposite me, doubling down on the damage her family—her father—had already seeded.

"Yes, I worked that out, thanks," I said as I typed.

**Me:** How are you going with my brothers?

I sent the message and stuffed around with my phone, ignoring the man seated opposite me.

While I wouldn't have taken my eyes off the senator for a second in any display of weakness, doing just that with this man was strategic. The power shifted inside the car, and I was no longer playing a defensive hand.

My tactics seem to agitate Luther, far more than the senator's had bothered me.

"Are you listening to me?" His voice rose a notch.

*How did the Senator find you, sunshine?*

"Did he ever threaten you?"

"What?" Luther blinked, and his tapping foot stilled.

"The Senator." I glanced at him sideways then slid my gaze back to my phone as Annie answered me.

**Annie:** Your brothers are hilarious. I have so many stories.

**Me:** About today, or about me in general?

**Annie:** Oh, hundreds of embarrassing ones about you.

She added a few little laughing emojis to the side of that comment and a small pink heart.

My own swelled just reading it, relieved they'd held up their end of the bargain and treated her as they should, like a fucking queen.

**Me:** Keep having a ball. I'll see you soon.

I sent two kisses afterwards for the hell of it and blacked out my screen. When I looked up, her ex was glaring at me, spewing insults that seemed to be part of the tail end of a tirade I'd missed. There's nothing like having no power in a one-sided conversation when you're trying to influence a decision, and Luther had just lost whatever game he'd tried to turn his way.

Perhaps it was the same message the senator had been so keen to jam down my throat.

*You're not good enough for Annie, stay the fuck away from my pissing ground.*

Funny thing was, I'd never worked that way. One of the many reasons military politics had irritated me so much, perhaps.

"Did I miss something?" I gave Luther a polite, albeit friendly smile.

He glowered at me. A few minutes later the car stopped. The ex evicted himself from the back seat, leaving me alone and craving a short flight back to Annie.

But when I arrived at the airport, it wasn't Stardust who met me.

It was her boss.

Fenwick fucking Jansen.

*Christ on a senator-shaped popsicle stick. Another major player that had slipped past me.*

*Strike two.*

I recognized his features as something tightened in my gut, and for the first time I wondered if the senator had set me up, and I'd missed the mark during my thankfully short period in his house. Cannon had said as much during the interview, and I'd been too distracted with my study of the man who screwed with Annie's life to take appropriate notice.

Now, I was about to pay for that mistake triply.

A darkness weighed heavy in the pit of my stomach. What else had I underestimated about Cannon Pillington's involvement with his daughter? The father, the ex, and the boss ... there was the holy trinity in a matter of minutes. But I got the feeling Annie's father's grudge match wasn't done fucking with my day just yet.

Feigning a smile, I shook hands with the man who had given my girl a seriously large dent in her confidence. Dressed in a purple polyester suit paired with a cheap haircut uneven on one side, her boss looked so far out of her ex and father's realm that I was surprised she could take him seriously or his authority for anything.

Mitch and I certainly hadn't in the last—and only—deal we'd signed with him, and I didn't doubt Annie's ability to see the same lacking qualities in a man she worked with on a daily basis.

I'd discovered Annie's deep-seated submissive tendencies, and anyone she placed in a pedestal position was given automatic power over her. If I found the time, I wanted to teach her how to better negotiate to protect herself before we parted ways. The thought of only having a few short weeks left to share everything I knew to armor herself against the world left me breathless. I managed to choke out a brief greeting to the asshole before me.

If her father was a pseudo-mafia man, and the ex was sleazy, this guy weighed in as a used car salesman. I could almost put money on the fact that he rode Annie's coattails into every job promotion and poached her along with him over the years. His expression offered no inflection of intelligence, and I knew I'd had more nous than him at eight years old.

“Shall we?” He gestured to the steps of the Lear Jet that certainly wasn't his. “We're sharing a flight back, courtesy of Annie's family.”

*Of course we fucking well were.*

Even if Cannon Pillingston tipped me off, I would have recognized the senator's slimy fingers in this.

I followed Jansen up the stairs and hoped there was more whiskey on board. Or maybe none. If this idiot was anything like her father, he probably had cameras set up everywhere and laid as many traps as possible.

Would I do the same in his position? Probably not, but then I would never put myself in his position. It was a place without power, and I never went into negotiation without knowing my hand as well as my opponent's. Because that's what this challenge had unofficially become—a negotiation for Annie's future happiness.

I doubted she'd approve of being left out, without an inch of control in her own destiny. Whatever these men thought

they had over her, I promised myself—and her—I wouldn't swell their ranks.

Whatever impression I left with these people would affect her life for at least the next year or two. She seemed to have a miserable existence in general, with the exception of her coveted space rocks, and the thought of diminishing her already pale existence horrified me.

I started up the steps to board the plane and stepped inside its plush, tan leather interior that could have the Senator's cigar smoke hanging in the air all too easily. I half expected to see him seated in one of the forward-facing chairs. Though he remained absent, his presence lingered, a powerless man who scraped at the strength of others to retain some semblance of authority.

But it wasn't the senator I thought of as I stepped inside the cabin's interior, Jansen a step behind me. If I leaned back, we'd become intimately acquainted in a way I didn't intend. The plane only sat eight occupants and a small bar table area near the wing. Seated at one side was Annie.

A smile broke out of my face as I strode straight towards her. Dressed in a smart black business dress and black heels, I wasn't surprised my brothers would've been in a mood with her. Mitch, especially. He had a thing about black dresses and heels.

But as I approached her, her eyes widened. Annie faced me with the same sort of terror that had been written across her expression when Bettie first announced the family challenge.

My heart settled into stone in my aching chest. I needed to hold her and cradle her in my arms, block out the demons who haunted her and tell her everything would be all right. Maybe that was egotistical of me, but I needed her, nonetheless.

But her eyes flicked me a warning. So instead of reaching for my girl, I kept my hands at my sides, gave her a short nod, and focused my attention anywhere else.

## CHAPTER 16



ANNIE

I LACED empty hands on the circular bar top, trying not to look at Sirius where he sat on a stool to my side as though he was the most important focal point in my life. From the way Jansen huffed behind me, nagging at an attendant, I was pretty sure I failed in that.

At least my boss would consider me consistent. A girl had to have standards, huh?

What Jansen *couldn't* know was the depth of my attraction—my emotion—for Sirius. The little weasel must report directly to my father. The articles and leaks, any media that had slipped out about the show ... everything between Sirius and I was conjecture, to this point. Unless my father had a direct line into the production, there was no way he could confirm my relationship with Sirius ... unless someone had whispered secrets into his ear, and my father was a great keeper of secrets.

Jansen, on the other hand, was a great divulger of information. I was careful what I told him of my life outside of work, not that I had much of one, to prevent just such a leak.

Perhaps my mother's training had taken despite my resistance to her efforts after all. The thought left me cold and alone as I stared at the chipped bar top, its gloss worn, and pretended not to wish Sirius would declare himself outright—ogre, meet princess—or give the distance I desperately needed from him.

Distance has a habit of growing and already the divide between us yawned deep and volatile.

My heart lurched in my chest as understanding dawned—the latter was a distinct possibility.

Money. Power. Assholes.

My family had ample stakes in all three.

I sank on my barstool, my mind ticking over. Was the reason Jansen took me on at all only because of my father? Had he been responsible for my entire career? Jansen's presence on my father's personal jet certainly suggested a buddy-buddy relationship that had likely been developing over some time. Say the period I worked in Jansen's office, for example.

My father loved control most of all and what better way to keep a wayward daughter in check than to ensure her boss reported directly to him?

My existence compressed around me, and I became an observer in my own life.

Perhaps that was all I had ever been.

Sirius ordered a whiskey for himself and some sort of pink, gin-based confectionery of a cocktail for me. His fingers landed on the side of the glass as he pushed it in my direction. The bar staff took a discrete hike to the other side of their zoned-off service area where even my father wouldn't deign to breach.

It would be beneath him, of course.

But here, with the three of us? The staff were doubly safe, as the center point of the drama was seated in my shoes.

Sirius twirled his glass in concentric circles on the bar top. "Met your family," he muttered. "Pleasant bunch."

"I met your brothers." I twisted the glass stem in my hand. Lurid pink eddies formed pools of beads on my fairy floss as it melted into a pink fluffy puddle on top. "Your family is beautiful."

I didn't try to look at him again. After whatever he'd been subjected to, and God knew how my mother had been with him, I had zero doubts he'd want to spend another hour with me let alone flying across the country and then some back to our little not so fake hidey-hole.

Hell, knowing my family, I didn't want to spend any more time than that with them unless it was absolutely necessary.



Preferably at a funeral. *Theirs*.

His brothers had been lovely. Welcoming, joking, full of anecdotes that would probably embarrass him on national television but made him more human and real to me. In a world full of fake things, it was wonderful to see how normal and broken and scarred Sirius could be. Human. Fallible.

Harder on himself than he was on his brothers. And every one of them understood that.

Unlike me. My *perfect* life of books and learning, a career that meant nothing at all, and a family who craved power over companionship and profit over love.

I prayed silently to a God I didn't believe in that Sirius wouldn't see me in the same light he likely saw my family, but after meeting them what choice did he have?

Heavy, familiar footsteps approached me from behind. They always left me jittery in my stunted little office; I squeezed my glass a little too hard, and it shot between my fingers. Sirius clamped a large, scarred hand over the top of my cocktail, studying the glass and stopping its effervescent trajectory.

"Easy." He shot me a sideways warning glance.

I nodded, managing to breathe before a hand clamped down on my shoulder. My boss's sweat sank straight through the material to touch my skin in an intimate gesture that made me want to crawl out of all seven layers.

"Good to see you, Sirius." Jansen's hand tightened on my shoulder painfully. "Again. Wouldn't you say, Annie?"

"Again?" I echoed, ignoring the warning look Sirius sent me through narrowed eyes and a miniscule jerk of his head. "What do you mean *again*?" I twisted in my seat to face them both, my pink cocktail a meager defense between us.

I sucked on the tiny straw and almost emptied the sloped glass in one sip.

Jansen's grin grew wide, showing teeth. If he was anything like Sirius, though I knew much better, then he was pissed.

Which was his regular caper with me, but usually I knew what I had done to deserve his disdain.

This time, I had no idea. Sirius inhaled in through his mouth and out between clenched teeth.

Suddenly, I was desperate to know their history.

My stomach flopped over on itself, trying to reject the overly sweet alcohol intent on pooling there.

“Oh, Sirius and I go way back. Don’t we?” Jansen removed his hand from my shoulder.

My stomach lurched, threatening to divulge its contents to the plane’s plush carpet despite my gratitude for the reduced contact with my boss.

I wasn’t grateful for Sirius’ next words.

“We’ve ... Worked together before.” He dragged the back of his knuckles across the benchtop, his forearm stiff with tension and I knew the motion had to hurt him.

“What did you work on together?”

Sirius’ head shot up, and he stared at me, obviously as surprised as I was that my voice came out so smooth and diplomatic.

*Maybe my mother’s training did take root somewhere.*

Despite that I’d tried so hard not to listen to her as a teen. Act of rebellion number two. I wasn’t sure whether I should be pleased or horrified at the thought of becoming a mini mother minion when I wasn’t looking.

“This and that,” Jansen said as though Sirius wasn’t in the room at all.

He knew he just dropped a giant bomb on me, and he wouldn’t waste whatever opportunity came next if I allowed him to poke another barb in my defenses. Anything to get me offside so that I ended up scrambling for footing. It was how he’d always been.

“Deals for new tech, patents, arms contracts. Breaking through loopholes to make sure US deals with the private

sector were very tight and only benefited us. Your brother is excellent in that respect.” Jansen nodded across the bar.

Sirius showed teeth.

“But we don’t deal with arms. Weapons,” I corrected myself. “We work in a branch of space exploration.”

Sirius surveyed me, something akin to pity lacing his eyes. “Every price for a mission requires some form of defense, Annie.”

I stared at him for a long moment, willing him to say something more than that, but both men left me floundering in a sea of testosterone. Even my stomach felt as though the gravity had been turned off inside the plane’s cabin.

My stomach stopped flopping and plummeted instead. *I knew Sirius was too good to be true.* After all, who went on a show, found a not-so-sexy girl, and fell head over heels for her when there was a sixteen-year age gap between them? In a matter of weeks? *And a whole lot of old money on my side. My father’s money. Jansen’s connections and tech resources.* God, I’d been such a fool. Sirius had even told me himself that he wouldn’t be my forever person. That night, the first time we were together—my first time—he told me so. That he wished he could, but that it would never happen because of our ages.

For a poorly shielded lie, I should have recognized the pass for what it was. I’d just wanted to believe in him so much ... I swallowed back bile at the rejection he’d tried so gently to give me back then. My first thought after we’d met of him being a poser, a fake that suited the show, hit me dead on.

Sweet and a liar. What a not so beautiful combination.

*Fake fake fake*

*Lies lies lies*

Sirius, with his own business and contracts, seemed to like money just as much as the next man. I was just a blunt blob on a pointy landscape. I knew this from my time working on my space rocks.

Each day started and ended with me hoping that every one of them would make a difference to how we view the world and discover a new element that would help in some respect. Technology, some advancement in medicine, and of course the military always had their fingers in many pies.

Thus, pie we were, and as usual I'd been left out of the loop.

Or maybe I had never been included in the loop to start with because I'd learned to turn a blind eye to protect myself from my father's underhand dealings. Hide, rather than get involved.

*Look how fabulous that's worked out.*

"Oh." Apparently, my diplomatic abilities had run their course.

I had no more to say as some of my father's staff escorted us to seats for takeoff. A warm, not-so-clammy hand brushed my lower back as I lowered myself into my seat then forward to shuffle my small handbag beneath my feet. I'd come directly from visiting Sirius' family, and a few overnight things was all I had in my possession.

I breathed out at the familiar touch on my lower back. Sirius grazed his knuckles along my spine from the dip of my lower back to the nape of my neck. I sat up abruptly, my hands wrapped around my seat arms to contain the shivers coursing over my skin.

Even though my heart was a little bit broken—and I knew Sirius would know that ... he *had* to—I refused to let his familiarity with my body be a deciding factor, letting my neediness take over.

*No.*

I was stronger than that.

Wasn't that the point of Team Geek? Brains versus brawn?

I didn't fit very well on either team. At this point, the rabbit hole was preferable.

I tilted my head back to catch his gaze full in the face, letting him read whatever it was that was written across my features. It wasn't like I could control my emotions well, and that was one of the reasons my mother was so keen to let me go into the wild, well away from her.

My sister could train but I ... I was the scruffy, stray dog who resisted all decorum shoved at it.

Sirius said nothing for a long moment, his lips pressed in a tight line. He thrust his still full glass of whiskey into my hands, pressing his fingers to mine and wrapping my thumb around the glass in a firm grip. "You need it more than I do." He nodded again and made it to his own seat before the attendant ripped him a new one.

The plane took off, leaving my heart somewhere behind us, adrift in a swell of chaos theory and dirty air.

And to think that I'd been worried about how Sirius would react to meeting my asshole of a boss, after the insecurities I'd shared with him. So many secrets out in the open.

I'd never thought it would have been me worried about how he would react to me seeing them together.

And betrayal hurt more than anything.

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"DID you really think his pairing with you had anything to do with luck?" Jansen sank into the seat opposite me the moment the plane leveled out into its regular flight path.

I stopped squeezing the life out of the leather arms of my opulent padded seat and twisted them into knots around Sirius' whiskey glass in my laps instead.

My boss' lip curled at the familiar gesture. "I'd say the office has been empty without you, but that would be a lie. We never even noticed you were gone."

"If I go so unnoticed, then why bother to torment me?" I closed my eyes. I'd broken my own rules about not speaking

to Jansen, had managed to avoid too much conflict with him so far, and I couldn't stop reliving his greeting to Sirius. Jansen loved his manipulation tactics, and I'd been on the other end of them frequently enough to recognize that, at least. Had he greeted Sirius as he had to unnerve me? Undoubtedly. What I didn't understand ... Was Sirius a player in this too?

*Old friend.*

Despite how I turned the information around in my head, Sirius knew Jansen. They'd worked together, known each other previously. Everything on the show had been about my father's power to influence my fate, and now it seemed Jansen had jumped on board that cart too. But Sirius? My heart ached at the thought of him being as bad as my boss and my father but no matter how I twisted the scenario, I couldn't make it work for me.

Nor could I voice my thoughts to Sirius without the risk of puking all over an enclosed space.

Wasn't that the point of all this, what my boss was trying to show me? That I knew nothing about the world or how it worked? It was what my mother and father tried to drill into me, that taking a *normal* master's course or career paths would leave me in a *normal* career. Instead, I wound my own path where I could make tiny discoveries, breaking whatever training they'd thrown at my brain in a futile attempt to make it work the way it was supposed to in a business sense, just like everybody else.

Everyone but me.

Just an idiot girl in an outside world.

But there was always a choice; I just hadn't wanted to see that anymore. If what Jansen said was true, then I wouldn't be missed in the office. If he lied ... well.

I swirled the glass in my lap, studying the way light refracted across the surface of the liquor and raised my gaze to lock onto Jansen's face.

He rose as he focused on me, towering above me as though sensing the change settling over me. "We signed a contract.

You're locked in for at least another three years."

I didn't bother to answer him, only offering a fleeting smile. I knew as well as he did that every contract had its loopholes, and I was certain I could find someone in Legal to help me get out of it. Swallowing back the burnt caramel and heady peat of the whiskey, I placed the empty glass on my seat arm, unsure what else to do with it.

One of the bar staff whisked it away, offering me a glass of champagne. Mixing drinks was a bad idea but I didn't care about impressing my boss or worrying about what my family thought. There was only one man on the plane I cared about, and it looked like I was as poor a judge with him as I had been during college when I'd met Luther Kingsman.

Fizzy bubbles shot up my nose, leaving my sinuses in a mess though for once I didn't mind the sensation. The whole event showed I'd let myself be thrust into a world I didn't understand. I was out of my depth. Worse, the security I craved ... My shoulders angled toward Sirius even though my heart screamed I couldn't trust him.

The pity in his eyes when he had looked at me at the bar had ripped my heart to shreds in an instant.

For all the fun moments, for everything we had done together and what I'd experienced with him, I knew it had to end. His last kiss had been his warning shot, and now he had seen the underbelly of my life.

I wanted to wiggle my way back into a hole and hide from the rest of the world forever, but something told me that that wasn't what my new path was supposed to be. I needed to stand up, alone, and weather this.

Jansen stood silent, waiting in an unusual display of patience, or perhaps he was gloating over the shred of power he thought he held over me while he waited for me to speak, but I had no words left.

I turned my head to peer out the window at the fluffy clouds surrounding us. The edge of the wing glimmered in the bright sunlight, reflecting a rainbow prism across the frosted

glass. I sipped my champagne and held my silence while my brain switched on alone.

After time, the shadows around me shifted, and I glanced down at my hands to find them in a slant of sunlight as the plane turned on its path. When I raised my eyes to tell Jansen to finally leave me alone, it wasn't his murky gray gaze, the dulled color of slate on a cloudy day, that I met.

Cobalt dark eyes surveyed me, though they had lost a glimmer of their usual mischievous sparkle.

"You're much prettier than my boss," I murmured, then I closed my eyes again. Why did I bother to speak at all? It wasn't like I could move from one person to another, trapped in my small, allocated place on the plane as I was in life. That image brought on a swarm of prickles that ran along my arms like so many tiny fingers. Nothing to do with the toxic mix of alcohol I'd imbibed, I was sure.

Or maybe I was not so sure. I twirled the empty glass in my fingers, watching honey-gold light bounce between the remnant drops that clung to its smooth insides.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay." Sirius leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees. His calloused fingers almost touched mine.

Almost, but not quite.

"I'm not sure I understand the definition of *okay*. Or all right. But I will manage." I raised my gaze to meet his, fiery and defiant. I was ready to take a break from my boss, but I wanted to keep my career, to break the final ties with my family but make my own way in the world.

If only that path also led to Sirius.

But that could never be.

"You're strong, Stardust." Sirius plucked the champagne stem from my fingers and placed it in the cupholder beside me.

The cool glass submerged to a deep level until only the rim was visible. Something about tall poppy syndrome fitted



through my mind, but I was too lost in the man so close to me yet so far away to pull the idiom apart.

“I am.” My admission was soft, and for his ears only.

“I worked with your boss—Jansen—on a few contracts. Not a single one of them ended in an amicable agreement, and he’s not the sort of man I’d like to work with again. I’m actually surprised you’re part of his department.”

I shrugged. “I sort of am and sort of not. I have a little office on the third floor, and everyone pretty much ignores me while I filter through picture after picture after picture of space, looking for things that other people can’t see.” I ran a hand over my face, a shroud of weariness dropping over me. “Hell, I can’t even believe what I see half the time. It’s all stats and numbers and guesswork.”

“Must be decent guesswork.” Sirius tossed me the ghost of a small smile. “There’s an element of estimation in most jobs. In mine, it’s assessing a risk profile, the likelihood the client will survive, and what I or my team can do to keep life ticking over.” He shrugged. “Otherwise, I’d be out of a job.”

“And here I thought you ran a retail store.” I didn’t bother to keep the sarcasm out of my voice, but the old betrayal held little poison, now.

“Is that the impression I managed to give you?” He winced, his gaze shifting.

“You certainly didn’t bother to correct it.” But then, I hadn’t said anything either. I’d chosen to take him at face value and look where it left me.

“You’re pissed at me for lying to you.” His fingers brushed the backs of my hands.

I drew them back. The corners of his mouth tightened, but he gave no other outward sign that this encounter wasn’t going the way he had planned.

“Don’t try the omission thing. It won’t work on the scientist.”

“Team Brawny for the fail, huh?” Sirius rubbed his chin ruefully. “I didn’t mean to deceive you.”

“Team Biscuit.” I waited for Sirius’ snort to subside. “Anything else you would like to tell me, or are you going to continue to lie to me?”

“Guess I earned that one.” He sighed when I didn’t answer and retracted his hands. “My brother Mitch, the lawyer you met today ...” He paused while I gave a sharp nod. “He sent me onto the show as a bit of a lark. I had promised them that I would try to be the example, take better care of our reduced family. Just the four of us left. Fine fuck up this has turned into, mind. But his endgame was to get me to the Galaxy Gala at the end of the season. Last five couples standing out of twenty, right? That offered decent odds, so we went with it. He sent me fresh contracts for the job we’d like so we can extract ourselves from the underhand dealings your boss seems to favor. No one wants to get tarred with that brush, believe me. Career and business ender.”

“Underhand?”

“Is that all you heard?”

“No.” I considered for a moment. “I listened to everything that you said. And this time I even believe it. And all I heard Sirius, was *underhand*, and that you played me.”

“That was never my intention.” He swallowed hard but didn’t break his gaze with me.

“Good intentions and going to hell, something like that?” I raised my palms and dropped them onto my lap. This conversation was getting us nowhere, and he was only confirming what I thought I already knew. “So. We finish off the season, pretend to be lovey-dovey, because that’s what the media seems to think we are, and I *do not* want the drama of breaking up on TV. *If* we ever had actually anything at all. No, don’t push me.” I held up a hand to ward him off. “Then we go our separate ways ... wherever that ends up being.” I broke our stare, studying the smooth edges of my fingers.

Sirius' gaze settled on me, a weighted band bending me forward over my knees until I could barely breathe. Right when I was prepared to push up, unable to bear the pressure of his silence any longer, he broke it for me.

"You're not going back to your old life." He said it like a statement rather than a question. "You can't."

He did know that much about me, and I didn't bother to fight him. Perhaps he'd figured out as much about my father as I had. Pity Sirius hadn't been in my life earlier to help me see that connection. Or maybe he was right on time. Either way, I needed to move on and take the control that had been so desperately lacking.

I swallowed and nodded, turning my gaze to my knees where I picked at the hem of my dress. "I'll have to, at first. End some things, tidy others up."

"And then?"

"Then ... I have no idea," I confessed. "This ... show. It was meant to be something to fix me, or so Jansen intimated. Maybe raise the work profile, though I'm not sure exactly how that was ever supposed to happen." I'd been so wrong, so naive. "Maybe he wanted a free dinner at the Galaxy Gala for the finale, use it to network? I spent too much energy worrying about how to try to fit in and how badly I could screw up on the show. In the end it wasn't about me at all. It was about him. You."

"But you got something out of it." His voice warmed with the memories we'd made together.

I should have been incited, angry, raging at him, but all I had left was exhaustion. "I got lots, including you, for a brief period."

"Annie—"

"Don't," I whispered softly. "Don't make me a promise you can't hold yourself to and that I don't want you to keep. Not anymore."

"Don't you?" Sirius leaned forward and the warmth in his voice blazed with seduction.

My head snapped up. “Don’t you play those games with me, either. You won. Don’t you get it? Both of you won. You ... you get to go to your gala, and you got a good fuck on the side.” I ignored his wince at the vulgar term floating in the small void that yawned bottomless between us. “Jansen gets his deal. Whatever it is you agreed on. And I pay the dual price for you both, unbeknownst to me. Congratulations.” Bitter seeds tripped off my tongue, my chest too tight to take another breath. Jansen and my father’s betrayal I came to expect, despite how screwed up that was. Sirius ... his hurt more than the others combined.

Sirius offered beautiful memories, but now, tainted with Jansen’s personal stench—a nastiness that had wound its way through my life for the last few years—I knew I wouldn’t be able to look back on them fondly for a very long time.

Until any chance of recovery had eroded into dust.

I resumed my stare out the window, recognizing that I was wallowing, but the frayed heartstrings that barely held my heart together along with the alcohol dropped me into a deep funk.

“I know it was only ever a temporary thing,” I whispered to no one at all, willing the tears that prickled my eyes not to fall.

When I turned back again, Sirius was gone.

## CHAPTER 17



## ANNIE

MY LIFE WAS A TORTURED, compartmentalized hell, one of my own making, and I couldn't escape it. Keira stopped trying to talk me out of my self-induced haze once I refused to break my mood, intent on wallowing, a duck with her feathers stuck in mud and sinking.

Lost inside my own sort of madness, I became a little stalker. Sirius ran mornings and nights, sometimes during lunch. Part of me wondered if he was eating anything at all, but his body mass didn't seem to be lacking anywhere; if anything, his physique hardened. I couldn't get the taste of him out of my mind, his touch ...

My brain knew just as well as my heart that the only reason I was so enamored with him was that he'd been my first. Hell, he'd told me he couldn't stay, that what we had was temporary at best, a few stolen weeks of peace and pleasure together.

But naturally, the downstairs faction—my heart, not kitty—refused to let it go. I reminded myself a million times that he was just fun times, like a toy I could return to the shelf when I tired of it. Dancing on the ropes, goop fights—memories of those sang another tune, and my heart insisted it was more. But what else could it be? It wasn't like I was in love with the man. I knew what that felt like, and it sure was not this schoolgirl level infatuation—fine, obsession—that fueled my need to watch him constantly.

“He's not with anyone else,” Keira told me over breakfast.

“He doesn't talk to any of the girls, and he doesn't drink with the boys anymore,” Hattie reported at dinner.

“When are you going to move on from him?” They both asked with identical expressions of exasperation.

“Maybe I like being lovelorn.” I tried to shrug it off. “It's a change, after all.”

They exchanged glances and thankfully left me to dismember my sashimi.

Two days off the plane and I was going stark raving mad with hormones.

Skiving off dinner yet again with friends, I pretended to coop myself up in the apartment, sulking when something worse was happening.

I was going jogging.

My current plan put torture into a whole new category I tried hard not to think about. I borrowed workout tights and a dark crop top from the wardrobe collection reserved for Team Geek's exclusive use, though we rarely used the store. Then I ducked downstairs a few minutes after I guessed Sirius had left for his nighttime run.

Which proved to be a mistake as I nearly ran right into him in the kitchen.

Unable to face him, or answer any of the sorts of questions I knew he'd have for a girl who hadn't done exercise since high school—and even then it had been of the forced variety—I turned a corner in the open plan room and hid behind the wine rack adjacent to a small library.

Running my fingers over book titles in the small library the common rooms offered, I feigned interest in all of them. My heart pounded a rush of blood to my ears until I couldn't hear if he was finished whatever he was doing and had left or not. Working my way to the corner of the room, I peered through the sliver of a view that showed me exactly where Sirius stood.

He refilled a water bottle, dropped powder in it from a colored tub he stored back in the pantry, and headed out the front door at a fast gait. I followed at a slower pace, watching him chat with the security team then head into the forest unhindered.

The moment the trees blocked him out, I trotted in his wake, sending a bright smile at the security men who watched me with disdain. "I'm late," I said too brightly, my words

echoing a little too loudly around the open space, gesturing in the direction Sirius had disappeared.

The pair nodded, their faces locked in permanently bland expressions.

I scurried past, hoping my bouncy, lopping gait didn't look too weird. The last thing I jogged for was a missed bus, and I'd had bundles of notes in my arms at the time. I'd lost the lot, scattering downtown in stats and theories no one else was interested in. That mishap had put me back weeks of work I'd needed to reorganize, and I hoped tonight's adventure wouldn't end the same way.

The forest closed around me, locking out most light except for the few late season fireflies intent on using me as their orbit. I swatted at them, my breath too loud in my chest until I stumbled over a rock and hit the ground face first.

I froze, blood thundering in my ears, and hoped Sirius hadn't heard me crashing about. What the hell was I doing out here? It wasn't like I'd be able to catch him. Besides, I had nothing to say to the man who'd ripped my heart out except to slap him and get him to admit what I thought was real between us ... wasn't.

Unwilling to give in just yet, I stumbled on, panting far too hard for the meager speed I managed to maintain. Pain lanced my side. It would serve me right if I collapsed in the middle of a short walk from the apartments, stuck on the ground and stretching for help that wasn't coming. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* I clasped a hand over my ribs, digging in to burst the familiar bubble I recalled from high school athletics when a teacher had tried to convince me that my body was capable of running a three-mile cross country endeavor and that any pain stemming from it was all in my mind.

Newsflash, Teach: it wasn't all in my mind at all. *Asshole.*

The noisy, sterile interior of the ambulance had confirmed that when my appendix happened to burst a mile in. No one had an argument for why it happened, but I was pretty sure it was my body's quiet little *screw you* message.



I hadn't had to partake in athletics components for a long time after that.

My body ached and my lungs over inflated as I sucked in desperately needed air. Bracing my hands on my knees, I puffed hard until the stitch subsided and my gasps shortened, becoming less painful. Perhaps my ego trip would result in another ambulance ride. Who knew? Who the hell was I kidding? This activity thing wasn't for mouse-like scientists ... including me.

Stalker determination aside, I straightened and swiveled upright, metaphorical towel thrown like a floppy gauntlet.

My turn halted halfway as my sweaty body slapped against a hard surface and hot skin.

I inhaled a deep breath and came up with Sirius' earthy, whiskey sharp tang. My body heat flared out of control as I stepped back, or at least, I tried to step back.

Sweat clung between us, adhering our bodies together in a suction of epic proportions.

*Flat chest, meet boob gap.*

And I'd thought thigh gap was all I needed to worry about.

I shoved my hands against Sirius' chest and pushed hard, ignoring my brain screeching that I'd found who I was looking for. Our bodies gave way, parting with a slurping sound better suited to a plunger situation.

I flew backward and prepared to meet the ground butt first.

Sirius' arm shot out, winding tight around my ribcage and hauling me back against him.

"What ... Sirius, what are you doing?" I squawked, staring up at him.

He smiled a moment before my full weight hurtled into him. My knee connected with something soft, and, eliciting a pained grunt, Sirius went down.

I stood, holding his pinkie as he writhed, one hand pressed between his legs. A gargling sound reached me.

“I’m so sorry.” I flapped one hand and squeezed his pinkie with the other.

“Thanks,” he wheezed.

“Are you okay?” I had no idea what happened after a man was kneed in the nuts. The only time I’d ever used it was as a kid when my cousin had trampled me in his haste to the candy bowl one Christmas. It had seemed a fine reason to deploy the knee as any other. He had gotten up pretty fast.

Sirius wasn’t.

“Did I break anything?” I whispered, looking on with a degree of fascinated horror as he clambered to his feet.

“Don’t think so. But let’s not try that for a while, huh?” He grimaced, adjusting himself and managed to stand tall.

“Good. Gotcha.” I nodded and kept nodding.

Sirius watched me warily. “Stardust?”

“Yeah?” My head came to a standstill.

“Can I have my finger back now?”

“Oh, sure.” I patted his hand awkwardly.

In the deep shadows, only a part of his curled lips and narrowed gaze was visible.

Sirius stared down at me in equal silence, his lips never moving, so I willed the words—*something, anything*—that he would give me to finalize the stalemate between us and bring us back to center. “You followed me out.”

I nodded, the light moment dissipating, replaced by something more serious. Sirius? My brain went on hiatus working that one through while Sirius watched on with no little sense of bemusement.

But Sirius Weston didn’t play by my rules, or anyone else’s for that matter.

Callous, rough fingers twined through my sticky bangs. He tilted my head back, studying me with a quiet, dark fire

glittering in his eyes. That was all the warning he gave me before his mouth crashed down over mine.

Whatever words I tried to say turned into a deep moan as his tongue slid along mine, dancing, twirling. Every touch that should've been familiar from our previous time together wasn't.

His kiss deepened, and he lifted me off my feet, his arms wrapped around me like a great bear but one I was more than comfortable in the embrace of. Safe. Trailing kisses down my neck, he found every sensitive spot and played there, heightening the nerves already on fire beneath my skin.

I arched back, granting him the access he wanted as he pinned me against his chest and backed me into a broad tree. Rough bark rent my skin as Sirius continued his devouring assault on my mouth. Allowing little space between us, his body pressed flush to mine, though his hands tugged at the material barrier between us.

He solved that problem in a moment, too. Slipping his thumbs beneath my sports bra, he flicked the clinging fabric up to expose my breasts to the night air. My nipples pebbled into tight, sensitive buds, the muggy air's kiss tenderizing them before his fingers pinched the aching pebbles sending my body into an over sensitized sort of overdrive.

I pressed forward, seeking his kisses even though I was well outclassed in this sort of talent.

Something he'd said earlier in our stunted relationship—if I could even call it that—fitted through my mind. That he would hurt me, break me if he took it at the speed that he liked.

Apparently, that wasn't a consideration for him anymore.

Heat pooled between my legs, drenching the black tights I'd effectively stolen from the storeroom. His rough fingers peeled them almost reverently from my skin, sucking and biting each inch of exposed skin until I prayed to the moon above us for more, or less, because his torture continued nevertheless.

Sirius thrust between my legs, pushing my thighs apart to grind his hip against my clit while he teased my breasts with his other hand.

His kisses were never ending, and the rhythmic pulse he sent through my body with the skilled use of his tongue and fingers between my thighs, broke me within seconds. I sank into my first orgasm, his mouth clinging to my skin as I clenched my fists, gripping whatever muscle I could as he dropped lower on me.

I had no words left, and he didn't seem to need them or want them tonight. His fingers wound around my neck almost all the way around, and he held my head back, taking me prisoner in his grip. His mouth descended to tease my breasts where his fingers pinched and teased my nipples. My hands skated lower, cupping the bulge of his crotch. He groaned into my mouth.

Rough knuckles pinched my clit, his fingers sliding inside in an overwhelming threat of need. Pleasure ripped over me before I could think. I cried out into his mouth, my ass pressed into the moss covered stone. Drawing him over me, I clung to him until I screamed my need into the darkened forest.

I came to as he teased me mercilessly, stroking along the same swollen flesh that had given him everything, and there was no hiding the evidence of my arousal to him. Why fight what he already knew I needed and craved? Sirius knew more about my body's reactions and could bring them out in a moment's notice. I didn't want to fight him, so I slid my arms around the back of his neck, arching up into his touch.

His finger slid along the wet seam of my pussy, teasing and tormenting in light touches, then harder, seeping back to that same pulsing rhythm that had done so much damage a moment before. He slipped two fingers straight inside me, scissoring them to stretch me, and I knew he wouldn't stop at a kiss or a touch.

Those things had seemed so romantic to me once, but Sirius Weston made them filthy.

His mouth found mine again, and I slipped out of my conscious mind, letting him peel my tights from my hips and managing to free one leg. The material dangled from my hip as he shoved his own shorts down, his mouth still waging a battle against mine. When he pushed against me, I rubbed back shamelessly, crying out into his mouth, inhaling him.

Sirius' hands grazed down my side, releasing my throat. He cupped my hips and slid deeper beneath my arms. He lifted me easily. I weighed nothing as he hefted me against the tree trunk, positioning himself below me. His dark, glittering gaze captured mine as his cock slammed inside me. Sirius pinned me to the moss covered stone, his mouth curled up in a primal, sadistic smile.

I asked him once about missionary and having sex face-to-face, and he told me how intimate an experience the position could be. Until this moment, I had no idea just how intimate he meant.

His unflinching gaze held me captive as he began to move, his hands braced against the stone on either side of me as I crooked my legs around his waist. My body bounced against him as though I'd be made to fit him like a glove.

Sirius reached every part of me as he impaled me over and over again, driving sensation straight through my body and delivering shocks that left me shivering. When I tightened around him, his mouth came down on mine, swallowing my cries as I came hard. But it wasn't only my body that was made for him—his body was made for mine, too.

The throes of my orgasm brought him to the edge of his own need, and he punched deep inside me, bellowing into the hollows of my throat as I convulsed around him.

His heart slammed against mine. and I panted, as unable to catch my breath now as I had been during my jaunt through the forest in pursuit of him. Had he known I'd followed him the whole time? Chances were that I hadn't been anywhere near as quiet as I'd intended.

Sirius Weston might still be a mystery to me, but every encounter I had with him exposed yet another facet of the man

who both terrified me and lusted after me.

I couldn't deny any longer to myself that I had fallen in love with this dark man who took me to the edge of torment and brought me release yet left me still wanting.

In as much silence as he met me, Sirius caught my fingers in his, helping me straighten my clothing and my hair to some reasonable semblance of order.

There wasn't anything I could do about the stickiness between my legs that soaked into the cotton of my tights. Those were ruined, I couldn't deny. I shivered in the night air as Sirius straightened his own clothes wordlessly, tucking my hands into sweatier ones, though I didn't mind the droplets coursing along my skin in tiny patches.

His larger hand wrapped easily around mine, drawing me close to his side as we walked back through the forest and made our way toward my apartment.

Sirius didn't say a word when we arrived, just kissed me again, gently this time, becoming the sort of Sirius I recognized from our previous encounters. Something more real had happened this time—not something he wanted, or planned. That made it somehow *more* than the other times. Like he had given me a part of himself freely.

I arched into him again, kissing him back in desperation and letting him see every emotion that ruined me at his every touch. A silent plea that he would come inside with me and break our mutual stalemate.

When I drew him towards my door, he pulled his hand back, his eyes locked on me as he made his way to the stairwell and slipped inside. The door closing behind him broke my heart into a thousand pieces, and I couldn't put them all back together even if I'd been able to locate them.

I made my way back to my bed, unwilling to shower the feel of him from my body, desperate to remember every last touch until his warmth and love making turned cold and icy. But my bed and memories only led me into a world filled with the shadow of the man I craved, edged with hints of leather

and whiskey, of hidden kisses and forbidden touches, in the recesses of my mind. Then he drifted, unreachable, leaving me alone in the void of deepest sleep, a mystery as I never saw his face.

## CHAPTER 18





## SIRIUS

I REWORKED my bowtie for the umpteenth time in an hour, grouped together the rest of Team Biscuit. We'd relocated to Nevada en masse. So en masse that I hadn't had a chance to talk to Annie at all on the business class flight to my home state. Not a Senator's influence in sight. I wondered more than once if Bettie had put her foot down and pushed the power-hungry man out of her production in the wake of family week.

Even she noticed things weren't the same between Annie and I afterward.

Still, returning to Nevada meant coming home, or at least, being that much closer to it. The Gala took everyone's focus for the week beforehand until the moment when it all came together in a make-or-break type situation. The show's winner would be announced tonight, but I didn't care about a novelty check and fake-happy applause.

All I wanted was Annie.

The static image that stared back at me reflected my exhaustion in the temporary accommodation's small mirror. Between the fittings and stylings, the make-up ... all the pettiness faded into insignificance when I considered that I'd lost Annie.

That what we had was a fairytale I'd hidden myself from, praying that we'd have the ending I thought we both wanted. But after Jansen's tribute to my omissions on the plane, our happy ending, well ... Failure had become a foregone conclusion, and I wasn't at all used to that.

Should I have said something earlier to her? Yes, and no. Her family had always been her Achilles heel, and had I known Jansen was involved, I could have cleared the floor for her, but without that knowledge ... I scraped my fingers through my scalp, wanting to roar out my frustration. But that would likely terrify anyone in the vicinity.

Could I have explained myself better? Absolutely Working with Jansen was one of the few contracts I wanted to rip into confetti and shower over the man's head. No matter how powerful the man *thought* he was, there were far better operators out there, including the Secretary of Defense I'd meet tonight.

I missed Annie's presence in the last week at my side, or me at hers, but I'd lost that right when I screwed her over, even if it hadn't been by design. Mind, if I'd been open with her about my business rather than being cagey before we started and not let her assume...

Nest. Own making. One person to blame.

Mind, there was that night in the forest ... the little minx was the crappiest stalker I'd ever met, but she was cute and sexy as fuck in that workout get up. It was probably a blessing that she hadn't chosen to wear skin tight clothes all season, or we would have spent a lot more time in the bedroom. Or outside of it.

Feeling her come undone beneath me had shattered my resolve to stay away from her and give her space. She hadn't uttered a single word afterward, and neither had I, leaving us in the same stalemate position we had been in after the families meet up challenge. She said she was happy to play along for the night, but her acting skills were about as good as mine, and neither of us would be up for an Oscar.

Still, I had one night left with her, and I planned to do everything in my power to prove to her that I wasn't the abusive asshole she had come to think of me as.

Or maybe that was just my impression of myself, and I *was* as narcissistic a user as her father. Hell, if that was the case then I needed to rethink a whole lot of things. As much as I wanted her back beside me, perhaps Annie Pillingston, my strong girl obsessed with space rocks, was better off forging her own path without me.

*My Stardust.*

My heart broke a thousand times over.

I gritted my teeth and smiled at my reflection as my phone rang. I flipped it over and picked up the call. “Mitch.”

“How’s prep for tonight going?” he asked without preamble.

“Oh, brilliant. As long as my date doesn’t bite my head off.” Not that it wouldn’t be warranted.

“That good, hey?” Laughter laced his voice.

“You know me.”

“I do know you.” Mitch was silent for a second and I could almost hear the thoughts turning over in his head. “Which means I don’t think you’ve earned this one.”

“I ended it.” I paused before I delivered the second round of bad news. “Jansen is her boss.”

“Shit. That’s news.” The laughter left my brother’s voice, and I knew he was recalling the shit fight we’d had over patents with the asshole. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who hadn’t done my homework. “And you didn’t tell her we never wanted to deal with him again? Did he buddy up to you?”

“Yes and no.” Had I told her that? I struggled to remember the conversation in the plane, as my breaking heart had taken up critical gray matter real estate at the time.

“What are you going to do to get her back?”

“No idea. I tugged on my bowtie, turning it askew. Geeks and bow ties were cool, right? “I’ll think of something.”

“Please tell me they’re going to film this one. I want to watch it.”

“Now who’s the asshole?”

“You’re funny.” Mitch was trying while I seethed silently on my end. “She’s cute, Sirius. And sweet. Doesn’t deserve your grumpy ass.” Sharp chatter and white noise filled his end of the line.

“Who’ve you got there?”

“Beast on the other line. Apparently, you’ve been talking to her.” His tone turned sour and accusatory.

“Yeah, about that.” I winced. This one wasn’t going to be fun. “You know I mentioned a branch in Tokyo? Some legal and some personal security for traveling or relocating celebs?”

Sarcasm laced Mitchell’s reply. “Yeah.”

“You do it together. With Janet. Her on the legal team, you on the security side. You can help with contracts. Plus you get extra duties.”

“And what are those, oh Great One?” Mitch didn’t *lace* his words with sarcasm. This time they were soaked.

“You’re her bodyguard.”

Heavy silence hung between us, so thick that the squawking on Mitch’s end pierced my eardrums. I could almost hear his fingers running through his hair, the way he always did when he knew he was outclassed. I’d pinned him into a corner; he wanted Tokyo as much as I did, but he didn’t want the duty of protecting who he called the Beast of the Law world.

“That’s the job? Fucking hell.”

“Hell, indeed.” My watch pinged an alarm. “I gotta go. Leon’s here, and I’ve gotta wait for Annie.”

“Yeah? Make sure you don’t screw her around as bad as you have the lovely band of brothers you’ve abandoned.”

“You’re the one who put me on here, remember?” I snapped and checked my temper. “I am being an asshole. I’m sorry.”

“You are. Don’t let it filter through to your date tonight or you’re screwed.”

“Already there, brother.”

Swallowing back bile at the thought of my final chance with Annie, I hung up and headed downstairs to mingle with the rest of the men as we were allocated our cars. The girls were due to join us in a few minutes. I stewed in my own

private hell, sweating in my suit alongside five other men, each one of us as twitchy and nervous as the next.

Leon leaned forward, peering over my shoulder at the long line of limos. “They forgot to order me a pink one.”

I grunted. “Disgraceful, isn’t it?”

The level of opulence the studios threw out willy-nilly was the opposite of the self-made business owners and the great American Dream I’d envisioned when I created Sothis Security with my brothers. I might have made millions on the endeavor, but I didn’t throw money around the way the studio did.

Still, I was grateful for the opportunity and what tonight might mean, fighting a war on more than one front. Or a battle. Maybe the war for us hadn’t started yet. My mind flicked back to Mitch. Giving him Tokyo was a double-edged sword, giving him the career advantage he’d been pushing for while locking him in an enclosed space with the woman he loved to hate most. After throwing me in front of cameras for the better part of twelve weeks, I had little sympathy for his plight. He’d just have to sort out his needs and wants on his own.

*Says the man who screwed up with the woman he loves.*

Dean poked me in the back. “Straighten up and get in the car,” he hissed, nudging me forward. “Here come the girls.”

Not one of us moved as the girls descended the steps to the apartment block in a wedge formation, a flurry of color and glitz. Cameras rolled and even though I knew the effect had been planned, it made it no less heart rending. Jewels glittered beneath the setting sun, reds, golds and blues rippling over long skirts and luxurious evening gowns, tailor made for every woman.

But I only had eyes for one girl, dressed in silver lace that scalloped over the swell of her breasts and grazed her calves as she held her head high, defiant against what the world had thrown at her.

And she’d won.

The competition had never mattered to either of us, only meant to keep us together for a short period. A vision of what she might look like in a wedding dress floated across my mind—her standing beside me beneath a bower in a forest or garden, somewhere outside where the sun could see us say yes. Or maybe at night, with the moon and stars witness to our promises.

That I'd fallen in love with her was a foregone conclusion. Whether she'd have me, whether she'd live that fairytale dream and keep it going ... that part wasn't set in stone. At least, not yet.

I hadn't fallen for a girl like this since my college days. Work always came first, but all I wanted was Annie by my side all night. Every night. I gaped at her, lovelorn and ridiculous and God knew what the camera crew caught on my face. Right then I didn't care.

All I could see was her gaze fixed at some point above my head, making eye contact with absolutely no one.

And she was still the most beautiful creature I've ever seen in my life.

## CHAPTER 19



ANNIE

*DON'T FALL down the stairs. One foot, then the other. Mind the skyscraper high heels.*

My personal pep talk did little as I wobbled on the edge of the small step that had never looked so high despite walking it a thousand times in the last weeks. I swore the heels added an extra five feet to my impending descent.

Hattie and Keira tightened formation on either side of me, keeping me upright.

“I can’t see a thing out of these damn contacts.” The color was so heavy everything seemed blurry, and my tear ducts had gone into overdrive the moment the stylist had slapped them onto my eyeballs.

“Don’t look, just move with us.”

“Go with the flow.” Hattie was back in sing-song mode, and for once, I didn’t mind in the least.

I internalized a groan as the cameras were rolling, though I imagined the scene would be overwritten with some sort of porn-level music, all slow motion and glamor style.

Hattie teetered next.

I grabbed at the skinny old-gold belt draped loosely around her waist and hauled her upright. “We’ve got this.”

A few months ago, I wouldn’t have known half of the dress cuts or palettes our plethora of stylists had draped us in, but the information had finally crammed into my mind, despite years of my mother’s training at a younger age failing to stick. I wondered idly what information might have fallen out while I wasn’t watching.

“Damn right.” Keira fixed her smile in place. “If you pop a contact, just leave the fucking thing where it lies.”

“That’ll look great, one brown eye and one blue one.”

“I’m sure they’d put it back with some sort of filter.”



“Filter this.” Keira smiled at the nearest camera and not so subtly flicked the bird.

Somewhere below us, the boys laughed at her audacity. “Sounds like you’ve got a crowd of admirers.”

“We *all* have admirers, ladies.” Hattie clung to my fingers, her words all the bravado we needed to make it to the bottom of the stairs without major calamity.

“You do.” Leon collected her with a sweeping gesture, herding her into their own private limousine.

A line of glittering, black vehicles ran the entire block. Black suited security marked sentinel points at either end of the row and the middle of the street at randomly spaced periods. That did my head in, OCD style. I looked away to find the girls gone, all entering their own cars.

Sirius stood alone at the final car, his hand resting on an open door.

Squirrels went riot in my stomach, somersaulting as I made my way precariously toward him, ever aware of the increased likelihood of my being the one to tumble and break an ankle.

Not that my stomach circus had anything to do with the last words said—or not said—between us. More because seeing Sirius Weston dressed in a navy dinner suit, bow tie and gray-shot hair styled like he was dressed for the cover of a European gent’s magazine did things to my body that weren’t in the realm of strange.

Somehow, my reaction to him was worse than it had been at the beginning of the filming season now that I was far more familiar than I should be with this man.

*Sexy. Dangerous.*

*Possessive.*

The way he looked at me couldn’t be more clear. My heart throbbed in my chest, wanting exactly what he offered.

It looked like Team Biscuit would take the drama award for today.

I schooled my features into something minorly happy and mostly bland and hoped my blush didn't make it through the thick layers of makeup piled over my skin. The stuff weighed heavy as a mask, and I couldn't wait to get home and wash it all off.

First, I had to survive the winner's announcement and whatever Sirius had planned for his work, with me tagging along on his arm like so much confetti wrapped candy. Feminists unite because I couldn't think of a more harrowing and unappealing way to spend tonight.

With luck, my role would be a silent, brief one, so I could head home on the flight pre booked for each of us. My luggage had been taken away, and I imagined it would be waiting in the car that would take each of us to our respective terminals as soon as we were released from our filming duties.

One more event, and it was all over.

I couldn't wait to leave the cameras behind, but going home didn't have the same appeal as it had only a few short weeks before.

Sirius Weston had changed me, and I wasn't sure whether it was for the better or not. Certainly, my heart never hurt so much as it had in the past few days.

I reached the car door, my hand rising in an automatic greeting as Sirius reached for me. His fingers wrapped around my hand in a warm grip, drawing me toward him.

"You look beautiful." He dipped his head and murmured the words only loud enough for me to hear.

I appreciated the gesture, some of the stone that had encased my weeping heart breaking off. "You too. Handsome, not beautiful. Well, I guess you do, anyway." My voice trailed off, heart jerking painfully in my chest as he only nodded and gestured me into the seat of the car.

*Tonight is for appearances after all. Just an act. That's all this is.*

I closed my eyes, willing the moisture brimming there not to fall and willing a giant contact lens never made for actual

vision to stay fixed in place.

“I’m sorry, Annie.” Sirius crowded my space as soon as I found my seat, talking breathlessly in my ear as he ghosted his lips across my cheek without actually making contact. “I should have apologized on the plane, or come to see you but I was ...”

He kept talking, but my mind closed off. The week between the family trip and today had been hell. I’d stayed hidden in my room, missing my space reports, the photographs that heralded my research sent through my emails intermittently each day before I joined the show. I’d even considered asking someone with more technical knowhow than me to hack into them.

“I don’t know how to react tonight, Sirius.” I cut him off, knotting my trembling fingers together.

His hand covered mine as his mouth brushed the corner of my lips still speaking for my ears only. “I would rewrite that night with you.”

Rewrite ... like write me out? I didn’t dare ask because I didn’t want him to take it back.

I shook my head. “I wouldn’t.” I turned, reading the surprise that flared his eyes. “I savor every moment I’ve had with you, and I always will. But you still left. At the end.”

*And you didn’t come back.*

Not a word of apology or explanation more than he had spoken once we were off the plane my father sponsored. Nothing. A brief tryst in the darkness, then ... nothing. More betrayals, more lies. Or maybe I was just so naïve as to think that if a man came back for another round of raunchy sex then he was promising to stick around.

All of it made me sick to my stomach. I wasn’t sure which Sirius I spoke to tonight. The one who lied to me and put so much distance between us, or the man with fire and passion in his eyes who kissed me and loved me like I was the only person on earth he wanted to hold?

*Yup, naïve as a newborn star. That’s me.*

I DIDN'T CARE what my father's recorders caught on the plane, or cameras or microphones or whatever in the hell had been installed in the limousine. I didn't care any more about *any* of it.

I just cared about him. My heart shattered just at his proximity, wishing I could go back and experience it all over again for the first time together.

*Our first time.*

"I was far too rough with you." His voice was laden with regret. "I should have treated you sweeter."

I shook my head again. "I wouldn't trade how you ... how we were that night. It was the real you, not the one where you tried to train me for some future lover. It is who *you* are, Sirius, and I loved every minute of it. I've been relieving that memory every night between then and now, and I'd have that again for the first time if I could, though I know that's not possible." I took a deep breath. "But as for the rest of this cluster fuck? Sirius Weston, for a man who's got the good you sure as hell better speak up or I'll find another limo to ride in." I was pretty sure he read the fear in my eyes but the flicker of rage in me was fueled by my burning heart.

*Be worthy. Please, after everything ... don't let this go.*

He wasn't the only one harboring regrets, but my already broken heart couldn't risk any more. Sirius caught his hand in mine, weaving roughened fingers between my knuckles and gripping me tightly. My heart thrashed in my chest as he raised my knuckles to his lips, grazing his mouth across them in a motion that sent shivers all the way down to my toes and back up to my heart.

My chest ached once, twice. I made the mistake of looking up into his eyes, and he leaned forward, stopping just short of actually kissing me.

"I've been so wrong about everything I've done with you, from not telling you what my business really entailed to not

speaking to you that night. My heart will shatter a thousand times over again and again.”

He dipped his head lower, still trying to keep the conversation between us private though I doubted we had much chance of that in the enclosed space. The driver pulled away from the apartment as we joined the convoy headed to the gala. His words were lost for a moment under the gentle throb of the engine.

Sirius wrapped around me tight as his words registered in my addled brain.

“You can’t say that.” My voice shook along with the rest of me.

“I love you.”

“Stop,” I begged. Because those words made me feel things I’d given up on. “I don’t want to think there’s hope and have it ripped away again.”

“It won’t. And of course I can.” His mouth brushed against mine gently. “It’s true.”

“I want to run.”

He laughed softly and kissed the tip of my nose. “No, you don’t. You were half dead when I found you in the forest.”

“That’s true enough. Did you know I was there?”

It was his turn to laugh. “Since the kitchen. You’re crap at stalking, Stardust. I might have told you that once before.”

“Maybe.” I twisted my knuckles in his, turning his palm over to trace the deep lines each there. Scars mingled with natural lines in a lifetime of hard work, broken hearts, and twisted truths.

“I don’t want this to be my regret,” I whispered.

“Then don’t.”

“But there’s so much to work through.” My heart squeezed at the prospect, knowing he loved me and still walking away. I didn’t want to, but how could I fall in love with somebody I couldn’t trust?

“If I said I picked you because I knew who your boss was, it would be an outright lie,” Sirius murmured as my fingers stilled in his and my heart stalled. “Or your father. Those are oversights I’m now bearing the brunt of, as well as you. But the reality was that I picked three girls who I thought looked approachable and who didn’t scare the shit out of me. You interested me. The space rocks thing got me from the start, Stardust. I’m as much a coward as any of you, and I discovered that your boss and I had something in common ... but not early on. I didn’t tell you more after we met again on your father’s jet because I was a coward twice over. What we have is ... peaceful. Uninterrupted. And it’s us.” He took a deep breath and squeezed my hands a little too tight, but I didn’t mind. “What we have is incredible. Do I do things wrong? Hell, of course I do. I’m human, and I’m male, but that’s no excuse for lying to you or treating you the way I have.”

“If you mean that night in the forest—”

“Yeah, that.” Sirius released me briefly to rub at the back of his neck.

I caught his hands and drew them back down to me, smiling for the first time in a week. “Yes. That. It’s something I want to repeat.”

Sirius nuzzled at my throat, sending tiny shivers all over me. “You do, huh? Are you sure this relationship isn’t based purely on sex?”

“Serenade me some. Maybe then I’ll reconsider, but until then, I’ll take just sex.” I smiled at him shyly, my heart pounding hard, but I knew I was making the right choice.

What he said added up with my experience. Trust Sirius over Jansen? Now that I read the truth in his face, saw his heartache matched mine, I’d choose him every damn day.

Sirius’ face lit up as he caught my cheeks in both hands and kissed me soundly.

“Yes, ma’am.”

## CHAPTER 20



## SIRIUS

I LEANED against an arched doorway holding two glasses of champagne as my gaze swept the outside ballroom. Golds and silvers filled the open space studded with black and charcoal variations of tuxedos. Stars littered the night sky above the brand-new observatory, the desert's backdrop. Vegas lit a faint glow along the horizon, though the strip itself was long distant.

I searched the crowd for a familiar face, but the head of hair I sought wasn't Annie's— dark bangs and locks looking cute as a fucking button brushing her cheeks and shoulders over the silver lace of her dress.

She wore the blue dahlia—tinted that way to match the midnight blue of my dinner suit—near the strap of her dress where it accentuated the creamy tones of her skin against the dark silver lace. Knowing she still wanted to smile around me, that tonight might not be all just an act before we parted ways ...

My chest constricted at the thought of losing her again when I'd only just recovered what we'd had in the first place.

Our tryst in the woods had bled me of the last remnants of my restraint. If I'd spoken to her after, I would have broken the spell that kept her near me, so instead I did more damage by keeping my distance, telling myself I was doing the right thing, when I knew I was the coward who didn't deserve the princess.

Because a princess, at least in my version of our fairy tale—the version that mattered to me—was who she had become. I just wasn't sure I was the prince worthy of her. But I'd damn well try.

Most of the other contestants had wandered off, mingling with people in their own industries the moment we'd arrived. Leon had towed Hattie off to the engineering division of the room while Dean naturally gravitated to the journalist's camp,



finally free to run his mouth at tonight's event. The relief in him at the ease of his escape was evident.

Keira hung uncertainly between the two camps of friends and finally disappeared around the same time as Annie had headed off to clean herself free of the excess makeup neither of us believed she needed.

I spied Gerald Lexington, the Secretary of Defense with his infamous gray toupee socializing near the buffet at the same time Annie reappeared at my elbow. "Feeling better?"

"Much." She'd washed half her makeup away, though kept the sexy as fuck smokey eyes, leaving her with the gentle glow I recognized.

"You're so damn gorgeous."

"Keep saying things like that and I'll believe it. Maybe. One day." Her gaze took on a distant stare, one I wasn't sure I liked.

"Hey, you are beautiful. And I'll tell you that every damn day." Her head dipped and she mumbled something soft I didn't quite catch. Lexington made a move in my periphery. "Come on. Let's get this part of the night over. Then we have to talk."

Annie raised a quivering smile to me. "You mean you don't care about who won the competition?"

I smiled, baring my teeth and lowering my head to graze her ear with my lips. "I don't give a flying fuck who won the damn comp. What I want is to know that I'll wake up with you tomorrow and every single day after for the rest of our lives."

I straightened as she stared up at me through opaline eyes glossy with tears.

"Sirius, we can't—"

"Walk with me." I pressed a kiss to her temple, handing her back her glass of champagne and folding her free hand around my elbow. "Fifteen minutes, tops. Then we talk."

"Are you that good at negotiating?" Her brow dipped as her brain tracked off in a new direction, and my heart lurched.

I loved her mind almost as much as I loved her heart. This woman could ruin me in a moment. I wanted to laugh with her, show her everything about my world, and free her from whatever hold Jansen had over her.

Bringing my focus back with effort, I drew her closer to my target, breathing out a controlled exhale. “No. I’m that good at reading people. If I can’t hold his attention for a few moments, this ... suggestion won’t work out so well.”

She nodded, though I hadn’t explained my plan to her at all. That measure of trust blew my mind. I squeezed her hand and approached Lexington from the side, offering him a nod when his eyes widened in recognition.

“Weston! I did hear you would be about tonight. Something about a TV show. Never thought you went in for that sort of thing. And this is ...” He trailed off, reaching out for Annie’s hand.

I refused flat out to relinquish the one tucked into my elbow, so I freed her fumbling hands of the untouched champagne before she dropped the lot in a fluster.

Maybe I should have explained a little more to her. For whatever training her mother put her through, it must have been with an iron fist because Annie was as jumpy as a bunny on race day.

“Annie Pillington. A pleasure.” She blushed prettily as Lexington took her in, his gaze flitting across to meet mine.

Out of the corner of my eye, Annie blinked once, then again. She shifted, though her face looked slightly strained, different somehow. Her grip on her champagne glass tightened.

“Cannon’s daughter?”

I nodded my affirmation, still watching her, though nothing else seemed amiss.

“Yes. I am,” Annie replied in a steady voice and despite her shaky start I couldn’t have been prouder of her recovery.

*There’s that inner strength I love.*

“I’ve heard you’re estranged,” Lexington mused, his focus on Annie, though I knew he watched me too. “And that he’s here tonight.”

Annie’s hand tightened on my arm though her smile never wavered. “He was involved in several underhanded ... situations. A scientist might not have many moral standings, but I prefer to keep my nose well out of politics, sir,” she finished shyly.

Lexington rumbled a laugh. “It’s a good policy. Keep yourself busy with whatever you do ...”

“I study space rocks.” Annie smiled brilliantly, earning herself another grin for her boldness.

“And she’s damn good at it.” I squeezed her arm.

“I’m sure she is. And you’re in private security now, or so I’ve heard, Colonel?”

“Retired.” I sipped my champagne, not quite sure how to broach my next move. “It’s been a lucrative set up, a family trust with my brothers protecting celebrities. But I’ve always been interested in national security, hence the military career. And I’d like to return to that direction, if from a private sector approach, this time.”

Lexington’s attention turned to me in full, and I understood in that moment exactly why he had made it to the position he held. “And you heard about the tender for a little project called Albatross, of course.”

“Of course.” Operation Albatross meant outsourcing a section of the White House’s personal security for more minor players, but it meant both potential expansion and validation for the security firm who landed the job. “I’d like to put Sothis forward.”

“Tomorrow I’ll be exhausted and hung over. Come see me in the afternoon and catch me at my weakest point. It’s when I usually say yes.” Lexington snagged a glass of whiskey from a passing waiter. “Enjoy your night, Miss Pillingston. Weston.”

“We will.” Annie and I chorused like a couple of school kids.

Lexington wandered off, muttering something about new love, but I knew our relation to each other hadn't hurt my chances.

"He liked you," I murmured, finishing my champagne and grabbing a fresh flute from a passing waiter. I was going to need it for this next piece of negotiating.

"He thought I was pretty. And he knows my father. Not the same thing," she objected as I drew her through the crowd, winding our way around party goers. "Don't move a single foot. My contact popped out in the middle of all of that and I have no idea where it is."

I laughed, bobbing down with her to search the floor despite her warning. Sweeping hands came up with nothing. I straightened, leaving Annie to her search, an idea crossing my mind. The waiter who had served Lexington a moment before passed by, and I snatched his empty glass from the tray.

The waiter glanced at me, shrugged, and carried on.

I tipped the glass to one side, studying the bottom of it, then tipped the final drops of liquid into my hand. "Annie?"

"You found it ... oh. Hell, no." She shook her head, vibrating as she stared at me. "Tell me you're going to stick about all night long because I am *not* putting that back in my eye. Do you think he noticed?"

"I think we're lucky he was already several warships to the wind." I winced as she popped her other contact out with an expert hand for a girl who wore glasses on the regular and tossed it into the glass.

I replaced the one I held in dripping fingers and placed the glass nonchalantly onto a nearby tray.

"Don't you leave me tonight. At all. I can't see more than a foot from my face," she warned, still giggling madly.

"Is this going to be like the green slime incident?" I wiped my hand on my pants. "Because that got out of hand."

"You mean am I going to shower you in contact lenses? No." She smiled, genuine, rosy, and happy, and all I wanted to

do was kiss her senseless right there.

“He thought you were fun, and he knows me, just as I know him—by career. Neither of us have a habit of plying our personal lives with playgirls, though he can drink like no one else I’ve ever seen. It did him well in his early days in the service.” I paused for breath, and someone else stole my space.

“Annie. How ... pleasant to see you on the arm of Mister Weston.” Cannon Pillington’s voice sliced through my nerves.

Annie stiffened at my side and said nothing at all.

“Senator.” I nodded.

Annie’s head tilted, and she rotated on her heel a fraction.

*Shit. She can’t see him.*

Her vision must be bad enough to deal with light in a bright room, but with the black backdrop of the desert sky, flaring light, and sea of black tuxedos, I had no doubt her vision would have flared out. I was surprised her eyes weren’t watering with the over stimulation.

“I would say congratulations on making it to the grand finale, but you’re not quite on the podium yet, are you?” Cannon hissed, snakelike.

“Not really our goal.” I spoke for us both and hoped I got it right as I slipped an arm behind Annie’s back and turned her discreetly to face her father.

She flashed me a small smile her father intercepted.

“Isn’t it? And what about life goals, Weston? Annie? Is this the sort of man you want to be paired with for the rest of your existence?”

I frowned at the odd phrasing, but Annie shook her head, gazing at an unfocussed point over the senator’s head.

“Like Sirius said, it’s not really important what you think.” She smiled broadly.

Had I said that? Annie had most definitely paraphrased my words, but I wasn’t going to let my girl down.

“Annie’s correct. And we’ve taken up enough of your time.” I nodded once and led Annie to the fat side of the gathering, taking her as far as I could from her father. The senator gaped after us as we walked away, but a quick glance over my shoulder ensured he hadn’t followed us. I scanned the heads for her boss or ex, but both were conspicuous in their absence.

*Good.*

I didn’t want to share the next moments with anyone else at all.

Except Annie.

I took score of the space around us, my gut tightening as I considered my next step for the evening. Bettie bobbed around near the impromptu stage, her hawk-eyed gaze missing nothing as we left the main floor, her camera crews in constant motion. Everything was as it should be, and I took stock of where we’d been before her lens dilemma broke us off.

“So, it looks like you will lose me to the Secretary for a short period tomorrow afternoon.”

“Sirius, we both have a plane to catch later tonight,” she protested.

“Do we? Did you check your actual ticket?” I asked quietly as I led her through another self of faux stone archways. A broad clearing surrounded by security suits and sparsely populated with couples overlooked the desert’s nightscape.

One area stood vacant, better yet, away from the line of sight of the cameras, not that I could prevent them from following us anyway.

“No?” She shrugged helplessly, twirling her champagne in her fingers. “I didn’t get a lot of time. The stylists took hours to do this.” She gestured at her face, wincing at my knowing grin.

“I’d say the same, but I know how long they make you wait for everything. You could have come tonight with no makeup and your hair worn normal, and you’d still be

stunning, but seeing you like this makes doing this”—I classily downed my champagne and placed the empty glass on a fake pillar—“a whole lot easier.”

She frowned at me and took a decent sip of her own. “What are you doing?”

I slipped my hand inside my jacket, extracting the slim, pale rose box I’d managed to have my baby brother smuggle in. Brandon had qualities the rest of my family didn’t possess, and one was his unnamable job as a national spook.

Bending on knee, I hit the deck without a grimace or too many creaking joints and looked up at her. Pale cheeks surrounded by a halo of dark hair, she looked absolutely perfect beneath the moonlight.

What we’d been through had created a huge risk factor for my family, for my business but in taking that risk, I’d found something far more important.

Her.

“Stardust, I’ve known you for a few weeks, and in that time you’ve changed how I see the world. A new perspective, both from a distance like your studies and a close up view of what I wanted from my life. I came here not because of a bet I could have gotten out of with a brother who can talk legal mumbo but because I wanted to prove something to my brothers. Show them that we can be more. Along the way, I met you, Stardust. For a long time, I forgot about things like love and focused on duty. But everything has a season, and now, I’d like for this season to be you. Us. Will you marry me?”

She stared forward, rose tinted lips parted as I gently levered the lid of the box up, but she wasn’t looking at the ring I’d had made for her. She was looking right at me, through me. My heart zinged as she began to nod, the fire in her opal eyes overflowing.

“Yes.”

I grinned, catching her hand. “Gods, that might be the hardest thing I’ve ever done.” I reached for the ring as I

became aware of crowds fluttering around us. A chorus of cheers broke out, and I knew the cameras caught it all. I didn't care. I slid the green stone ring surrounded by a galaxy of white opals onto her finger and folded my hand around hers.

Her breath hitched as her fingers tightened around mine. "Are you being Sirius?"

"Now? You pick now with the Sirius jokes?" I growled, tickling her ear with my breath until she laughed. "The studio wanted you to have their own ring, but I told them to go to hell. Sorry it's not a fancy brand, or the one sponsored by your father, but I'm not selling out for a clear stone when I wanted to give you something more ... you."

"It's beautiful," she whispered, her smile fading as she ran her thumb around the setting as though scared to touch it.

"Like you. Moldavite. Not romantic sounding, but it is from a meteorite. Part of what might have been a star once for my Stardust. Born of heat and pressure and long travels. Changed over time from something raw to something beautiful and amazing." *Like you.* But I couldn't force that out, so I went back to my facts. "Your very own space rock."

The tears overflowed against my chest, dampening my shirt. I squeezed my eyes shut as she wrapped her arms around me, hugging me tight enough to steal my breath.

Her touch left me heady, dizzy, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

By the time we drew apart enough to kiss, I could make out Leon, Dean, Hattie and Keira's obnoxious cheers breaking through the crowd, knowing I'd found not only the most important person in my world but an extended family as well. Hattie and Leon sported identical crowns, and I took that to mean they had won the celebrations. Bettie was nowhere to be seen.

I drew Annie to me and kissed her soundly until the cameras and the crowds dropped away, and it was only us.

Just us.



# EPILOGUE



ANNIE

“OH, God. The garden. That was so embarrassing. I fell *out* of a bush.”

“I swear I tripped over you.”

“Nope, I picked the wrong girl and got the right girl straight up.”

“And the questions! I hated those fucking questions.”

“The bus! Do you remember that?”

“I remember Annie and Sirius wandering around the trailers like lost puppies looking for each other.”

“I remember saving your ass.”

“I remember you leaking all our damn details to the media.”

“Guilty. I’m a journalist. It’s my nature.” Dean raised his hands over his head with a good-natured smile while everyone threw popcorn his way.

I snuggled into Sirius’ side, batting popcorn away as it flew over Keira’s head.

Leon muttered something to Hattie. She erupted into giggles, sliding off the sofa to roll across the rug in her apartment.

“What did you do to my girl!” Keira pretended to be enraged. At least, I thought it was a pretense. She and Dean hit it off hard, but theirs was a fight and flight relationship. Someone was always throwing haymakers in the metaphorical sense, and someone else was always running.

Oddly enough, Keira was the one who did most of the running.

Dean didn’t seem to object to chasing her, especially when she wore boots.

Premiere night for the season meant there was a big production downtown. Red carpet, glamor, lights ... and plenty of action.

Which was why the six of us had opted to hold our own TV based premiere in Hattie's small, bookish apartment on the city's outskirts.

It was perfect, filled with clutter, plenty of books, maps and even a star chart. I felt as much at home as I did with Sirius, though getting used to the mansion he shared with three brothers and a business was still taking its time. Five weeks was nothing in the space of a lifetime, but I already had fallen into a morning routine of greeting everyone in the house.

And an evening routine with just one person.

Sirius drew me tighter into his chest. "Is she okay down there?"

"She' is not a third person," Leon intoned, swinging for Sirius. He seemed to have taken sole responsibility for Hattie, and I was glad she'd found a champion of sorts while she slowly figured herself out.

I managed to duck in time, lucky to be able to move at all given the amount of beer and cheap wine we'd bought for premiere night. *Go cheap or go home* was our motto, a fight against the obsequious wealth the studio seemed intent on throwing around with their crowd of rent-a-celeb for the night.

"Wait. Go back." Keira pressed pause and worked her way backward and forward through scenes until she was covered in a liberal coating of popcorn. "Bettie's bust *expands*. Episode two. She had work done, and *no one noticed*."

That was a fair call. If it hadn't been talked about then she'd gotten away with it. Until now.

Dean held up his stylus in one hand and his phone in the other. "Proof?"

"See ... the last third of epi one, and the first shot of the next episode. If she had surgery bruises, she covered those really well with makeup." Keira whistled, her eyes wide with admiration.

I giggled, grabbing for another handful of popcorn from the communal bowl.

The room swam around me, and I grabbed Sirius' thigh a little too tight.

“Are you ready to head home?” he murmured into my ear.

I shook my head to say *no*, then his innuendo hit me at full speed, and I nodded.

Once.

Maybe twice.

He huffed a laugh against my cheek. “Come on, then.”

We managed to extract ourselves from the apartment, giving plenty of hugs.

“When will we see you again?” Hattie asked tearily.

“My bank account doesn't allow for too many cross-country flights,” I murmured, and her shoulders fell.

“Come to us whenever you like, or whichever way you want to go,” Sirius said firmly.

Leon sashayed around the tight cluster, giving both of us a giant hug. “Any more sugar daddies where you're from?” He batted bejeweled purple and black falsies.

“Hands off, dude.” I pushed his chest gently, though he acted like I'd flung him back and posed in the doorway, the picture of distress.

“Seriously though, will we see you again?” The small knot in the doorway paused in combined breath.

Sirius squeezed my shoulder. “Any time. Give us a reason. Or just Annie.”

“Us, you antisocial sugar daddy,” I grinned, elbowing him until he doubled over.

Or I thought he doubled over.

Sirius bent down and tossed me over his shoulder.

The ground had never looked so far away as he straightened and opted for ... the stairs.

“Are you being Sirius?” I cried as he shut the door on the cat calls of our *Geekily Yours* cast.

“Only if you keep making bad jokes.”

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## SIRIUS

Annie sober was fun. Annie drunk ... that was a whole new minefield. We'd gotten a holiday apartment for the week of the premiere to share, and although socializing with our cast mates was fun, I liked having somewhere to return to for quiet and to worship her on my own.

She put a decent amount of bruises into my back as I carried her down four flights of stairs and into the waiting car Bettie had insisted on giving us—a limo, no less.

All the better for not waiting over an hour to cross traffic to get across LA. I rapped my knuckles against the driver's seat back, and he obliged in raising the divider.

I had potentially had sex in front of thousands of people on a reality tv show, and I still had no idea how much of our private moments had been caught on camera or audio. But thankfully it hadn't affected my deal with the Secretary to take on a portion of White House security, and a last chance with Annie to form new memories wasn't out of the question.

"Sirius," Annie murmured as I shifted across to her seat.

I caught one knee, spreading her legs as I pushed her gently back into the wax-scented leather seating. She let me, sighing, her knees falling open as I pushed up between her legs to cover her body with mine. "Don't fight me, Stardust," I murmured, "Not unless you really object to this."

"I'm not. I don't. Promise." She shook her head vehemently.

I smiled. "Good."

"Wait. What did I just agree to?"

I laughed softly as I reached under her dress to catch her panties and pull them off. I found her bare. My hands roamed the smooth skin of her ass, squeezing her globes and spreading her lips so I could dive between them.

“Little minx,” I muttered, sluicing my tongue through her folds and teasing her clit. “Scream for the driver, Stardust. Give him a reason to go home and fuck his girl senseless.”

*Like I'll do to you in a moment.*

Her cries drove my arousal higher. I shoved my jeans down, fisting my cock as I stared at her. Dress hiked around her waist, hands over her tits rubbing her nipples through the material, arousal glistening where I'd made her come.

“Fuck me.” She was going to be my wife ... my *life* for the foreseeable future. Every damn night she'd have me, every moment. I'd give her a damn space office at home if it meant she'd work there each day.

I notched myself at her entrance as she reached for me, squeezing her thigh hard enough to leave her skin pink with the imprint of my hand. “I don't want to hurt you,” I murmured, conscious of the eyes that could be in the car.

“I don't care. I want you like we were that night in the forest. Please.”

Her plea undid me. I gripped her hip tight in my hand and fucked her into the leather seat until I could see the starbursts behind her eyelids as she arched beneath me, my thighs slicked with her need.

Growling deep, I swallowed her next scream and took her harder, seeking my own pleasure as she clenched tight around me, her tight little pussy milking my cock until I groaned into her mouth and shuddered as she shifted me from one universe to another.

Then I rolled onto my back and let her show me exactly what stardust felt like when I came down from one high only to be lifted to another beneath the woman who would become my wife soon.

Damn good thing we had another thirty minutes on the drive home.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sirius and Annie have wormed their way into my world and telling their story has been so much fun! As a non-commercial TV watcher, I'm firmly in Sirius' camp of avoiding reality shows, but throwing him in the deep end and setting him up for some geeky fun was too much to resist. The first *Bachelors Abroad* project was a Sirius learning curve too. Not only did I get to fill the book with hidden Easter eggs and obscure geeky references no one else will find and the most cringe worthy dad jokes, I got to play with humor. If you've read my books before you'll know that while quirky, Sofia does not tell jokes. Yes, I am allowed to talk about myself in the third person. But B&TG was a whole new level of taking snark to fun and bright situations and throwing my characters in the proverbial goop. And you know what? I did have a lot of fun working it all through! So here's the people who made it happen because without them, this book would lack more than a little shine.

I've been blessed to be a part of the New Romance Café team for over two years now, and when Andie Wood took on an idea I suggested, it ballooned into the sort of world that gets under your skin. Without Andie, the Weston brothers wouldn't exist (and trust me, they're all going to get their story).

Whitney worked through the story line and all the prolific little plot bunnies I threw across the page in true style. I am grateful for your words and so many comments to make Sirius and Annie emerge from the page.

Jenny, Anna and Shanti and all the team at the Romance Café—you've all been amazing and I'm so glad to be able to chat to all of you throughout the process. Penguin and otter gifs and library memes keep me sane! It's such a relaxed space and I love being included in your worlds.

Miss Faedra Rose allows me to share all the weird and wacky parts of my brain and process and I couldn't have a



better writer bestie. Honestly, my crazy would die without you. Love you babe.

There's one person who backs me in everything, whether I'm pulling my hair out over a scene, attempting to find a quiet spot in the house, evict him from my shared desk or needing tea after earning myself an editing hangover...hubs. Nearly twenty years together, and although I know you'll never read this without me showing you, I appreciate you more than words or pre-dawn cuddles, even if there are a few extra legs or a snoring head between us. Thank you for your amazing ongoing support no matter how mad my ideas are or when I try to get up before sparrow fart to write in the quiet hours. And my kids, who climb me, distract me, talk through all the main points and then ooh and ahh in appropriate awe over each cover. You guys are life. I love you and thank you always.

And to you guys, who read from cover to cover on this fun and heart wrenching journey. I want to say I appreciate you more than words too but the truth is, you guys are the reason I write more words. Knowing that there's one person out there who got to escape into a different place for a short period makes all the difference to me. So, thank you for walking into this world with me. It's good to have company, and it's a (Siriusly) fun place to be.

*Sofia xx*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*USA Today* Bestselling author Sofia Aves writes fast-paced police romances, sizzling military units, steamy cowboys with a Montana backdrop and the occasional cheeky god. Married to a veteran, she often tackles topics of PTSD and reintegration and has a soft spot for all who work in uniform. Sofia writes kidlit for charity and has over one hundred and fifty publications across four not-so-super-secret pen names.

Sofia is a mum of three crazies in a returned veteran household and has an overly large fur baby who thinks she's a teacup puppy. After eighteen years of planning and dreaming, Sofia and her husband will put the finishing touches on their very own alpaca park this year. Sofia lives near Brisbane, Australia.

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