

THE LAWFULLY IN LOVE SERIES

Beautiful

DISTRACTION

D.C. KILE

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*For all the girls who wanted to be lawyers after watching
Legally Blonde.*

Chapter 1

Riley

“**S**hots!” My best friend Candice shouts into my ear, making me wince. It’s karaoke night, and the amateurs have no idea that they don’t need to scream into the microphone.

“We already did shots.” Don’t get me wrong, I’m a fan of shots, but not the night before I start my brand-new job.

“Come on, Riley. Don’t be a party pooper. Pretty soon, you’re going to be stuck in a damn courtroom all day wishing you could be taking shots instead.”

I can’t help but laugh. Candice is a schoolteacher, and they’ve been back in school for a few weeks, so she definitely needed a night to let loose. She’s had way too much fun tonight and will probably regret the hangover she wakes up with, but we’re celebrating, so fuck it. I’m starting my dream job as an associate attorney at one of Georgia’s most prestigious criminal defense firms. Is it my dad’s firm? Yes. But that doesn’t make it any less exciting. If anything, it makes it more so because I get to work side by side with my dad, who just so happens to be one of my favorite people on the planet.

“I have to get up early tomorrow, and I absolutely cannot be late on my first day of work.”

“You think Daddy Stevens is going to fire his precious daughter if she’s late? I highly doubt it.” I roll my eyes because she’s right but also because I hate when she calls my

dad Daddy Stevens. She only calls him that because she knows it bothers me.

“Alright, fine. One more round of shots, and then I *have* to go home.”

She claps her hands. “Yay!”

She leaves me at the table, and I watch her wiggle her way into the wall of people at the bar. She immediately catches the bartender’s eye, and he gives her a cute smile. I can’t see Candice’s face, but I’m sure she’s blushing.

She walks back to the table with two small glasses full of clear liquid, which I assume is tequila, her drink of choice. I grab the glass she hands me and take the lime off the rim.

“To fresh starts,” Candice says, and we clink our glasses together.

“Here goes nothing,” I mumble and tip the glass to my lips, feeling the burn of the cheap tequila slide down my throat. I shove the lime in my mouth, but it doesn’t do much. Closing my eyes at the burn, I shake my head. When I open them again, I see Candice smiling at me. How she can sling back tequila like it’s nothing, I’ll never understand.

“Don’t you feel better now?” she asks.

I do feel a little looser. I smile and nod. “Yeah, I do.”

Over her shoulder, I notice a guy making his way in to talk to a girl at the bar. I can’t really place my finger on it, but he’s giving me bad vibes.

“Hey, Can?”

“Yeah?”

“Come stand on this side of the table and look at this guy.” She does what I ask without question.

“What are we looking at?”

I tip my chin toward the bar. “You see that guy at the bar in the hat talking to that blonde girl?”

“Yeah.”

“My creepy man sense is tingling,” I tell her.

“Ooo, I love your creepy man sense.” She rubs her palms together as we watch the guy and his movements. I’m a person who always follows their instincts, and in all my twenty-seven years, they haven’t let me down. I’ve gotten pretty good at sensing when someone or something just feels *off*. It’s hard to describe, but I get a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach, and my arms start to feel itchy.

The blonde girl turns to say something to her friend next to her, and I watch the hat guy drop something in her drink.

Candice grabs my arm right as a wave of chills runs through my body. “Did you see that?”

“Uh-huh.” Before I even realize what I’m doing, I’m walking toward the bar. I come up behind the girl and tap her shoulder. “Hey, girl! It’s been forever! How are you?”

She looks confused, which makes sense because we’ve never seen each other before, but I bring her into a hug and whisper into her ear, “This guy just put something in your drink.”

I pull back and look at her with wide eyes, hoping she gets my message to play it cool. Thankfully, she smiles, playing along. “It’s so good to see you.”

“It’s been forever. Hey, Candice is at my table. Do you want to come say hey?”

“Oh my gosh, yes.” She grabs her friend’s hand before turning to the guy. “Sorry, I’ve got to go, but it was nice meeting you.” She turns away from the bar, leaving her drink untouched, and I lead both women to our table.

“Holy shit, thank you so much. My heart is beating so fast,” the girl tells me when we get back to Candice.

“Of course. We’ve got to look out for each other.” I smile at her, glad I could help.

“I think I’m ready to call it a night after that.” She turns to her friend, who nods. They thank us again before taking off.

“Gah, you are going to be the best attorney,” Candice tells me as I sling my arm around her shoulders, turning her towards the door.

“Come on. Let’s go home.” She leans her head on my shoulder as we walk out the door and wait for our Uber.

* * *

Well, this is a shit show.

I’m going to be late, and my head is pounding. How did I sleep through my alarm? I don’t even remember hitting the snooze button. I slept like a damn rock, probably from one too many tequila shots, and now I’m frantically jumping out of bed because my cat pounced on my head to alert me that she wants food right now.

I slip into the green pantsuit and white blouse I bought for today. I do my make-up faster than I’ve ever done in my life, finishing with my favorite red lipstick. I use my curling iron to fix a few pieces of my thick brown hair that didn’t quite make it overnight, and I’m done. I slip on my nude heels before heading to the kitchen.

I feed Luna her favorite can of wet food before I swallow some ibuprofen and grab my coffee and a granola bar for the drive. My alarm had been set so I would have enough time to make myself a nice breakfast and even lunch to take to the office, but I guess that’s out of the question now.

Grabbing my purse from the counter, I call out to Luna, “Bye, LuLu. Don’t tear up the place while I’m gone.” She’s too busy chowing down to care that I’m leaving.

I lock up and take the stairs to the ground floor of my apartment building, not bothering to wait for the elevator. Although it might have been faster than me attempting to take the stairs in five-inch heels.

By the time I make it to the office and get to the front reception desk with the familiar gold letters reading Stevens and Jensen, Law Group, it’s only five minutes after eight. I

smile, pretty impressed with myself for only being five minutes late and not *too* hungover, but my smile fades when my dad comes around the corner with his brows raised.

“Sorry, Dad, I slept through my alarm,” I tell him, my shoulders slumping in defeat.

“You sure know how to make an impression on your first day. If I wasn’t your dad, you wouldn’t be off to a good start.” He starts walking toward his office, and I know I’m supposed to follow.

“I know. I was just so excited about today that I couldn’t sleep. And when I finally did fall asleep, it was one of those deep sleeps, you know?” He doesn’t need to know the part about being out late and having a few celebratory drinks with my BFF.

He smirks. “Oh, I know. I remember the days of trying to get you out of bed for school. It’s not an easy task. You’ve never been a morning person.”

I groan. “I know. But I’ll be better. I’ll never be late again. I promise.”

He chuckles. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, baby girl.”

I consider his words. “You’re probably right. How about I’ll do the best I can?”

He rounds his large oak desk in his office before sitting in his leather chair. “That’s all I can ask for.”

There’s a knock on his office door, and I turn to see who it is. God has blessed me today because I’m greeted by the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen. No joke, he looks like he walked right off the pages of a magazine. His dark hair is long enough that I, or uh, someone, could run their fingers through it. His face has sharp angles leading right to his perfect, pouty lips. The white button-down he’s wearing stretches across his broad chest and shoulders. He’s left the top few buttons undone, and it’s tucked in perfectly to navy blue slacks that cling to his thighs.

Once I'm done with my perusal—although I'm not sure anyone could ever be done looking at this man—my eyes travel back up to his face, where his piercing blue eyes are staring right at me.

He smirks, and I look down to the floor and shift a little in my seat, trying to mask the awkwardness. He totally just caught me checking him out, and there's nothing I can do about it.

“Sorry to interrupt,” the Adonis in the doorway announces, his voice deep and low. It almost makes me want to sit him down, hand him a book, and make him read to me. “I've got that case file you emailed about last night.”

He steps into the office and hands Dad a folder of paper. I want to reach out and grab the folder because that was one of my favorite things about law school. I loved reviewing case files. Finding the small details that someone before me might have missed. But I don't go for the file, reminding myself that it's my first day here and not my business... yet.

“Ah, yes. Thanks.” My dad takes the file from him and sets it on his desk. “Kellan, this is Riley, our new associate attorney.” I sit up straight in my chair, throwing on the most professional smile I can muster. Kellan looks at me from my head down to my pointed high heels. I'm dying to wiggle out of his gaze because it's making my whole body hot, which is really awkward and annoying with my dad sitting in the same room. “Go easy on her, alright? She's also my daughter.”

Kellan's eyes shift from my dad back to me. “Welcome to the team,” he says dryly. His words might be meant to be welcoming, but there's no emotion behind them. In fact, the look on his face is now anything but welcoming. It's amazing how quickly his expression went from possibly interested to bored annoyance in the span of two seconds. Who is this guy?

“Thanks,” I reply. He doesn't stick his hand out for me to shake, so I guess we aren't doing that. I sit there with my fingers interlaced in my lap, feeling the clamminess on my palms.

“We’ll catch up in a bit, Kellan.” He dips his chin to my dad in acknowledgment before walking out.

When I’m sure he’s gone, I let out a long breath. “What’s his deal?” I ask, tilting my head to the door that Mr. Stick-up-his-ass just walked out of.

“Oh, Kellan? He’s a senior attorney here. One of the best I have on staff, actually. He’s cutthroat and gets the job done.”

“He seems a little, I don’t know, intense.” Surely, I’m not the only one to notice the glare he’s perfected. It would scare a kid away from a candy store.

“He’s quiet. Works a lot. But he’s a smart guy. You could probably learn a lot from him, baby girl.” I cringe at the nickname Dad has called me for years that I usually love.

“Yeah, alright. Hey, maybe I shouldn’t call you Dad while we’re in the office. You know, it might be weird. And you probably shouldn’t call me baby girl. Especially when other associates are around.”

He considers this for a minute. “You’re probably right. Between the hours of eight and five, we are Dan and Riley.”

“Eight-ish,” I tease.

He chuckles. “But don’t feel like you got this job just because I’m the boss. You worked your ass off and earned your position, ok? Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“I know.” I smile, knowing my dad is proud of me for following in his footsteps. Ever since I was little, I’ve wanted to be just like him. My freshman year of high school, I made a plan to become a criminal defense attorney. I did everything I set out to do. I graduated top of my class in high school, got into my first pick of colleges, studied my ass off for the LSATs and got a killer score, and finally made it to law school, which I loved every minute of. And just recently, I passed the bar and landed this job. My checklist is officially complete.

“Come on. I’ll have Susan show you around and get you set up.” He stands, and I follow.

“Ok, do you want to have lunch together today?”

“Can’t today, ba— um, Riley. I’ve got a lunch meeting with a potential client. Raincheck for tomorrow?”

“Oh, yeah. Totally. Good luck.”

He smiles and hands me off to Susan, who I remember from my interview panel when she introduced herself as the Human Resources manager. I’m pretty sure she’s the only one in that department, if you can even call it a department.

She shows me around the office, most of which I’ve already seen before, but I’m polite and let her tell me where the restrooms and the lunchroom are. We walk over to the only empty cubicle in the entire office. It has my very own gold nameplate on the side that reads *Riley Stevens, Esq.* I want to jump up and down and clap my hands in excitement, but I refrain and make a mental note to take a picture of it later to post on my social media.

My desk is already set up with a laptop and an extra computer monitor, several pens and legal pads, a few stacks of sticky notes, and highlighters. Susan hands me a stack of paperwork to fill out so she can get all my information entered into the systems.

When she’s gone, I look around, taking in the empty cubicle I’m sitting in. I definitely need to buy some stuff to make this place look more *me*. A plant, for sure. I make a short list of things I want to bring in on a sticky note.

Then I take a deep breath, inhaling the scent of paper and coffee that fills the office. I grab a blue pen, focus on the paperwork in front of me, and get started.

Chapter 2

Riley

My hand is cramping, and my stomach is growling by the time I finish all the paperwork Susan gave me. I stand from my chair, lift my arms over my head, and do a little side stretch. Clipping all my papers together, I deliver them to Susan's desk.

I grab my purse and head down the elevator to find some lunch. Dad's office building is located smack in the center of an up-scale outdoor mall. They have everything you could ever want here: all the name-brand clothing shops, the over-priced home goods stores, a cycling studio, a movie theater, and even an electric car store. So when I walk out the lobby doors, people are everywhere, bags in hand, walking to their next destination.

I look around for a minute, trying to get my bearings. I've been here a few times but not enough to have anywhere memorized. I spot a Chipotle across the street, and my stomach growls again, just imagining the burrito bowl I'm about to order. Yes, I'll pay extra for the guac. I look both ways before crossing and then break into a power walk to get to the other side, my hunger getting the better of me.

I'm blasted with the scent of grilled meat and spicy salsa when I step inside. I get in line, looking around the tall man in front of me to see how many people I'm behind. I'm sure my stomach will eat itself soon if I don't get food.

Then I focus back on the man in front of me and freeze. Kellan. Should I say something? Should I pretend I don't recognize him? What's the protocol for situations like this?

I bite the inside of my cheek, thinking about what I should do, but I can't take it anymore. I tap his shoulder and blurt, "I promise I'm not following you." I add a little laugh at the end to make it sound like a joke.

Kellan's head turns slowly, like eerily slowly, before his eyes land on me. His arms are crossed over his chest, just like they were in Dad's office earlier. He doesn't smile, he doesn't say hi, nothing. Suddenly, I think that maybe he doesn't remember me. I mean, he only met me for like a minute. He could've easily forgotten my name.

"Riley. From work," I remind him.

"I know." Okaaaay.

"Dan had a lot of great things to say about you." People love compliments. Surely, this will make him warm up a little.

"You call your father Dan?" A look of disdain crosses his face.

I swallow. He just let the compliment roll right off him. I'm not sure what to do with that. "Well, I thought calling him Dan in a work setting would be more professional."

"Hmm." I can feel the judgment radiating off him.

And because I can't stand awkward silences, I continue to torture both of us. "So what's there to eat around here besides the mecca of all burritos bowls?"

I smile. He doesn't.

"There's a map on that sign out there." He tilts his head to the window at the front of the restaurant.

"Right." I nod.

At this point, he's next in line, so we're both relieved from talking. Not that he was doing much talking. I listen to him order his burrito bowl, and I'm surprised when it's the same thing I order: a chicken burrito bowl with brown rice and black beans, fajita veggies, roasted chili-corn salsa, cheese, and guacamole. I want to make a joke about great minds thinking alike, but he walks toward the register before I get the chance.

I place my order and go to the register next to Kellan. He hands the girl his credit card. She's trying so hard not to stare at him, poor thing.

With a shaking hand, she gives him his card and receipt. He grabs his food and walks off without even saying thank you.

I start to say, "See you back at the office," but I don't get to finish the sentence before he's out the door. I turn back to the girl at the register and sigh. "It sucks when hot men have shitty personalities." She gives me a shy smile, and I tuck a five-dollar bill into the tip jar on the counter.

Unlike Kellan, I don't want to eat my lunch cooped up in the office, so I find an empty table outside and sit. Today is a perfect day to be outside. It's early September, and it's finally starting to cool off a little. Not sweater weather or anything, but I don't feel like I'll have a heat stroke every time I walk outside.

I pull out my phone to respond to a text from Candice checking in on me.

* * *

Candice: How's your first day?

Riley: so far so good!

Candice: made any new friends?

Riley: um, no. To be fair I haven't really met anyone yet, but the one guy I did meet acts like I'm gum on the bottom of his shoe

Candice: how could he not like you? Everyone likes you.

Riley: I don't know. But it's ok. I'm not here to make friends. I'm here to kick ass and take names.

Candice: that's my girl! Call me later

Riley: :)

I scroll through social media while I eat the rest of my lunch, and before I know it, it's time to head back to the office. I'm back at my desk for only a few minutes before there's a knock on the cabinets above my desk. I turn in my chair to see a youngish guy, maybe a year or two older than me, standing there. He's in khaki pants and a white button-down, totally professional but not anywhere as sleek as Kellan. Although I imagine not many people are.

"Hi," I greet him with a smile.

"Hi, Riley. I'm Spencer. I'm an associate attorney here. Dan asked me to show you the ropes and everything. Do you have time now?"

"Of course. I'm kinda just waiting for someone to tell me what to do anyway."

He chuckles, and a small dimple forms on his cheek. "Let's go into one of the conference rooms and get started." I grab my laptop and notepad and follow Spencer into a room with glass walls. It's basically like a giant fishbowl. Anyone who walks by can see everything you're doing. It's awkward, and I remind myself to ask my dad later why on earth he approved of such a terrible design.

"So, did you just finish law school?" Spencer asks while he gets set up in the chair next to me, close enough so I can see his computer screen but not so close that we're touching.

"Yeah, well, I graduated last year, but I just passed the bar. I worked for a small family law firm for a little bit to get some experience."

"That's awesome. I've only been here two years, but there's never been a shortage of work. Dan and Paul keep the clients rolling in."

"Oh, I have no doubt." He doesn't seem to have worked out that Dan is my father and that I've known his partner, Paul Jensen, since I was in grade school, so I don't bring it up. I'd like to start with a clean slate and prove my worth rather than everyone treating me differently because I'm the boss's daughter.

Spencer goes through their internal system and how to find files, order supplies, and reserve conference rooms. All the things you wouldn't think about when starting a new job but are really helpful information to have.

“This is a really great place to work. I think you'll like it here. It's one of the best firms in the state, and you'll get great experience.”

I smile, my heart booming with pride that my dad created such a great place for people to work. I think I'll love it here just as much as Spencer says I will.

After we've gone through everything he can think of, we part ways so he can get back to work, and I can get back to... I don't know, sitting around?

I peek into Dad's office to see that he's back from his meeting.

“Hey, Dan.” It feels weird calling him that, and I'm going to have to stop myself from giggling every time.

“Hey. How's your first day going?” He turns his full attention to me. Something he's always done. No matter how busy he is, Mom and I are always his priority.

“Good. Filled out all my paperwork. Spencer gave me the rundown of our system. Anything else I should be working on?”

He shakes his head. “I think that's about it for today. I'm going to send you a Meeting Maker for our staff meeting tomorrow morning. It's mandatory each week unless you're in court.”

“Ok, got it.”

“We'll get you started on some cases tomorrow. Maybe have you sit in on a few client meetings with some of the senior attorneys. Get you some experience so you feel comfortable hitting the ground running.”

I clasp my fingertips together in excitement. “I can't wait.”

He smiles, and I know he's proud to have me on his team. I hope that I won't let him down. I feel like I can be a good

attorney, no, a great attorney, but this is a hard job. We defend people who may or may not be innocent. It's not our job to prove their innocence, though. Our job is to defend their rights and ensure they get a fair trial. A lot of people forget that and don't understand why we would want to work with the "bad" guys.

"So, go on home and get ready for tomorrow, ok?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and call your mom."

I smile and give him a small wave before I grab my things and head out.

Chapter 3

Kellan

I hate staff meetings.

They're pointless to me. I don't need to hear what anyone else is working on. I don't need and, more importantly, don't want anyone else's opinion on my cases. They're mine for a reason.

But this meeting is mandatory, so if I want to keep my spot as Dan's favorite, I have to attend.

I walk into the largest conference room right when the meeting is supposed to start. Not late, but not a minute early either. Unfortunately, we have a full house today, and every seat is taken except the one by the new girl. I sigh and pull out the leather chair, positioning myself between Ms. Talks Too Much and some other girl I've seen before but don't know her name. I don't really care, either.

"Hi," a perky voice next to me says. I blink slowly before glancing to my left to see Riley's big smile enhanced by blood-red lipstick. She's wearing a yellow shirt that's so bright I can barely look at her. And yesterday she was in a green pantsuit. I'm starting to wonder if this woman owns any normal clothing.

I grunt in response to her greeting. I hope talking to me doesn't become a habit of hers. Most people here know that I like to be left alone. I'm busy. I have one of the biggest caseloads of anyone here at the firm, including Dan and Paul. When I'm not in court or meeting with clients, I need to be

reading case files or strategizing. Small talk with people I don't care about is nowhere on my daily schedule.

"I brought donuts," Riley tells me, smiling towards the center of the table where a few boxes of donuts from a local shop sit. Almost everyone around the table looks to be snacking on one.

"Good for you." To her credit, her smile doesn't fade. She shakes her head slightly.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Let's get this party started. I want to start off by welcoming our latest member of the team. Everyone, meet Riley, our newest associate attorney," Dan announces. He conveniently leaves out the part where she's his daughter.

Riley stands and gives a little wave. Her skirt, which I didn't notice before, is an insane pattern of yellows, blues, and oranges. I've never seen anything like it, and I wonder who on earth would ever make such a thing, let alone buy it. Though, I'd be a fool not to notice how well the ostentatious fabric hugs her hips.

Everyone around the table claps and greets her with "welcome to the team" messages. I do neither.

"I'm so excited to be a part of this group. I'm looking forward to getting to know each and every one of you. There's so much combined experience in this room. I hope over the next few weeks, you'll all share a little tidbit of advice with me for an attorney just starting out."

I look around the table to see if anyone else is annoyed by how fucking happy she is. Surely her cheeks are cramping from the amount of smiling she does. But everyone, and I mean everyone, is smiling at her like she's the shiny new toy they all want to play with.

She sits back down, and I get a whiff of something that smells like lavender. She would smell like something that's supposed to calm you when she looks like a pack of crayons exploded on her outfit and acts like the world is all sunshine and rainbows.

“Alright, folks. A few reminders before we start the open forum. Remember to turn in your expense reports for last month by the end of this week...” Dan drags on about useless things that we all should know by now but still feels the need to remind us about, and Paul congratulates a few of my peers on their cases from the week before.

I glance at Riley’s open notebook to see she’s doodling tiny flowers all over her page with a pink ink pen. The urge to roll my eyes is overwhelming. I didn’t even know they made pink pens. She better get used to blue or black if she’s going to make it in this industry.

The meeting moves to the open forum part, where we all get to talk about what problems we might be encountering with our cases and see if anyone can provide a “fresh perspective.” I never discuss my cases in these meetings, and I never offer advice to other people. Mainly because I don’t want to. If I need a new set of eyes, I go to Dan or Paul directly. I’m not going to one of these jokers because I know they won’t be able to see anything I haven’t already thought about.

I mindlessly watch Riley draw small flowers on her page before she switches to what I *think* is supposed to be a cat. It kind of looks like a hot dog with whiskers.

When the meeting is over, I let everyone else filter out first. Riley stands to gather her things. “Took some good notes there.” I nod to her doodles.

She smiles. “I know I’m no artist.”

“You aren’t in high school anymore. Maybe you should actually try paying attention. Or are you exempt from doing any work since Daddy owns this place?”

Her face falls as I stand and walk past her, grazing her shoulder with my own as I pass her.

I don’t know what possessed me to say that. She hasn’t necessarily done anything to me except get under my skin. I shouldn’t care what she’s doing during meetings. If she doesn’t want to pay attention and listen to her peers so she can

learn, that's on her. Why did I feel compelled to say something?

I'm about halfway to my office when I see a blur of color rush by and stop right in front of me. Riley sticks her hand out, pressing it to my chest to stop me. I look down to where her hand is touching me before slowly making my way back to her face.

"Excuse me. Not that I need to explain myself to you," she starts to say without removing her hand from my chest. "But drawing helps me focus. I listened to every word everyone said and retained it up here." She removes her hand from my chest and points to her head.

"Good for you," I say casually, like her putting her hand on me didn't annoy the shit out of me. I step to my right and walk around her to continue to my office.

Behind me, I hear someone ask, "What was that about?"

Riley responds with a chirpy "Nothing" before walking off.

Brushing off the encounter, I walk into my office and sit in my chair. I look around at the bare walls and shelves. Empty. Just the way I like it. I don't like any distractions when I'm working. I'm here to focus and do a job. The clients depend on me. Sometimes with their lives. I take that responsibility very seriously. That's why I am edging everyone else out to become partner when I've only been here for a few years. Dan and Paul love me because I'm ruthless in the courtroom and bring a lot of attention to their firm. I've always kept my own emotions out of my trials. I make sure my client gets a fair trial and try to offer a sliver of doubt for the jury to believe that maybe the proof the state is presenting isn't completely accurate.

There's a knock at my door. "Hey, kid," Dan says as he walks into my office. Normally I would hate for someone to call me kid. But with Dan, I don't mind. He's taken me under his wing since I started here. He's one of those guys who wanted to be a criminal defense attorney because he wanted to

help people. Not for the money or the attention. He's a good guy and one of the main reasons I love this firm.

Because of that good reputation, we get a lot of work. And I have earned his trust enough that he assigns me the tough cases because he knows I can handle them.

"Hey, Dan. What's up?" I gesture for him to take a seat.

"Oh, just living the dream." He smiles. While most people use that phrase sarcastically, he most likely truly believes he's living the dream. This is what he's always wanted: a family, a successful law firm, and an unbelievable reputation in the court system. "Came to check on your caseload. You feeling heavy?"

I cock one of my eyebrows. "Depends on why you're asking."

He chuckles because he wouldn't expect any other response from me. "Well, we have a possible high-profile case making the switch to our firm. I want to make sure it's in the best hands, and I'm not sure I can handle it right now. I'd like you to take it if you're able."

I nod. I love a challenge. Even if I was completely overloaded, I'd take the case. I'd put in the extra hours and work the weekends. Well, more than I already do. "I can take it. Do you have any details?"

"None. I just got a call from someone's manager today. I think it's a celebrity. She's currently with another firm but doesn't feel like her case is getting the attention it deserves. I'm meeting with them this afternoon and will get as many details as I can."

"Ok, sounds good. I won't let you down."

"I know." He stands, taps his fingers on my desk as a goodbye, and leaves. I lean back, listening to the leather of my chair creak.

I'm so close to being made partner, I can feel it.

Out of nowhere, I hear a squeal and turn to find the source. Riley is in her ridiculous outfit, clapping in front of one of the

other associate attorneys like he just said the most exciting thing in the world. Since he looks about as exciting as a sack of potatoes, I highly doubt whatever he said was squeal-worthy.

Must be nice to have boss's daughter perks and be able to chit-chat around the office all day. Shaking my head, I turn back to my email and open my latest message from our private investigator, River, to see what he's got for me.

Chapter 4

Riley

Surprisingly, I'm at the office early, so I stop at the coffee shop for my favorite cold brew. When I get to the elevator, the button is already lit up, and I find myself standing next to the one and only Mr. Grumpy Pants.

“Good morning, Kellan.” I eye him in his gray suit and black button-down shirt and take a sip of my coffee. It's really unfair how attractive he is, but I wonder if he owns any colored clothes. The black and gray are a stark contrast to my magenta blouse today.

He grunts in acknowledgment, making me want to laugh so bad. Who doesn't say good morning to someone? Maybe he's not a morning person. But at this rate, I don't think he's an afternoon or evening person either.

I don't push him to say anything else, even though I hate the silence in the elevator as we go up the six floors to Stevens and Jensen.

He heads towards his office—all senior attorneys have their own office—while I make my way to my cubicle after dropping my lunch bag in the break room fridge.

I brought some pictures and a small bamboo plant for my desk to make it feel a little more personal. I open my laptop and read the few emails I have before making my way through the quiet office. All I can hear are keyboards clicking and paper shuffling. I find Spencer's desk and tell him good morning before I move to the desk next to his, where a woman

is sitting, dark-rimmed glasses pushed up on her face while she reads through papers.

I knock gently on one of her cabinets before saying, “Hi, I’m Riley. I’m a new associate attorney.”

She looks me over before giving a half smile. “Mila.”

“How long have you worked here, Mila?”

She looks up, thinking. “Um, I guess three years now.”

“That’s awesome. I’d love to pick your brain sometime. Hear any advice you might have for a woman in the industry.”

She looks a little surprised, but she nods. “Yeah, sure. I’m free at lunch today if you are.”

“Perfect! I brought my lunch today so save me a seat in the lunchroom?”

She nods, and I give her a small wave before continuing my walk through the office. I stop at the office right next to Kellan’s. It belongs to a guy named James, who I haven’t officially met yet. His door is ajar, so I knock before pushing it open. He’s a good-looking guy, maybe in his mid-thirties, with dirty blond hair.

I introduce myself, and he seems happy enough to entertain me for a while. He tells me he’s been with the firm for seven years and is currently working on an assault and battery case. He offers to let me sit in on one of his client discussions later this week, which I absolutely take him up on.

“Riley.” I hear my name behind me from the hallway. I whip my head around and see Kellan staring back at me through black-rimmed glasses, and holy shit. Kellan in glasses is *chef’s kiss*.

“Yes?” I ask, raising a brow at him.

“If you’re done being a social butterfly, Dan would like to see us.”

“Oh, sure.” I wonder what Dad needs to talk to both of us about. I turn back to James. “Thank you so much for talking with me. I look forward to working with you.” James smiles

and nods, and I can hear Kellan sigh behind me. I'm taking up valuable seconds of his precious time by thanking someone.

I grab my notebook from my desk before following Kellan into Dad's office. We each take a seat across the desk from him. I glance at Kellan and see his eyes are focused on the picture on Dad's desk. It's one of me, Dad, and my mom at the beach maybe ten years ago. It's one of my favorite pictures, which is probably why Dad has it framed on his desk.

"Ok, good morning," Dad says as he turns away from his computer monitor to face us.

"Good morning. Happy Wednesday," I say when I realize Kellan sure as hell isn't going to say anything.

Dad smiles at me before he starts. "Kellan, we've got that case I talked to you about yesterday. I want you to take the lead." Kellan nods like he wouldn't expect it any other way. "And I want you to work with Riley."

"What?" Kellan and I say in unison before looking at each other, brows furrowed in confusion.

"Dan, you know I work better by myself," Kellan informs my dad.

"And I work better with people who don't perpetually wake up on the wrong side of the bed," I add. Kellan glares at me, and I smirk.

Dad laughs. "Listen, I know. Kellan, I wouldn't normally ask you to work outside of your usual process, but I want you to show Riley the ropes. And Riley, Kellan is one of the best. I have a feeling you'll learn a lot from him. This will be good... for the both of you."

Kellan shifts in his chair beside me, and I can tell he wants to protest again, but he keeps his mouth shut.

Dad continues. "So, have either of you heard of Lana Johnson?"

My eyes light up. "Oh my gosh, yes!" I say before I can stop myself. "My playlists are full of her music. She has songs for every mood, and her voice is so full of emotion. Ugh, I

could listen to her all day long.” I clasp my hands in front of my chest, just thinking about all of my favorite songs she’s written.

“Well, she’s also being accused of murder,” Dad tells me.

I wince and sit back in the chair. “Oh, yeah. I heard about that.” Kellan huffs a laugh next to me, probably sensing my disappointment. I really, *really* wish I could punch him in the shoulder. Nothing hard, just a little “what the fuck” punch.

“Well, she’s your new client. She’s accused of murdering her husband’s lover at their home in Atlanta. There’s some evidence suggesting that she may have done it, but she’s claiming innocence. It’s going to be a challenge. She just dropped her last attorney, so we’re picking it up late in the game. Kellan, get a private investigator lined up ASAP. We only have a few months until the trial.”

“I just don’t believe she could do something like that,” I say, leaning back in my chair.

“Do you know her?” Kellan snaps the question at me.

“Well, no.”

“Then don’t be so naive.”

“I’m not—” I start, but he cuts me off.

“Plus, it doesn’t matter if she did it. We need to make sure we defend her and show any possible doubt. If we present even an inkling of doubt in the jury’s mind, then they can’t, on good faith, convict her beyond a reasonable doubt.”

“Yes, I know. I went to law school too.” I roll my eyes, and Kellan glares his piercing blue eyes at me.

Dad chuckles from his chair. “This is going to be fun.” He seems to be enjoying our discomfort. For the first time in my life, I’m mad at my dad. How could he possibly think it would be a good idea to put someone like me with someone like Kellan? It has disaster written all over it. He speaks so highly of Kellan, but he left out the part where the man has no manners.

Dad hands a file over to Kellan. “Lana knows you’re going to be her lead attorney. She’s expecting to hear from you and soon. This is a high-profile case, so the trial will likely be televised. This could be huge for you, Kellan. I don’t think I need to tell you what I mean.” Kellan nods, understanding what my dad is trying to tell him. “And I’m expecting you to keep Riley with you every step of the way.” Dad gives Kellan a pointed look, and Kellan dips his chin in acknowledgment. “Alright, get to work.”

“Thank you, sir.” Kellan gets up and walks out without even a glance at me. I stand and look at Dad like, “What the fuck is his problem?” He just shakes his head.

I follow Kellan to his office, having to step up my pace to catch up to him. His office is pretty plain, not that I expected much from a guy who only wears black and gray, and there’s a hint of pine and mint in the air. He has a coat hanger in the corner with his suit jacket hanging on it. No pictures or artwork on the walls or his desk. No plants. No personalization, really, other than the coffee cup next to his keyboard. His desk has well-organized piles of papers and files. Nothing looks cluttered. Everything has a place.

The complete opposite of everything in my life. He would probably die if he saw my desk at home, especially when I was in school. Sometimes I wasn’t sure I even had a desk under all my papers.

“So, what’s first?” I ask, sitting down in the chair across from his desk.

“I’ve got to read the file and set up a meeting with Ms. Johnson.”

“Ok, great,” I say excitedly, ready to get into the details of the case. He looks down at the folder Dad handed him and shakes his head. He looks at his laptop, so I reach for the file, assuming he’s about to go through emails instead, but he slaps his hand on the folder and pulls it away from me.

“What is your problem with me?” I blurt out. Might as well clear the air now before we have to work closely with each other for the next two months.

He doesn't even look up. "I don't care enough to have a problem with you."

"Oh, so you're just a complete ass to everyone? Good to know."

"I might be an ass, but I'm damn good at my job, which is why I'm stuck with you on this case."

I lean back in the chair and cross my arms over my chest. "Oh, I'm so sorry you're *stuck* with me. I don't really want to work with you either. But we have to, so you better get used to it."

"Not likely. You're only here because Daddy wants his little princess to succeed."

I purse my lips, trying my best not to lash out at him. "He might be my dad, but I worked hard to get here. I went to law school, got the experience, and passed the bar. I worked just as hard as everyone else to get here. And I grew up watching my dad build this firm. It only makes sense that I would want to be a part of it."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, princess."

"Unbelievable." I sigh, knowing that arguing with a man like Kellan isn't going anywhere good. "I won't get in your way. Just hand me each page as you finish reading it."

He opens the file, and I watch as his eyes move across the page, his thick lashes fluttering slightly beneath his glasses as he reads. "I can feel you staring at me."

I jump at his deep voice and shift my eyes to the wall of windows behind him. After a minute, he silently hands me the page he was reading. "Don't get the pages out of order."

"Yes, sir," I say with a mock salute.

And that's how we spend the rest of the morning. He hands me page after page, and I put them face down in a tidy pile once I finish reading them. Before we break for lunch, I listen as he calls Lana to schedule a meeting in our office tomorrow afternoon.

I excuse myself for lunch, and Kellan looks more than relieved for me to go. Mila has saved me a seat at a small table in the lunchroom, and Spencer sits next to her, eating a sandwich and chips.

I heat my food up and then sit down at their table with a groan.

“Everything ok?” Spencer asks.

“I’m stuck working on a case with Kellan,” I explain.

“Really?” Mila’s eyebrows shoot up.

“Yeah.”

“He usually works by himself. I’ve never actually seen him work with anyone except Dan or Paul.”

“Trust me, he isn’t happy about it.” They laugh, fully understanding. I open my Tupperware and mix my chicken and rice. I need to change the subject and get Kellan out of my head. I don’t like being around people who bring down my mood. “So, tell me. What’s something you wish someone had told you when you first started?”

“Let’s see.” Mila thinks for a minute. “I have a few things. First, I would tell myself not to take everything so personally. I work with a lot of men, both attorneys and clients. They don’t always think before speaking, and they definitely don’t realize how some things sound before it leaves their mouth.” I nod because that makes sense. “And second, I would tell myself not to let people walk all over me. Yeah, you have to pay your dues and do the grunt work. But you’re an attorney. You went to law school, same as every other attorney. Sure, you may lack some professional experience these guys have, but sometimes a fresh perspective is what a case needs.”

Spencer stares at her. “Wow, I was just going to suggest bringing your lunch because eating out every day can get expensive.”

We laugh. “All of that is really great advice. Thank you.”

We eat and chat about everything from law school to their favorite restaurants in the area. They’re fun and easy to talk to,

and I'm glad that not everyone is as standoffish as Kellan.

After lunch, I check my email and see that Dad has sent me another case to work on. It's an easy one and will probably result in a plea bargain, but I'm still excited. It's my first case, all on my own. I take a deep breath before I dive in and get started, a permanent smile plastered on my face. I don't think about Kellan's sour attitude once for the rest of the day.

Chapter 5

Riley

Lana Johnson is just as stunning in real life as I expected her to be, even with a messy bun, hardly any makeup, and an accusation of murder hanging over her head.

I follow Kellan into the conference room he reserved for this meeting. Thankfully, it's not the room with all the windows so people won't be walking by and gawking at us the entire time. I'd imagine that's not a good vibe for a client of Lana's caliber. A square mahogany table with leather seats and a large TV monitor mounted to the wall complete the room.

"Lana. I'm Kellan Winters. It's nice to meet you." I watch Kellan extend his hand to her. She looks him up and down, taking in his black suit and gray shirt. He looks stunning. Any woman would have a hard time not checking him out. But he doesn't back down from her perusal; in fact, I think he stands a little taller because of it.

She stands from her seat and shakes his hand, holding it a little longer than probably necessary.

"Hi, Ms. Johnson. I'm Riley. I'll be assisting Kellan on your case." She breaks her gaze from Kellan and smiles at me. I extend my hand to her, and she shakes it with a strong grip.

"Please, call me Lana." I nod as we all take our seats. Kellan and I sit across the table from Lana.

Kellan wastes no time getting down to business. "Alright, Lana. We've reviewed the case file from your previous attorney. Your husband's lover was found dead in your house with you also on the property."

“I didn’t kill her,” Lana cuts in.

“I’m not saying you did. But you were at the scene; you had the motive.” He shrugs like he might actually think she did it. We haven’t talked about our thoughts yet, though not for lack of trying. After we finished reading the file, I tried to talk to him about it, but he just stared at me until I picked up that he wanted me to leave his office immediately. Seriously, I’ve never met anyone as big of a jerk as he is.

“What motive?” she asks defensively, her brows crinkling together.

“The victim was your husband’s lover. Why wouldn’t you want her dead for intervening in your marriage?” Kellan counters.

“I’d known about her for months before she was killed. He was already served with divorce papers, and I literally didn’t care anymore. My marriage was over. We had a prenup. There was no reason for me to kill her.” She sits back in her chair and crosses her arms over her chest like she’s won the case with her statement. I, for one, am proud of her. I mean, if I found out my husband was cheating on me, I don’t know that I would be so calm and collected.

Kellan replies instantly. “She ruined your marriage, stole your husband.”

Lana rolls her eyes. “Oh, please. If she wanted him that bad, she could’ve had him. I wasn’t going to waste any more time on a man who stepped out on me no matter how much I may have loved him.”

I shift in my seat and bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. I really want to reach out and high-five her for that answer.

Kellan must notice my movements because he gives me a side-eye glare before returning his attention to Lana. “I understand. But the jury might not. It’s too coincidental. We can’t provide an alibi because you were literally at the crime scene.”

“Her body was found outside in the backyard. I was upstairs all day writing music and had headphones on. I couldn’t hear anything.”

“Was anyone with you?”

“No.”

“Exactly.” He throws his pen down on his notepad. “So your word is your alibi. Jurors aren’t going to believe that. It’s not solid enough.”

“So, what? I’m guilty because I was in my own house alone,” she scoffs.

“Of course not. But we’ve got to find something else that proves your innocence or, at the very least, provides reasonable doubt. So walk me through what happened that day.” It’s not lost on me that he says *me* instead of *us*. Ugh.

Kellan and I both have a notepad in front of us to take notes, even though we’ve both read her statement in the case file.

She lets out a deep breath before starting. “Alright. I woke up around eight. Had some coffee on the front porch. My house has a wrap-around porch that I love to sit on in the morning when it’s not too hot. Anyway, I had my coffee and went inside.”

“Was anyone else outside? Did you see or hear anything out of the ordinary?” Kellan interjects.

“No, not that I saw. It’s heavily wooded out front. I can’t even see the street from the porch.”

“Alright.” He makes a note on his notepad.

“So then I went inside. It was probably between eight-thirty and nine at this point. I went upstairs to the room I use as a studio. I had been stuck on this one song, but I finally had a melody in my head that I needed to get out. I tried it on the piano and the guitar before putting it to the lyrics. Once I finally got to a place I semi-liked, I went downstairs to get lunch and a glass of water to help my throat. I walked past the

French doors that open to the backyard and saw a body covered in blood.

“I couldn’t even tell who it was. I screamed, grabbed my phone, and called nine one one. I ran upstairs and locked myself in my studio until the cops got there in case the murderer was still hanging around. I didn’t even find out it was Dax’s lover until a few days later when they could finally identify her.”

“She was bludgeoned to death.”

Lana shrugs. “That’s what I’ve been told. I didn’t study the dead body when I saw it.”

“I assume your coffee maker is in your kitchen?”

“Yes,” she confirms.

“So you didn’t see a body when you made your morning coffee, but you did when you went to have lunch?”

“Correct.”

“And how long was it from coffee to lunchtime?”

“Probably four or five hours. Sometimes when I’m writing, I lose track of time.”

Kellan writes something on his legal pad, and the sound of his pen on paper is the only sound in the otherwise silent room. Lana studies him a moment before saying, “Dan Stevens promised me you’d be the best person to handle my case.”

He looks up, meeting her eyes. He knows she’s challenging him. “I’m going to do my absolute best. As long as you work with us, I believe we can win.”

Lana’s mouth forms a thin line before she nods, and then he nods back, like a silent confirmation passed between them. I just sit here like an awkward third wheel watching the entire interaction. Kellan shows no emotions. I can’t tell if he thinks she did it or not, if he likes or dislikes her, or what his strategy will be. I’ve literally got nothing. It’s taking all my restraint not to draw doodles on my notepad, but I don’t want either of them to think I’m not paying attention.

He finishes whatever he is writing and starts going over all the finer details with her about what will happen in the next few weeks. He tells her not to speak with anyone about this case without *him* present (he doesn't mention me because I'm apparently invisible). He tells her not to leave the state without consulting *him* (still invisible for this). And he tells her to contact *him* at any point if she has questions or concerns. At this point, I rip off my invisibility cloak and interject to tell her she can also contact me if she can't get ahold of Kellan for some reason. This earns me a glare from Mr. Bossy Pants.

Lana thanks us both for our time and shakes our hands again. Her gaze lingers again on Kellan's lean figure, but he ignores it. I'm sure he's used to women throwing themselves at him.

After Lana leaves, I follow Kellan down the hall to his office, practically running to keep up. By the time we get there, I'm almost out of breath and kicking myself for not keeping my cardio routine up since graduating from law school.

"So, what's our plan?" I ask after he sits in his chair and wakes up his laptop without bothering to look at me. I'm starting to wonder if I really am invisible to him. It's hard to ignore me in the yellow blazer I'm wearing today. I picked it specifically because Lana's album *Yellow Roses* is one of my all-time favorites.

"We'll reconvene next week to discuss." That's it? That's all I get?

"Next week?" My voice sounds screechy, and I hate it.

"Contrary to what you might think, princess, I do have other cases I'm working on. I can't drop everything for this one." *Princess?* Who the fuck does this man think he is? But I bite my tongue because I have a feeling arguing with him now isn't going to get me anywhere. I want him to let me in. I want to be an actual partner to him.

"Ok, well, what can I do in the meantime?"

“Try not to fuck anything up?” Oh. My. God. If I knew I wouldn’t get in trouble, I would reach across this desk and slap his pretty little face. Let’s see how attractive he is with a red handprint on his cheek. “The P.I. working on this case needs a few days to review the evidence and gather what he needs to fill any holes that the prosecution may have created. So, don’t worry. Things are happening behind the scenes. We’ll look at the evidence next week.”

I tilt my head up to look at the ceiling. “Fine.” My voice is heavy with disappointment, but I guess this is part of being a lawyer. Not everything is working on crazy murder cases all day long. People need defense attorneys for other things. I know he has other things he’s working on, just like I do.

I just want to dive in. I want to prove that Lana is innocent, and I believe that *we* can do it.

“Good job not fangirling in there,” Kellan says, still without looking at me.

“Oh, shut up. Don’t act like you’re immune. She’s gorgeous and talented.”

“And for all we know, a murderer.”

“She’s not.”

“Whatever you say.” The corner of his mouth tilts up in an almost smile.

This man is infuriating, and I wonder if he gets off on being so difficult.

Chapter 6

Riley

For the rest of the week, I hardly see Kellan. He must be in court during the day because I'm packing to leave when he finally shows up at the office. I've had a few more cases added to my list. Still not a ton, but enough to keep me busy while I wait for the Lana Johnson case to pick up speed.

By Friday, I'm more than ready for a cocktail night with Candice at our favorite bar. She already texted me to tell me about her long week, so I know she's ready for a drink or two or *five*.

After I slip my laptop into my bag, I grab my phone and walk toward the front of the office. I press the down button, and the elevator dings at almost the exact same time. The doors open and out walks Kellan. He looks... tired. His bag is on his shoulder, and his suit jacket is thrown over his bent arm.

He stops when he sees me standing there.

"Do you always start your days at five on Fridays?" I tease.

"I'm not just starting," he scoffs, like I actually thought he was lounging on his couch all day.

"Good day?" I don't bother telling him I was joking.

He nods slightly. "I'd call it a successful day."

"Good!" His eyes roam down my body, and I'm suddenly grateful for the tight black dress pants and sleeveless red blouse I chose this morning. It fits me well, and by the way

Kellan's eyes linger on my breasts a second too long, I'd say he agrees.

Normally, I'd be offended having a man ogle me like this, but having Kellan's eyes on me makes my entire body heat in the best way. I hate when my body betrays me like this. Of course, it would want the man who oozes sex and just so happens to be a no-fun, grumpy pants that wants nothing to do with me.

Luckily for me, my brain usually wins out, so I decide not to jump on top of this man in the middle of the office lobby and instead plan a date with my vibrator later tonight for some self-care.

"Well, have a good weekend." I step onto the elevator just before the doors start to close. By the time I press the button, I look up and see Kellan walking back to his office. I try to not stare at his ass, but I'm unsuccessful, and I only pull away when the doors shut, cutting off my view.

* * *

Candice smiles at the cute bartender as he slides us our tequila sunrises. I look away so they can't see my smile.

"You should totally get his number," I tell her when we've found a table a few feet from the bar.

"Yeah, right. He's way too young for me." She waves me off.

"Oh, please. You're twenty-seven. That's hardly ancient. And he looks at least twenty-one."

"He has a baby face," she counters.

"Yeah, but it's a cute baby face that made you blush not five seconds ago."

"Shut up," Candice groans. "I don't want a younger man to have a fling with. I want someone who's in the same place in life as me. I want a house, a family. Not weekends at the bar."

“Damn, I was just talking about a night of hot sex. I wasn’t asking you to marry the man.” I hold my hands up in defense.

She rolls her eyes. “Anyways, how was your week? Is the new job everything you hoped it would be?”

“No, you first. How was your week?” I take a sip of my drink and wait for her to tell me all about the goings on at her elementary school.

“Ugh, it was fine, I guess. I have some pretty good kids, but I also have some who will not stop talking. It’s nonstop, all day. I can barely even teach my lessons. I had one boy ask me to tell him a story from my childhood because they think I’m older than dirt for some reason.”

I laugh. “What story did you tell him?”

“I told him about the time I went on a cruise, and it was the ship’s first trip. I met the love of my life on the ship, and everything was going so well. We were sneaking around, finding all the fun places to hang out. Life was great. Until the ship crashed into an iceberg, creating a huge hole in the side. We started sinking. Everything was chaos. People were jumping over the edge. There weren’t enough lifeboats. I survived by hanging onto a door, but unfortunately, the love of my life didn’t make it.”

I stare at her. “So, you told them the plot of *Titanic*?”

“Yes. Yes I did.”

We both burst out laughing. “What if they go home and tell their parents?”

“Oh, I hope they do. And I hope their parents don’t rat me out so the kids go on believing this for the rest of their lives.”

“You’re insane.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault they haven’t seen a classic movie.” She shrugs.

“They’re first graders.” I laugh.

“I know,” she chuckles. “And maybe one day, when they finally watch the movie, they’ll think that their first-grade

teacher was on the real *Titanic*.” We sip our drinks. “So, tell me how it is to be a big-time lawyer.”

“I am *not* a big-time lawyer.”

“Maybe not yet, but you’ll get there.”

“Well, I appreciate the confidence. This week was great, actually. I got a few of my own cases to work on and a big one I’m assisting on.”

“Are you still working with the guy who hates everyone?”

“Yep,” I confirm. “He’s been keeping me in the loop on things, thankfully. It’s just, I don’t know. Maybe he doesn’t get my sense of humor or something. I know our job is serious, but I want it to be fun. I don’t want to live my life devoted to a job that isn’t any fun.”

“Yeah, that sounds miserable.”

I nod. “So, I’m going to keep being me. And he can just deal with it.”

“Yeah, fuck that guy.”

My mind wanders to the way he looked at me this afternoon. He *definitely* liked what he saw, even if he would never admit it. And I definitely liked being looked at like that. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen that much heat in a man’s eyes and have it directed at me... Just thinking about it sends a shiver down my spine. “It kinda sucks though because he’s really good-looking.”

“What kind of good-looking are we talking about? On a scale of Justin Timberlake to Henry Cavill?”

I ponder the question for a moment. “I would say he’s like Henry Cavill level.” She gasps. “Yeah, I know. He’s like Henry Cavill with a little Zac Efron. But not *High School Musical* Zac Efron. I’m talking rugged in his thirties Zac Efron.”

“Jesus Christ. How are you not trying to lure him to your bedroom every day?”

I laugh. “Well, the sourpuss mood he’s in helps. I didn’t see him smile once this week. Not even when Dad assigned him the case of a lifetime.”

“Alright. I’ve got to see him. Have you stalked his socials yet?” It immediately occurs to me that I haven’t. I’m a little disappointed in myself. I was the queen of finding people’s socials in college.

“Um, no. I haven’t, actually,” I admit.

“Oh, come on, Riley. You’re letting women everywhere down.”

“I know, I know.” I pull out my phone and search Kellan’s name on every social media app I have, but nothing comes up. It figures that he wouldn’t have any social media presence since he hates talking to people.

“There has to be a picture of him somewhere,” Candice pleads.

“Um, let me check the company website. I think they have pictures of the staff.” I pull up the website and click the link in the menu that says “Meet Our Staff.” I scroll through pictures of my Dad and Paul. I pass by Susan and a few other senior attorneys until I finally see Kellan’s picture with a small blurb about his education and career highlights. “Oh, right here.”

I enlarge the picture before handing her my phone. Her eyes widen. “Wow. You weren’t kidding.” I look over her shoulder at the phone, Kellan’s blue eyes staring back at me. Again, he’s not smiling because I’m pretty sure he doesn’t know how. But his full lips are pressed together, making them look extremely kissable. His dark hair is tousled in a messy *I just got up and ran my fingers through it* kind of way, and his face is angled so you can see his perfect angular jaw.

As we both stare at the picture, a text pops up on my phone from a number not saved.

Unknown: What’s your schedule next week?

Candice obviously reads it since my phone is in her hands. “Is that a guy from one of those dating apps you signed up for?”

I take my phone back and open my messages. “I don’t think so. I haven’t really connected with anyone yet.”

“Why not? You and Landon broke up months ago.”

“I know.” I give her a pointed look. “Just no one has really caught my eye on any of them, and I’ve been busy.”

“You’re never going to get over him unless you move on,” she states matter-of-factly, like she’s not the queen of *not* moving on.

“Not true. I *am* over him. I couldn’t care less what he’s doing.”

“Or who he’s doing?” Yes, my boyfriend of two years broke up with me and immediately started dating a girl I thought was my friend. It’s cliché. And annoying. I was upset when it happened, but as Candice so graciously reminded me, it’s been months. I’m over it. I *am* over it.

“Right,” I confirm. “He can do whatever he wants with Melanie.”

She sighs, shaking her head. “Still, you need to find a new man.”

“Alright, alright.” I shoo her off.

Riley: Who is this?

I put my phone down, thinking it’s probably a wrong number and they won’t text back. But my phone pings almost immediately, and I hate the way my stomach flutters when I see his name.

Unknown: Kellan. We need to meet with Lana’s husband and get his story.

Riley: ex-husband.

I can feel his eyes rolling through the phone.

Kellan: Right. Schedule?

Riley: I’ll make myself available for whenever works best for you.

I figure it's best not to poke the bear. At least he had the decency to reach out and check with me and didn't schedule the meeting when he knew I wouldn't be available. I wouldn't put it past him to do something like that.

Kellan: Ok.

I assume our conversation is done, so I put my phone back down. But then he hits me with a surprise message.

Kellan: Have a good weekend.

Riley: You too :)

I debated not adding the smiley face but did it anyway because that's just who I am.

"Why are you smiling?" Candice asks, breaking me out of my daze.

I shake my head. "No reason."

"I call bullshit."

I shrug and take another sip of my drink. I'm going to keep it to myself that Kellan Winters took the time to find my number and reach out to me. And I'm especially going to keep it to myself how warm and fuzzy it makes me feel inside.

Chapter 7

Kellan

It's three minutes after eight, and I've already looked out my office door twice to see if Riley is at her desk. She isn't. We have a meeting with Lana Johnson's ex-husband in an hour and a half. Granted, Riley doesn't know that, but still, she should be here. I guess being late is a perk of being the boss's daughter.

Finally, at six minutes past eight, Riley saunters in with a fucking plant in her arms. Is that a cactus? I shake my head and stand from my chair. I could be a gentleman and let her settle in first, but I don't want to. I've got a lot on my plate right now, and honestly, it still pisses me off that Dan is making me babysit his daughter for this case. I don't have the time or patience to walk her through everything I do. I need to focus.

And having those chocolate eyes on me while I'm trying to think does *not* help with my focus.

She doesn't notice me as I lean against her cubicle, watching her unpack her stuff. She turns slightly and almost jumps out of her skin when she sees me. I'm laughing on the inside, but on the outside, I stay emotionless, a skill I learned early in my law career.

"Jeez. You scared me," she whisper-shouts, hand over her heart, presumably to calm it. "Are you like a freaking ninja or something?"

"Yes, I moonlight as a ninja for extra cash," I deadpan.

"I wouldn't doubt it."

“Is that a cactus?” I question, even though I already know it is.

“Yep.” She turns away to pick the plant up off her desk. Then she’s facing me again, pushing the cactus into my chest. “It’s for you.”

“For me?” She nods. “Why did you bring me a cactus?”

“It’s prickly, just like you. And I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but your office is pretty bare. So I thought I’d spruce it up with this little guy.” I start to open my mouth to respond, but she stops me. “And it’s a gift for letting me work this case with you.”

“I’m not *letting* you work this case. I didn’t really have a choice.”

She sighs. “Well, I’m still just trying to be nice. I don’t know if you know that word. But part of being nice means you don’t say no when people give you a gift. So, enjoy your new cactus. He doesn’t need much water.”

Shaking my head, I reject her. “I don’t want a cactus, and it better not be on my desk later.”

Surprisingly, she takes my words and tone in stride and just smiles at me.

“Anyway, we have a meeting at nine-thirty this morning with Dax Larson, Lana’s ex-husband, so be ready to leave in forty-five minutes. I’ll drive.”

Her eyes widen, but she quickly regains her composure and attempts to hide her excitement. It doesn’t work very well, but I don’t call her out on it this time.

“Ok, sounds good. I’ll be ready.”

I nod and head back to my office to read through a plea bargain a prosecutor sent over last night. I already know I’m not going to like it and will advise my client not to take it. But I’ve got to read it anyway so I can explain it in case he’s dumb enough to go against counsel.

The next time I look up, Riley is standing in my doorway, her black pencil skirt showing off all her curves. Whoever

made these types of skirts knew what they were doing.

“Ready?” she asks when my eyes finally reach hers. She knows she caught me checking her out.

I nod, not trusting my voice to sound normal. I don’t know what it is about her, but sometimes I can’t stop myself from looking. I know it’s wrong. She’s young, full of life, and too damn happy and naive. And most importantly, my boss’s daughter.

We walk down the hall together without speaking. Dan spots us and stops us before we get to the elevator.

“Where are you two kids headed?” I’m thirty years old and definitely not a *kid*, but I don’t correct him. I never have, and I never will

“Interview with the client’s ex-husband,” I reply, swinging my keys around my index finger. We don’t have time to chat, so I hope he doesn’t ask too many questions. I look over at Riley, who has a huge smile on her face. Her dad notices and lets out a chuckle.

“Alright, good. Give me an update on the case in the next day or two, Winters.”

“Yes, sir.” Great. Another thing to add to my ever-growing to-do list. I’m never going to have a chance to do what I actually need to. The thing I’ve been neglecting for months because my caseload keeps growing.

We make our way to the elevator, and as soon as the doors close, Riley blurts, “I bet you drive a Porsche.”

“Why would you think that?” I ask, not moving my eyes from the button panel.

“I don’t know. You just seem like the type.”

“I’m not sure if I should be offended or not, but you’re going to be disappointed.”

“Really? No Porsche? Is it a different sports car?”

“No.” We get to the parking deck, and I lead her to my black SUV. Nothing special. I even bought it used. But it’s in

good condition and gets me from point A to point B.

“You’re right. I am disappointed. Are you married with kids or something?”

My eyebrow shoots up. “No, why?”

“Why would you have an SUV like this unless you’re toting kids around?” I unlock the doors and slide into the driver’s seat.

I don’t even know why I’m answering her, but I can’t stop the list of reasons that fall out of my mouth. “It’s practical. It was a good price. And I have a lot of files I carry around with me, sometimes in boxes. It’s nice to have a good-sized trunk for that.”

“I guess that makes sense,” she tells me. I huff a laugh. I’m not sure why she thinks something I said wouldn’t make sense.

Once we’re on the road, we go over what we know about Dax Larson, which really isn’t much other than he was dating the victim and married to our client.

The parking lot of the building where Dax asked us to meet is empty except for two other cars—one has a license plate that says “Dax1,” and the other says “Music143.” Both make me want to roll my eyes. I know Riley also sees them because she laughs under her breath.

We walk into a music studio, and Dax is waiting for us at the front desk. I recognize him from the pictures in the file. He’s tall and a little lanky, with cropped blond hair and a fairly large neck tattoo of some sort of bird. I’m a fan of tattoos, but I like to keep mine where they can be easily covered. As much as society tries to pretend it isn’t an issue, people are judgmental. I’ve experienced firsthand that they see a tattoo and instantly think less of you.

Riley and I introduce ourselves, and Dax leads us through a hallway of music booths and into an office. The walls are black, and the lighting is low, but I still notice all the swords hanging on the walls. It seems odd to have swords in a music studio, but maybe I’m missing something.

Riley takes a seat while Dax rounds the desk. I follow suit and pull out a notebook.

“Alright, Mr. Larson. I’m just going to get right to it to save us both some time.” He shoots me an appreciative smile and nods. “You were married to Lana Johnson and also having an affair with Tiffany Walters, correct?”

He does a slow blink before nodding and saying, “Correct.”

“And when did Ms. Johnson find out about the affair?”

“She found out maybe five months before Tiffany’s...” He pauses to swallow, and I’m not sure if it’s genuine or if he’s putting on a show for us. “Before Tiffany’s body was found.”

“And how did Ms. Johnson take the news of the affair?”

“Actually, surprisingly well. She was justifiably mad and had some choice words for me, but she let me know we would be getting divorced. She didn’t want to hear any apologies or that I would be better. She just said, ‘I’ll have divorce papers drawn up,’ and she did. I moved out of the house, and that was that.” Good for Lana.

“And how were you feeling during all of that?”

“Honestly, it fucking sucked. Lana was it for me, you know. I loved her. I still love her. Tiffany was only supposed to be a physical thing because Lana was gone so much. But she got clingy.”

I stop him. “What do you mean by clingy?”

“She started showing up here at the studio while I was working. A few times, she came to the house. That’s how Lana found out. The damn doorbell camera caught Tiffany coming to the house repeatedly.”

“Were you paying Tiffany at all? Was she coming for money?”

“Of course, I paid her. How else do you keep someone’s mouth shut? You’d think she would’ve backed off when I asked her to since I was basically paying all her bills, but she went and caught feelings and shit. Made things difficult.” He

leans back in his chair, relaxing a little more. It's good when they relax around us. Sometimes they get loose lips and end up telling us something we need.

I nod, acting like I understand, even though I think this guy is a giant tool who thinks he's God's gift to women. "So, after you got the divorce papers, did you keep things going with Tiffany?"

"Well, yeah. There was no reason not to. She isn't, or, uh, wasn't, a bad person. She was good company and great in the sack. Willing to do anything." He smiles and winks at me like I'm going to agree, but I keep my face stoic.

Riley clears her throat, and Dax looks at her.

"Uh, right. Sorry. So anyway, I moved out. I've been living with my business partner, Shawn."

"He owns the studio with you?"

"Yeah. Tiffany knew I was living there. I mean, she'd been there a few nights a week since I moved in. I don't know why she went to Lana's that day."

"Is there any reason Tiffany would've been mad at Lana? Was Lana trying to get you back or anything?"

A look of sadness crosses his eyes. "No. She wasn't trying to get me back. I tried a few times to get her back, though. To apologize. Make things right. I even sent flowers." He says this like flowers would be enough for someone to forgive months and months of cheating. I've never even been in a serious relationship, and I know that wouldn't work, especially for a woman like Lana.

"That's unfortunate," Riley says dryly. It's the first thing she's said since we walked in, and of course, it makes me want to fucking laugh.

"So," I continue. "You have no idea why Tiffany was at your old residence that day? No reason that Ms. Johnson would have called her there?"

He thinks for a minute. "No, not that I can think of."

The office door creaks open, and a man pops his head in. His eyes go wide when he sees Riley and me. “Oh, sorry. Didn’t know you were busy.” He quickly shuts the door.

“Who was that?” Riley asks before I do.

“My business partner, Shawn. He’s not good with people. He handles most of the business side of things. Money and all that.”

“And he’s your new roommate?”

“Yeah, for now. I’m going to get my own place soon. I guess I was just kinda holding out hope that Lana’d come to her senses and take me back, but the papers have been signed now.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine she’d want to take you back after she’s been accused of murdering your lover,” Riley snaps. Dax looks at her, seemingly shocked that she would say that to him.

I clear my throat, getting her attention. When she looks at me, I raise my eyebrows and give her a slight head shake. She exhales and sits up straighter in her chair.

“Where were you the morning of the murder?” I ask, pen ready to write this down in my notebook to cross-check it with the files.

“I was at brunch with Jessie Jones.”

“And she would vouch for you?” I don’t know much about pop culture, but I’ve heard the name Jessie Jones before. She’s a singer... I think.

“I’d hope so. But even if she didn’t, the restaurant was full that day. Surely someone would recognize me. I made a reservation. You can check it.”

I make note of the restaurant name and ask a few more questions, none of which give us any more information than we had, so we wrap up the interview. “Thanks for your time today, Mr. Larson.” I stand shaking his hand.

“Yeah, of course. I’ll help in any way I can if it helps Lana and gets justice for Tiffany.” I nod and notice Riley doesn’t

bother thanking him or shaking his hand. Instead, she goes over to the wall of swords.

“What are these for?” she questions.

“Uh, they’re more Shawn’s than mine. He kind of collects them.” Riley takes a step closer to one particular sword. I recognize it from a few movies I’ve seen, but I’m not sure what it’s called. It’s not quite centered on the sword mount, which would drive me insane if I had to look at it every day, and it looks bigger than most of the others, heavier at least. “I let him put them up in here so we could keep them out of the studio booths. Compromise and all that. It’s not a good idea to put weapons by a bunch of musicians who might be drinking or... doing other things.”

Riley and I both nod, knowing exactly what he’s saying without him actually saying it.

We follow Dax out of the studio, silently get back into my car, and pull away.

After a few quiet miles, I say, “You have to learn to control your emotions when interviewing people like that.”

She sighs and growls a little at the end. “I know. I know. I’m disappointed in myself.” She turns her body toward me in the seat. “But that guy was such an ass. *Oh, I sent her flowers. I can’t believe she didn’t take me back.* Gag me.” She scoffs.

“Trust me, I didn’t like that guy either.”

“Well, I couldn’t tell.”

“Exactly. Because no matter how much of an ass he is, we might need him on our side in the future.”

She runs her fingers down her face. “I know. *I know.*”

“I was a hothead when I first started, too,” I say before I can stop myself. I don’t know why I’m telling her this.

“I cannot picture that at all.” She laughs.

“Oh, yeah. It was bad. One of my first cases, I had to be escorted out of the room. I was fairly certain my client did what he was being charged with, and he was acting like it was

no big deal. Like I could get him out of it if I just called the judge. I got right up in his face, yelling at him.”

Riley throws her head back and laughs. My lips twitch, wanting to smile but stopping myself.

“But I felt like shit afterward and contemplated whether or not I was in the right field.”

“And you decided you were?” she questions.

I swallow, not wanting to give her the real reason I knew I needed to stay. “Yeah. I wanted this job. And I’d worked hard for it. So I started practicing closing off my emotions. I would bite the inside of my cheek or pull at one of my arm hairs if I felt like I was getting too angry. It would help me compartmentalize and shove those thoughts to the side.”

“And look at you now. Zero emotions.” She sits back in the seat, but she’s smiling now.

“I have emotions.”

She laughs. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“I do,” I confirm. “I just mask them well. It’s easier for me that way, especially with this job.” I don’t know why it suddenly bothers me that she thinks I don’t have feelings. Like I’m some cold-hearted monster. I’ve been called out for it before, and it never bothered me. But now, I feel the need to defend myself. And I don’t like how that sits with me.

“You are a master of your trade.” Her smile is smug, like she’s proud of herself for that comment.

“Mm-hmm.”

She sighs and stares out the window as the city passes. “I still just can’t believe someone like Lana Johnson married a tool like Dax Larson.”

“I know. But the heart wants what it wants, I guess.”

Riley whips her head to me, and her hand comes up to her heart. “Kellan Winters. Are you a secret romantic?”

I scoff. “Absolutely not.”

She shakes her head. “I’m going to figure you out one day.”

“Not likely.”

She sighs and stares out the window again as we fall into a comfortable silence. It irritates the fuck out of me that I actually don’t mind her being here.

Chapter 8

Riley

After our interview with major asswipe Dax Larson, things cooled down with the case while we waited for the private investigator to find something we didn't already have in our case file.

I worked on my own cases and shadowed a few other attorneys to court or client interviews. Mila, Spencer, and I had lunch together on the days we were actually in the office. At the very least, we conversed around the coffee pot to catch up.

Kellan has been in and out the last few days, so I've had no time to talk to him. We didn't even really unload the Dax interview because I was still in disbelief that someone as cool as Lana would marry someone like *that*.

But finally, on Thursday afternoon, four whole days since our interview, Kellan texts me.

Kellan: PI sent me his prelim findings. Do you have time to go through them this afternoon? I'm almost back to the office.

Riley: Yes!

He doesn't text back, not that I expect him to, but a simple "k" would've sufficed. When he walks out of the elevator doors a few minutes later, everyone around me shifts to look at him. He's hard not to notice with his intimidating presence and fierce features. His suit is crisp, even though he's probably been in court all day. His lips are slightly parted, making them look perfectly kissable. But his eyes are swirling with

something I can't put my finger on, and it makes him look alive for the first time since I met him. He looks like he could fulfill all of my desires, and damn if I wouldn't be willing to let him.

His eyes find mine, and I straighten in my chair, forcing an awkward smile.

"You ready?" he asks as he passes by my desk without stopping to hear my reply.

"Y-yes," I stutter, jumping from my chair and grabbing my laptop, notepad, pen, phone, and water. For some reason, I think grabbing everything on my desk is a good idea and realize it's not when I almost drop my water as I power walk to Kellan's office.

The cactus I put on his desk is still exactly where I put it: close to the corner, out of his way, and in direct sunlight from his office windows.

"So, what did he find?" I ask while Kellan gets settled.

"I don't know. I haven't opened the file yet. I was waiting until we could do it together." I suck in a breath. He waited for me? He probably feels like he has to or I'll tell my dad, which I would never do. But I'm going to take it to mean that he's warming up to me, just a little.

He slides his glasses on and forwards me the email from the PI so we can read it on our own. I'm glad for that courtesy because I would probably drool on him if I had to be close enough to read over his shoulder.

We both finish reading at about the same time, so we sit back in our chairs and stare at our screens while we process everything.

"Ok, so still no murder weapon," he says first. He links his fingers together in front of him. "I was really hoping we would get that."

"But there is a weird indentation on the victim's face on the autopsy. Like whatever the killer used to hit her had some sort of design." I scroll back to the picture even though I've already spent way too much time staring at this woman's

pulverized face. It's probably going to haunt me every time I close my eyes.

He scrolls back up to the picture on his screen. He moves his face closer to get a better look before agreeing, "Yeah, you're right." Hell yeah, I'm right. And while I don't need that validation, it feels good hearing it from him. "Nothing in Tiffany's phone record was out of the ordinary. A few calls and texts from Dax. A few from her mother. She made an outgoing call to her employer the afternoon before her murder."

"No odd charges from her bank account besides the ride-share app she used to get to Lana's house that day," I add.

He rubs at the stubble from his five o'clock shadow. "It's weird that the doorbell camera was off that day. That doesn't look good for Lana. The jury might think she turned it off so there wouldn't be evidence. And the other cameras around the house don't show anything. Either someone knew how to avoid them, or they got really lucky."

"Why would she call the police when she found the body if she's the one who did it?"

He shrugs. "People have done stranger things."

We go back and forth about everything we know up to this point. We talk things out, and he seems genuinely interested in my opinions, which is a surprise. I know how much he prefers working alone, so the fact that he's entertaining me feels important.

"Do you want to get the whiteboard out and start working out connections?" Kellan asks after it feels like we've gone through everything.

"Um, is that a joke?" I raise both eyebrows at him. "Absolutely, I do. This is the moment I've been waiting for."

I see a smile tug at his lips, but he quickly masks it. And as if on cue, my stomach screams at me, begging for food. Kellan hears it and pops a brow, looking at the clock on his laptop.

"Oh, shit. I didn't realize it was so late. We can do this another day." He starts gathering the papers on his desk.

“No, no. We were on a roll.” I stick my bottom lip out. I’ve actually been having fun tonight.

“Sounds like your stomach needs a roll,” he quips.

I almost choke on my spit. “Did you... did you just make a joke?” I ask in disbelief. He rolls his eyes in response. “I can go grab food, and we can get back to it.”

“Alright.”

I stand. “Do you want anything?”

He looks out the window at the setting sun. “I’ll walk with you.” I’m surprised but don’t question him.

We walk to the elevator, and I notice we’re the only people in the office. While we wait for the elevator, Kellan starts rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt. I try not to stare, I really do, but I can’t stop myself. His forearms have no business being so hot, but I shouldn’t be surprised when the rest of him looks like a damn god.

The ride to the lobby is quiet, as is the walk to the burger place a few doors down. Kellan walks with his hands in his pockets, and I try to look anywhere else but at him. We get in line to order food.

“Have you ever been here?” I ask when I see him studying the menu.

“No.”

“Of course you haven’t,” I mumble.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“This place is too fun for you.”

“Hey, I can be fun.”

I smile at him. “Yeah, I’ll believe it when I see it. Anyway, they have a really good pimento cheeseburger, and the bacon jam burger is also good.” He nods at my suggestions.

We order separately and stand by the wall to wait. Kellan pulls out his phone, probably checking his email since I know he doesn’t have any social media.

I glance toward the door, and my heart nearly stops.

“Oh, fuck me,” I whisper.

Kellan looks up, confused. “What’s wrong?”

I turn awkwardly toward the wall and close my eyes, trying to figure out how I’m going to play this.

“Are you alright?” Kellan tries again. It sounds like he’s uncomfortable even asking that question.

I look at him and see the two people who just walked in point at me. “Shit. Ok, can you just go along with what’s about to happen?”

“What?” His brows are furrowed as he looks at me. He has a right to be confused because I’m not making any sense. My thoughts are jumbled, my palms are sweating, and I wish I had picked any other restaurant besides this one.

“If you have a shred of decency in you, please just go along with what I’m about to say. I’ll owe you big time. Whatever you want,” I beg, not even caring that he might ask for something impossible.

He doesn’t have time to answer because someone says, “Riley?”

I look up to see my ex-boyfriend in front of me, hand-in-hand with the woman he left me for. The woman I thought was my friend. I hold my head a little higher and slap a smile on. “Landon, hi.” I glance at his girlfriend. She at least has the decency to look a little uncomfortable. We haven’t talked since the day I saw them kissing. “Melanie, how are you guys?”

“We’re good,” Landon answers, and Melanie pulls him a little closer to her. Like I might reach out to steal him or something. She should know I absolutely do not want him anymore, nor will I ever again. “Haven’t seen you in a while. Everything good?”

“Oh, yeah. Just busy. New job and new boyfriend.”

“New boyfriend?” Landon questions, and his eyes move to Kellan for the first time.

“Yeah, sorry. How rude of me. This is my boyfriend, Kellan.” I link my arm through Kellan’s and feel him stiffen next to me. Landon gives Kellan a nod, and Kellan returns the gesture.

“I didn’t know you were dating anyone,” Melanie says, seeming to relax now that she knows I’m not trying to get Landon back.

“Oh, well, we haven’t been together that long. We both like our privacy. Isn’t that right, babe?” I look up at Kellan and find his eyes boring into me. I think he might be mad, but it’s hard to tell because he always has the same expression.

“That’s right,” he confirms, and I let out the breath I didn’t realize I was holding. He’s going along with this whole absurd thing. I smile up at him before turning my attention back to Landon, the man I wasted two years of my life on. Landon smiles, but I know him well enough to know it’s fake. As if I should be wallowing in the loss of our relationship and my moving on is a surprise. And judging by the look on his face, not a good surprise.

“Well, great,” Melanie says. “We should do a double date.” She looks to Landon, who is even more uncomfortable now. “Oh, we could ask Lisa and Preston to come too. It’ll be like a law school reunion.”

“Oh, um, I don’t know,” I stutter out, looking to Landon and then Kellan for help.

“Oh, come on.” Melanie reaches out to playfully hit my hand. “It’ll be fun. We all haven’t been together in months.” Yeah, since Landon and I broke up, and she swooped in to comfort him.

“Yeah, Riles, it might be fun getting the old crew together.” I want to throw up hearing my old nickname. I don’t know what to do. They’re both waiting for me to answer, and I don’t know what to say.

I glance up at Kellan and find him staring at me, waiting for an answer. He must see something in my eyes because he puts his arm around my shoulder, pulling me into his side. I’m

instantly overtaken by the scent of pine and mint that make my knees weak.

“We’ll be there,” he says without taking his eyes off mine.

“We will?” I ask.

“Yeah, remember we were talking about getting together with your friends the other night? You fell asleep on my chest, so you probably don’t remember. But I told you we should set something up because I want to meet your friends.”

I blush at the mental image of me laying on his bare chest in his bed. I wonder what his bed looks like. I shake my head. That’s a question for another time. Right now, I’ve got to focus on the task at hand.

“Oh, right. Silly me,” I say with a laugh. “I was tired that night.”

“Oh, good.” Melanie claps her hands. “I’ll plan it out. We’re busy this weekend, but how about the weekend after?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” It doesn’t actually sound good. It sounds terrible, but it physically pains me to disappoint people, and she looks so excited.

Thankfully, the guy at the counter calls our order numbers. Kellan releases me from his hold to grab our bags.

“We’ve got to go, but it was good to see you guys,” I tell them as I follow Kellan out the door.

“Yes. Looking forward to our dinner!” Melanie calls out. I nod again because I don’t trust myself to not tell them how much I am *not* looking forward to it.

Outside on the sidewalk, I feel like I can finally breathe. I start to walk back to the office, but Kellan reaches out his hand to stop me. I look at his long fingers wrapped around my wrist.

“Um, are you going to explain that little shit show?”

Chapter 9

Kellan

She groans, and the sound instantly shoots to my dick, which confuses the hell out of me. I shouldn't be feeling anything like that with her.

“That was my ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend,” she explains.

“Yeah, I got that much. Do you want to win the ex back or something?” I grind my teeth together. Riley is way better than that guy. I don't know why I care who her ex is or if she wants to get back with him.

“Oh, god, no.” She shakes her head. “No, that ship has sailed. I've just been so busy studying for the bar exam and now this job, I haven't had time to try to date or anything. I set up a profile on some dating websites, but I haven't even logged back on to check for matches or whatever.”

I nod, the thought of her on dating apps making me suddenly nauseous. Hasn't she seen all the women who have gone missing or killed by a random man they met on a dating app? But it's not my job to lecture her.

“So, looks like we're going to dinner,” I tell her.

She tilts her head up to the sky. “Oh, no. Don't worry; I'll find a way to get out of it.”

“I'll go.”

She stops walking and whips her head in my direction. “You'll what?”

I mentally run through my schedule, making sure I don't have anything that weekend. But even if I had something, I'd reschedule. "I'll go. Just let me know the details." I start walking towards the office again.

"You do realize you'll have to pretend to be my boyfriend the whole time." She jogs to catch up to me.

"Mm-hmm."

"So, you'll have to pretend you actually like me." Her eyebrows raise like she can't fathom me actually being nice. The truth is, she's not terrible to be around. Sure, I'd rather not have to hang out with anyone, but if Dan is going to force me to work with someone, I don't mind that it's her. Some of the stuff that comes out of her mouth is ridiculous enough that I find it funny.

"Yes, I know what being a boyfriend entails."

She walks beside me, silent for a minute. "You're sure about this? You aren't going to bail on me last minute as some weird joke?"

I chuckle. "Riley, we work together. If I bailed on you and pissed you off, it would be awkward in the office. Not to mention your dad would probably add me to his shit list, which is not a place I want to be."

"Is that why you're doing this? Because of my Dad?"

"No, in fact, I'd rather not tell him."

She nods. "Agreed. He wasn't a big fan of Landon. Especially at the end." Yeah, I can see why.

"So, we're done talking about this, then?" I ask.

"Yeah," she answers quietly. I can see her mind working through everything that just happened.

We get back to my office and start eating. Rather than discussing the case, I push for more details about her ex.

"So, why did you guys break up?"

"Well, I thought we broke up because we were growing apart, but it turns out we broke up because he was growing

closer to Melanie.”

“Was Melanie your friend?”

“Yeah. We weren’t besties or anything, but she was part of our little group. I never thought of her as a threat, but I guess sometimes it’s the people you least expect that hurt you.”

She pops a french fry into her mouth. She’s so carefree, so lighthearted. Something I’m definitely not used to in this industry. That novelty might explain why I volunteered to go on a pretend group date with someone I barely know. I feel a magnetic pull towards her that I don’t understand.

She’s gorgeous, obviously. I noticed her the second she walked through the elevator doors on her first day. From her long brown hair and sparkling eyes to the way her hips moved as she walked. I even noticed the bright purple polish on her toenails. But as soon as Dan mentioned she was his daughter, I froze. I cut off all my thoughts. She’s off-limits. Especially if I want to make partner one day. It’s not a good look to be banging the boss’s daughter.

But in the burger place, when she brought me into her imaginary storyline, when she touched me, I lost all common sense. All I could think about was how her body felt so close to mine and how she smelled like vanilla and jasmine. She looked at me with pleading eyes, and I figured, sure, I could spend a night with her trying to make her ex-boyfriend jealous.

He looked like a tool anyway. Riley is definitely better off without him. And his new girlfriend seemed faker than those goddamn reality shows on TV these days. I will never understand how he could go from Riley to her.

I’ll go on this date with her, and then we can go back to just being platonic coworkers. That’s all. Dan and Paul never have to know.

I look up at Riley. She’s focused on getting every french fry into her mouth. The sight alone would cause anyone to laugh, so I clear my throat, masking my laugh, and ask, “Are you ready to strategize?”

She jumps up, almost knocking her Styrofoam container over. “Yes! I’ll get the whiteboard.”

She walks to the supply closet and rolls a giant whiteboard into the room. She hands me a marker, and we get to work.

We write names, connections, and alibis—everything we know. Then we stand back and look at it, trying to work out a strategy for Lana. This is usually my strong suit. I love putting the pieces together and tearing down the prosecution’s case. But tonight, it feels like my brain has stopped working.

I’m pretty sure it has something to do with the brunette leaning against my desk. Her back is arched, pushing her tits out even more. It seems like all my blood is rushing to my dick, and I know I’m not going to be able to get anything productive done tonight.

I’m too tired.

And too fucking horny.

It’s dangerous for me to be around her any longer tonight. “I think we should call it a night,” I say, ripping my eyes from her body just in time for her to look over at me.

She sighs, moving her eyes back to the board. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

But she doesn’t move. “We have plenty of time to figure this out, alright? The trial isn’t for a few weeks. We’ll get it. And we’ll win.” I’m not sure why I feel the need to give her this little motivational speech, but the smile she gives me is worth it.

“I know. And I’m working with the best.” She winks at me before pushing off my desk and gathering her things.

I grab my laptop and slide it into my bag. We walk out of the building together, and I wait by my car until I know Riley has made it to hers. My mother may have disowned me, but she did teach me some manners.

When I got the job at Stevens and Jensen, I moved out of my old place and found a new apartment only minutes from the office. There was no point in me staying where I was. I had

no ties to anyone there, and the commute would've been a beast. It just made sense to move.

And right now, I'm grateful it's so close. I'm exhausted. I've let my work become my entire life, and today, I realized that maybe that's not the best idea.

Unlocking my door, I look around my empty apartment. There's nothing here. I have a couch, a TV, and a desk in the living room. Everything is in its place. No pictures. Nothing personal because I didn't take anything when I left home. I don't even want to think about what Riley would do to this place if she only bought me a cactus because my office was empty. I should've thrown the little thing away, but when I was holding it over the trash can, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

I drop my laptop bag by the door with my shoes. My clothes come off one piece at a time, and I lay them on my bed. I step into the steaming shower and lean my head back against the wall.

Fucking Dan.

Why'd he have to bring his daughter onto the team?

Why'd he have to assign her to this case?

Why'd she have to be so goddamn pretty and fun?

I don't have any answers to my questions as my hand wraps around my cock, and my wrist starts pumping faster and harder until I'm coming with images of Riley laying naked across my desk.

Fuck me.

* * *

The next Monday, at precisely six at night, my phone rings. Anytime I get a call this late, I know who it is. Sometimes the time changes, but it's almost always on Mondays.

'Department of Corrections' fills the screen, and I answer without hesitation.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Kel.”

I sigh in relief at the sound of my brother’s voice. Just like I do every time I hear from him. “How are you?”

He chuckles. “Same as I’ve been every day for the past ten years.” I squeeze my eyes shut. Ten years. He’s been stuck in there for ten years. “What’s new with you? Please give me more than work bullshit. I’m dying in here. I need to live vicariously through you.”

I wrack my brain for something besides work to talk to him about. “Uh, well, I have a fake date this weekend.”

“What the fuck is a fake date, and why can’t you go on a real date, man? Just because I can’t get laid doesn’t mean you shouldn’t.”

I roll my eyes even though he can’t see me. Yes, it’s been a while since I’ve gone on a date or been with a woman. I can’t seem to find the time to put in any effort. The small talk and getting-to-know-you stuff are too much for me. I want to get to the reason we’re both there anyway, but it’s hard to do that without sounding like a complete asshole.

“Shut up, Kai.” It’s the best response I can give my older brother. I hear him chuckle. “So, there’s this new girl at work, and Dan has her working with me on a big case. We went to grab food the other night since we were working late, and her ex-boyfriend walked in with his new girlfriend. My coworker, Riley, pretended that I was her boyfriend, and we somehow got roped into a group date this weekend with friends of hers from college.”

Kai bursts into laughter. “This is the best thing I’ve ever heard. And you actually agreed to it?”

I did because it was like she touched me, and I lost all my common sense. Just having her hand on my arm was too intense for me. My body lit up so much that I couldn’t help but agree to go on a fucking group date with a bunch of people I didn’t know. “Yeah, I did.”

“Do you at least like the girl?”

I consider the question. A week ago, I would've said not really. She's loud and out there and so damn happy all the time. But I actually don't mind being around her. Especially when she looks at me with those big brown eyes. "I mean, she's not terrible to look at. We just don't have much in common."

"Why do you say that?"

"She bought me a cactus for my office because it goes with my prickly personality."

He laughs again, and it feels good to hear his laugh. He always tries to keep a good attitude during our phone calls, which I'm sure he does so I don't worry about him, but he never laughs. I'm glad I can give him this even if it is at my own expense.

"Wow, this girl sounds amazing. I can't wait to hear how the date goes. What does she look like?"

"You want me to describe her?"

"Yes, Kel. I haven't seen a woman in the flesh in ten years except for a handful of female guards, but even they are few and far between."

"Alright." I rub my hand down my face, trying to get a good mental picture of Riley. It isn't hard considering I've been picturing her almost every night after I get in bed. "She's pretty tall with long legs. She's got brown hair that goes about halfway down her back. She curls it most days. She's got brown eyes and long lashes. She's got curves in all the right places."

"Damn, dude. I wish I could meet her, see you guys together.

"Yeah, I, well, yeah, she's pretty, alright?"

"Does she look like a celebrity or anything? I'm trying to get a mental image."

"I don't know, man. She just looks like Riley." I hear his soft laughter again at my explanation.

“Ok, Kel. I want a full rundown next week so make sure you try to remember the entire date.”

“Alright, alright.”

“My time is almost up, so I gotta run. We’ll talk next week?”

“Yeah. Take care of yourself.”

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you too.” Then he hangs up the phone. I sink into my couch and stare at the ceiling. God, I miss him so much. He was my best friend. He still is, really. And it’s so hard not to see him every damn day or be able to call or text him when I want to talk. I have to wait for him to call me, and if he doesn’t have enough credits, I have to send him money.

I stand from the couch and walk over to the box I have stored in the corner of the room. I take the lid off and start going through Kai’s case notes like I have thousands of times before to find something—anything—I might have missed. The one thing I know that *has* to be there, but I haven’t been able to find yet.

Chapter 10

Riley

“I still can’t believe this is happening,” Candice says for the tenth time since she answered the phone.

“I know.” I hold up another dress to decide if this is the one I’ll be wearing tonight or not. It’s been two weeks since Kellan signed us up for this triple date night, and the weekend is finally upon us. I’ve given him multiple opportunities to change his mind and come up with elaborate excuses to get out of it, but he hasn’t taken the bait. It’s almost like he actually *wants* to go.

“You get to spend the evening with the hottest man I’ve ever seen and make your shithead ex-boyfriend jealous,” she says with a sigh.

“Oh, please. I’m not trying to make him jealous.”

“Bullshit.” One thing about Candice is she will always call me on my lies. I guess that comes with the territory when you’ve known someone since you were both in diapers.

“Ok, fine. I hope he’s a little jealous.” I smile. I don’t want Landon back, but it wouldn’t hurt if he realized what he was missing out on.

“Um, everyone in the state of Georgia is going to be jealous of you spending any amount of time with that man. I’m just mad I won’t be there to see it all play out.”

“Ugh, I know. I wish you were coming.” I lay down on my bed and stare up at the ceiling.

“Me too. But unfortunately for me, I don’t have anyone to fake date me. Plus, a table full of lawyers? No thanks. ”

I laugh. “Hey, lawyers are fun.”

“Yeah, I’m picturing a bunch of nerds hanging out getting wine drunk.”

“Hey!” I call out defensively. “I’m not a nerd.”

“You’re a unicorn, though. You’re hot, fun, and freaking smart, so you don’t count,” she states matter-of-factly.

“I’ve always liked unicorns.”

“Now you sound like one of my students.” We laugh and talk for a little while longer before I have to hang up and get dressed.

I’m kind of dreading having to be around Landon and Melanie tonight, but I am excited to see Lisa and Preston, who I haven’t seen in months. At the very least, I’ll be getting a good dinner because the place Melanie picked is one of the best Italian places in the city.

Kellan offered to pick me up and, keeping on-brand for himself, is exactly on time. I open the door, still wearing my robe.

“Hey. I can’t decide which dress to wear. Can you help me pick?” I ask as soon as I let him in.

He looks me up and down, taking in my silk robe. His eyes linger a little longer on my bare legs.

“Sure.”

He follows me to my bedroom and looks absolutely mouth-watering in his jeans and black button-down shirt. Part of me can’t believe that Kellan Winters is in my bedroom, and I have to remind myself that this isn’t real.

There’s a pile of discarded clothes on my bed, with the two dresses I’d narrowed down in the middle. “Ok, here is option one.” I hold up a red strapless dress. He nods but doesn’t say anything, so I put it down and hold up option two, a black

halter dress with rainbow sequins on the straps and around the bottom of the dress.

“Can I see them on you?” he asks. He’s taking this decision way more seriously than I thought he would, but I don’t mind giving him a little fashion show.

I walk to my bathroom with both dresses and slip on the red dress first. Stepping back into the bedroom, I feel his eyes on me before I see him. I walk right in front of him and stop, move my hips from side to side, and then turn around to show him the back. He gives no commentary other than to say, “And the black one?”

I sigh. I was hoping for a better reaction, although I’m not sure why. I shouldn’t want him to think I’m attractive. We work together; nothing good could come from that. But I’m also a woman, and I can’t help but want the attention of this very attractive man.

Back in the bathroom, I put on the black dress. This one is tighter on my body than the red one but accentuates my hips and butt. And I love the pop of color with the rainbow sequins. I hate wearing just plain black.

I walk out toward Kellan, and before I can even stop in front of him, he says, “That one.”

“You’re sure?” I question, liking the way his pupils dilate as he looks me over.

“Yep.” He stands from my bed. “I’ll wait by the door. We’ve got to get going.” I roll my eyes at Mr. Punctuality. I can be fashionably late for my ex-boyfriend, thank you very much.

I put my heels on, grab my clutch, and stop at my hallway mirror by my front door to apply my red lipstick. I can see Kellan watching me in the mirror. He’s zeroed in on my lips, and the wrinkle between his brow seems to deepen as I finish.

I pop my lips and throw my lipstick in my bag. “Ok, I’m ready.”

He looks at the floor and opens the door for me. I walk out first, but before he shuts it, I yell goodbye to Luna.

“Who’s Luna?” Kellan asks as I lock the door.

“My cat. She ran under the bed when she heard you knock.”

“You would have a cat.”

“Yes, I would.” I’m a proud cat mom, and no one is going to change that.

He opens the door for me when we get down to his car. “You know we aren’t on a real date. You don’t have to pretend to be a gentleman when no one else is around.”

He exhales loudly. “Just get in the car, princess.”

Princess. I know he’s not saying it in a loving way, but I kinda like it.

Before we leave the parking lot, he puts the restaurant address into his map app. “So, are you one of those ride in silence types?” I ask. We’ve been in the car for at least three minutes now, and the radio hasn’t been turned on.

He chuckles next to me. “No, you can listen to whatever you want.”

“Ok, good, because I made us a throwback playlist.”

He keeps his eyes on the road like the good law-abiding citizen he is but repeats my words slowly. “A throwback playlist.”

“Yep. Any particular music you don’t like?” I ask, even though his answer won’t stop me from playing every song I carefully selected for this playlist.

“Uh, I’m scared to say no.” I laugh and press play as Blink 182’s “What’s My Age Again” fills the car.

I start singing along to the words, of which I know every single one, and notice that Kellan is actually mouthing some words.

“Hold the phone. *You* know Blink 182?” I ask in disbelief.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know. Because Blink 182 is fun, and you are—”

He interrupts me. “If you say I’m not fun one more time...”

“Jeez!” I hold my hands up in defense. “I didn’t know it bothered you that much.”

“I’m going on a date with a woman I barely know, pretending to be her boyfriend. How much more fun can I be?”

I laugh. “Oh, I’ll make sure you are plenty more fun tonight.” He rolls his eyes. “Speaking of this song, how old are you? I feel like your girlfriend should know that.”

“Thirty. How old are you?”

“Twenty-seven. What’s your favorite color?”

“Black.”

I nod and consider his answer. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Ok, what’s yours?” He glances at me quickly before turning his eyes back to the road.

“Yellow.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” he repeats my phrase.

“How does yellow make sense for me?” I huff.

“Because you are like walking, talking sunshine. So happy and bubbly all the time.”

“I’m going to take that as a compliment,” I tell him, although I’m pretty sure he is subtly trying to tell me I’m annoying. “Ok, do you have any pets?”

The song changes to “One Week” by Barenaked Ladies.

“No.”

“Of course not. I only have my Luna. Are you from here?”

He hesitates before answering. “No.”

“Ok, where are you from?”

“Tennessee.”

I narrow my eyes. The playful tone in his voice a moment ago is gone at this point. “Is your family still there?”

Another pause. “My mom is.”

“And do you have any siblings?” I press, knowing in the back of my mind that it’s probably not a good idea to continue this. I can feel his attitude change, but I’m not sure why.

“I don’t think you’ll need to know my entire family story for dinner with your friends.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Ok. Got it. Family is off-limits. What’s your favorite food?”

“Breakfast food.”

“That’s a broad answer. Are we talking pancakes and eggs or maybe an eggs Benedict kind of thing?”

“French toast.”

I nod. “In case you’re wondering, I like Mexican food. I could eat chips and queso every day for the rest of my life.”

“Noted.”

The All-American Rejects start singing about their dirty little secrets as we go back and forth, asking basic questions a typical new couple should know. Well, I ask questions, he answers, and then I volunteer my answer, but at least we aren’t sitting in silence.

By the time we get to the restaurant, we’ve made it through a good amount of songs, and I’m pretty sure he never wants to hear me sing “Kiss From a Rose” ever again.

We pull up, and it’s valet only. Melanie would pick a place like this. She always was one to flaunt how much money her dad made.

Kellan makes it to my door before I can open it. He takes my hand to help me out, which is completely unnecessary, but I let it happen anyway because I want to feel his hands on me.

Kellan puts his hand on the small of my back and guides me up the few stairs of the building leading to the hostess.

Let the fun begin.

Chapter II

Kellan

That fucking red lipstick.

Every time she wears it, I can't take my eyes off her mouth. It makes me want it on every part of me, and definitely one part in particular. The part that is currently growing in my pants as I walk her inside towards the hostess stand.

She turns suddenly, her hair whipping in my direction. "Do we need to come up with a story?"

I rip my eyes away from her ass and clear my throat. "Um, what kind of story?"

"A bedtime fairytale," she says sarcastically, shoving my arm. "A story about how we met or something?"

"I think we just stick as close to the truth as possible."

"Ok, ok. I can do that. But we have to go along with whatever story the other person tells, ok? You can't backtrack."

"Don't worry, we'll be fine. We're lawyers. We're used to getting people to believe us." She laughs, and her shoulders visibly relax.

"Alright. And just, you know, act like a boyfriend," she says.

"Yeah, I got it," I whisper. "Your lack of faith in me is astounding."

"Do you have a lot of practice being a boyfriend?"

I sigh, not realizing that the evening would entail me discussing my very sad love life. “No. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t know what I need to do. I wouldn’t have agreed to do this if I didn’t think we could have convinced everyone. So, relax. Enjoy this time with your friends.”

“Alright, thanks.” She turns and tells the hostess who we’re meeting, and the young girl leads us toward the back of the restaurant, where it looks like Riley’s friends are already at a table.

“Riley!” a woman calls out when we get closer to the table. I can only assume this is Lisa. Riley gets excited and picks up her pace.

Lisa throws her arms around Riley, and they hug, rocking side to side for a minute, which might be the weirdest hug I’ve ever seen.

“Oh my God, who is this absolute dreamboat?” Lisa asks when she realizes I’m standing there. Riley turns to me and pulls me closer to her.

“This is my boyfriend, Kellan.” She looks at me with a huge smile, and I rub her back. I assume that’s something a boyfriend would do.

“Damn. Good job,” her friend whispers, but it’s loud enough for everyone to hear. From the corner of my eye, I see Landon shift in his chair and look away. Good.

We sit in the last two available seats at the large circular table. Lisa introduces me to her boyfriend, Preston, who seems like a nice enough guy. Not nearly as shady as Landon. But maybe I don’t like Landon because I know he’s had his hands on my girl.

Wait. What?

My girl?

What the fuck am I thinking? She is not my girl. Definitely not. She’s my coworker. That’s all.

“How did you guys meet?” Lisa asks us, breaking me out of my mini freak-out in my head.

“Work,” Riley and I say in tandem. I let Riley add the details. “Yeah, I met him a few times when I went to visit my dad at work and then when I started there, one thing led to another and here we are.” I grab her hand, linking her fingers with mine, and bring the back of her hand to my lips. She doesn’t take her eyes off my mouth as I kiss her hand.

Both Lisa and Melanie go, “Awww” when I do that, so I know that was a successful move. I set our hands down on my lap and don’t untangle our fingers. She squeezes my hand once, and I squeeze hers back like some sort of secret code.

We order our drinks—she gets some sort of fruity cocktail, and I get a beer—before everyone around the table starts catching up. It’s interesting to hear that not all of them went on to be lawyers even though they went to law school. I know there are other opportunities for law school grads, but I just always figured if someone made it through law school, they’d want to practice law. But maybe that’s just me. Being a lawyer was always my goal. And not just any lawyer. The best. I wanted people to know my name. I wanted them to be scared to have to prosecute a case when I’m at the defense table. If I keep going with my current rate, I’ll reach that goal in no time. I’ve already made a name for myself, and I’m proud of it.

Riley finishes her first drink and quickly requests another. I listen to her talk and laugh with her friends, and it warms my chest. I was worried I’d be bored, but seeing her like this—in her element—bored is the furthest thing I’m feeling. I should’ve known I could never be anything but entertained around this woman. She loves to talk, but she also loves to listen. And throughout this dinner, I find myself enjoying watching her listen. She keeps her eyes attentively on whoever is speaking. Her facial expressions change as she reacts to each story. And when she laughs, fuck me. It’s like watching a damn sunset on a beach or that romantic shit people like.

I glance at Landon just for shits and giggles, and his eyes are zeroed in on Riley. Specifically, her mouth, where her lipstick has faded a little from her cocktails. I tilt my head, getting his attention, and cock an eyebrow at him.

He had his chance with her, and he fucking blew it. He doesn't get to stare at her perfectly kissable lips anymore. They're mine now. Well, not really, but he doesn't know that.

The thought crosses my mind that he knows what she tastes like, and I don't. It makes me irrationally angry. I put my arms around her, pulling her closer to me. She looks at me and, instead of looking confused or annoyed, smiles. She's not looking around to see if anyone is looking at us. Her eyes are right on mine. She's smiling at *me*, like I'm the only one that matters. And that makes my heart rate speed up. Being in court, pleading my clients' innocence or trying to convince the jurors that the state is wrong, my heart rate is solid and strong. But Riley smiles at me, and I feel like my heart might beat out of my chest.

Jesus Christ.

"So, Kellan. You're a lawyer too?" Landon asks, presumably trying to get her attention on him.

"I am," I answer dryly.

"He's one of the best, actually," Riley adds, clapping her hand on my thigh, a little too close for comfort in a public place.

"I bet you're learning a lot from him," Melanie says, clearly walking the line between tipsy and drunk. Landon is going to have a fun time getting her home.

"I sure am." Riley giggles—fucking giggles—and I'm sitting here wishing everything these strangers are assuming about us is true.

We eat our dinner over light conversation. Luckily, Riley does most of the talking for us so I can just sit, eat, and nod when appropriate.

After dinner, a quartet starts playing in the dining room by a large open space, presumably for a dance floor. A few older couples go out to the floor to dance. Lisa squeals, and Preston doesn't hesitate to grab her hand and escort her onto the dance floor. Riley smiles at them as they walk to the dance floor, where Preston twirls Lisa into his arms.

I look at the smile on Riley's face and know what I have to do. I stand and hold my hand out to her.

"What?" Her eyes are wide as she stares up at me.

"Let's dance." I move my hand out closer as if to say, "I'm doing this for you, so get your ass up." Thankfully, she takes it and stands, and we walk to the dance floor. I keep our hands linked and place my other hand around her waist.

"You didn't have to dance with me," she whispers.

"It's what a boyfriend would do." She relaxes into me a little and lets me lead her.

We sway slowly, bringing us closer until our bodies are almost touching. I look into her eyes and hear her breath hitch, and her tongue slips out to wet her bottom lip. She wants me to kiss her, and fuck, I want to do it.

"This is the grand finale," I whisper. "Our last chance to make him jealous."

"Who?" she asks, unable to take her eyes off my lips.

"Your ex." Our chests are touching now, and each breath she takes is a tickle on my lips.

"Oh." She swallows.

"I'm going to kiss you, Riley."

She inhales. "Really?"

I nod and cup the back of her head. Her head tilts back, and she leans into my hand. I'm centimeters away from her red lips. Our breaths tangle with each other, and it's so sensual it feels like we're already kissing. I whisper, "Fuck me," before I lean down, closing the gap between our lips.

Her body melts into mine, and everything around us disappears. It's just me and her. Her lips are soft and so damn luscious, just like I thought they'd be. My fingers massage the base of her neck, making her head fall back more so I can deepen our kiss. She parts her lips for me, and I slip my tongue in and swipe it across hers.

She moans into my mouth, encouraging me to keep going. I didn't think we would get as far as kissing as part of our act tonight, but here we are. Making out on a dance floor surrounded by other couples. I can feel eyes on us, but we're in our own world now. Riley and I have stopped dancing and can't seem to pull away from each other.

"Get a room!" Lisa calls out when she and Preston twirl past us, snapping me out of the trance Riley's lips have pulled me into. She smiles against my lips, and we break apart.

She giggles, and her cheeks are a beautiful shade of pink. I'm a little embarrassed I completely lost myself in that kiss, but I pull her into me, not quite ready to let her go.

"What kind of witchcraft was that?" she asks against my chest.

"Just a kiss." I hope she can't feel my heart hammering right now because she will definitely be able to tell it was way more than that.

"I've had a lot of kisses in my life, and that was definitely not *just a kiss*," she teases.

"I had a job tonight, and I like to be the best when given a task." A flash of disappointment crosses her eyes, but she blinks it away.

She takes a step back, and I let her. It's probably for the best that we put some distance between us anyway, even though it sends a sting of disappointment through me. We head back over to our table, where I have to pretend that I'm completely fine after that kiss.

Chapter 12

Riley

“**W**e should totally do this again soon,” Melanie says as she hugs me goodbye. She must be insane if she thinks I’ll regularly want to hang out with my ex-boyfriend and the girl he left me for.

I could’ve said, “Oh, no thanks,” or “Maybe,” but my dumbass says, “Oh yeah, for sure.”

Once I’m out of Melanie’s grip, I tell Lisa goodbye. She pulls me into a hug too. “It was so good to see you, Riley.”

“You too,” I say, returning the hug. I’ve maybe had one too many cocktails, so I sway slightly in her arms.

“I’m so glad to finally see you happy. The way Kellan looks at you... damn.”

I pull back to look at her face. “How does he look at me?” I’ve only noticed Kellan looking at me with pure annoyance in his eyes. I hope he hid that tonight so my friends believed our little act.

“He looks at you like you are the only girl in the room. Like he can’t wait to get you home and out of this dress.”

“Oh.” I nearly choke hearing her say that because that is definitely not the Kellan I know. At least it wasn’t until that kiss.

Oh my God.

Kellan kissed me. I still can’t believe it.

And not just any kiss. That was like a once-in-a-lifetime, make your legs feel like Jell-O kind of kiss. His lips were soft yet claiming. His hand held my face and tangled in my hair, and it felt like he was worshipping me with his mouth. I wish it didn't have to end.

I wish it wasn't fake.

"Well, I, for one, am glad to see that you upgraded. I like Landon, but not enough to trust him with your heart," she whispers so Melanie and Landon can't hear her.

"Thanks, Lisa. Let's do this again soon."

"Yes!" She gives me one more squeeze before she walks toward Kellan. I hear her tell him, "You better not hurt my girl."

Kellan chuckles and replies with, "Scout's honor." I almost laugh out loud because I highly doubt he was ever a Boy Scout. I give Preston a hug and then give Landon a small wave, which he returns. Friendly enough, I suppose.

Kellan leads me out of the restaurant with his hand on the small of my back. I feel the heat pooling in my stomach from his touch. That kiss has overstimulated me, and every little thing about him is turning me on: the way he hands the car ticket to the valet without taking his hand off me, the scowl on his face while we wait for the car to be pulled around, the way he takes my hand and leads me to the car. It's too much, and I feel the lines of our fake relationship blurring. It could also be the cocktails, but I'm happy to blame it on the kiss.

"Did I do alright tonight?" Kellan asks once we're headed back to my place.

I glance at him, and my eyes instantly go to his lips. Those pillowy soft lips that were on me less than thirty minutes ago. Of course, I imagined what kissing him would be like. What woman who's met him wouldn't? Real-life kissing definitely surpassed imagination kissing. "You were more than alright. If you weren't there with me, I'm pretty sure Lisa and Melanie would've left their boyfriends for you."

He laughs. “It’s a good thing I only have eyes for my fake girlfriend.”

“You know, it’s good to see you smile. You don’t do it enough.”

He looks away, like maybe he’s a little embarrassed or hiding something he doesn’t want me to read on his face.

“Lisa told me you looked at me like I was the only girl in the room.” Am I fishing for compliments right now? Probably. Do I care? Nope.

“You’re very beautiful, Riley. I’d imagine most men would look at you like that.” If I’m not mistaken, his voice deepened when he said that. I want to tell him I don’t want *most men* looking at me. I want him looking at me. But since my head is having a hard time deciphering what is real and what is part of our fake relationship act, I keep quiet.

We sit in silence for a few miles while he makes his way through the city. I notice his hands are gripping the steering wheel tightly.

“I shouldn’t have kissed you,” he blurts out.

“What?” My eyes move from his hands to his face. His eyes are on the road, so I can only see his profile, but I see his jaw tick as we pass under a streetlight.

“I shouldn’t have kissed you. I crossed a line. I was too invested in playing the part and wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Oh, ok.” I’m not really sure what else to say to him, but I don’t think I can keep the disappointment from bleeding into my words.

“I just don’t want you thinking that I want you like that because I don’t,” he continues.

“Want me like what?”

“You know, like in a romantic sense. I don’t want you.” Ouch. That’s a little harsh, even from my fake boyfriend.

“Are you telling me or trying to convince yourself?” I ask, feeling a spark of anger light inside me. Anger mixed with

embarrassment from his rejection. I felt his erratic heartbeat after he kissed me. He might not want me now, but he wanted me then.

“Riley, seriously. I don’t want you. I just don’t want you to think that I do because—” I can’t hear any more of this.

“Ok, Kellan. I got it.” Didn’t he just tell me I’m beautiful like five minutes ago? He’s giving me whiplash.

“I... You aren’t going to tell Dan about this, are you?”

I squeeze my eyes shut and let my head fall to the headrest. With a sigh, I say, “No, Kellan. I’m not going to tattletale to my daddy that you kissed me and regret it. It’s embarrassing enough hearing it now. I don’t need to re-hash it with my family.” I guess my Cinderella clock has run out, and I’m back to being his annoying co-worker.

“I’m—”

“Do not apologize. Leave me with some dignity.”

“Ok,” he says quietly, completely out of character for him. Usually, he’s a no-nonsense, my-way-or-the-highway kind of guy, but he seems out of his element tonight. Like he’s as uncomfortable as I feel.

The rest of the ride to my apartment is filled with quiet tension. Kellan still has a death grip on the steering wheel, and I keep my eyes forward, careful not to look at him. He pulls up outside my building and doesn’t even bother putting the car in park as I get out. And because I don’t want tonight to make working together awkward, I say, “Thanks for doing this tonight, the whole date thing. I appreciate it.”

He nods but doesn’t respond, so I shut the door and make my way upstairs.

It’s crazy how I went from having one of the best nights of my life to one of the worst in a few minutes, from having my mind blown by that kiss to feeling like a reject on the playground.

I take my shoes off, give Luna a few scratches, and take my phone out.

Riley: you up?

Candice: Yes! How'd it go?

Riley: Good until the end.

Candice: What happened?

Riley: He kissed me at dinner and then told me he doesn't want me.

Candice: what kind of kiss was it? Like a peck?

Riley: no, like a real kiss with tongue and everything.

Candice: He put his tongue in your mouth and then told you he didn't want you?

Riley: yes!

Candice: wtf?

Riley: I know. I stupidly got my hopes up there for a sec but he crushed them real fast.

Candice: I'm sorry, Riley. You deserve better than that.

Riley: thanks. Gonna go lick my wounds now

Candice: wanna do some retail therapy tomorrow?

Riley: yes please

Candice: ok. I'll come over in the morning

Riley: see you then

I head to my room and exchange the stupid dress that stupid Kellan picked for the extra large T-shirt I sleep in.

I don't know why it hurts so much that Kellan said he doesn't want me. Yes, we're total opposites. He's work, work, work all the time, while I'm more work hard, play hard. He doesn't talk to anyone, and I talk to everyone. He can mask his emotions, whereas I wear mine on my sleeve. He only likes blacks, and I like as much color as possible.

Total opposites.

We'd never work even if he was interested, and I now know he is definitely *not* interested.

It's fine.

I'm fine.

I'll let it hurt now because it was my stupid lie that put us in the situation tonight to begin with. But Monday, it's back to professional Riley, who doesn't let a stupid boy hurt her feelings.

Chapter 13

Riley

Monday morning feels chaotic. I didn't have time to prep any meals or hit the grocery store for breakfast foods, so I feed Luna, spend some extra time perfecting my makeup and hair, throw on a gray pencil skirt and a bright blue blouse, and I'm out the door.

I grab breakfast and coffee on the way and get to the office just a teensy bit later than I'm supposed to. But really, I've seen people coming and going at odd times, so I think my dad is just testing me about the being on time thing.

Glancing towards Kellan's office, I see he's not in yet. He never actually said he'd be in today—I guess I just assumed—but he usually drops in at some point during the day.

At lunch, I grab a salad from the deli down the block and eat with Mila and Spencer in the lunchroom.

“How was your weekend?” Mila asks. My heart skips a beat. There's no way she knows what happened over my weekend. She's just being nice.

“It was good. Just hung out with some friends. You?” I take a giant bite of lettuce to stop myself from saying more.

“It was good. There was a Greek Festival down in Atlanta that my boyfriend and I went to. I ate so much baklava.”

“That sounds fun! I always want to go to festivals downtown, but I never hear about them until it's too late. Except for the time I went to a Mimosa Fest with my best friend, Candice.” I wince, thinking about all the bottomless

mimosas we had. “I don’t remember much, but I think it was fun.”

“I can let you know next time, and maybe you can come with?” Mila suggests.

I perk up. I love a new friend! “That would be great!” She smiles and nods. “So what about you, Spencer? What kind of trouble did you get into?”

“Well, I spent my weekend gallivanting around town with my cousin. It was his birthday, so a group of us went out. We stopped by an escape room, but we drank so much we couldn’t actually escape.”

I throw my head back in laughter. “I’ve actually never met anyone who couldn’t escape an escape room.”

“I’m happy to be your first.” A loud tapping is heard to my right, and a set of folders hits the side of the table.

There’s Kellan in my favorite gray suit and black button-down. Yes, I do have a favorite suit of his, and I’m not ashamed of it. It makes his blue eyes pop.

He looks between Spencer and me before grabbing a bottle of water and walking out.

“What’s his deal?” Spencer asks when Kellan is out of view.

I shrug. “Literally no idea. That man is a walking bag of mysteries.” And he’s an amazing kisser who doesn’t want me. Sigh.

We finish our lunch and head back to our cubicles. After I gloss over a few emails, I feel a shadow hanging over me. I look over and see Kellan standing there, staring at my new succulent. I’m surprised to see him twice in one day. I thought for sure after our “date,” he’d try to avoid me. I didn’t want a repeat of him saying he didn’t want me. I got the message loud and clear.

“What is that?” he nods at the new plant I brought in this morning. I can’t believe he noticed something new on my

desk. I hate that it excited me that he noticed such a minor detail.

“It’s a succulent,” I explain. “I thought my bamboo plant might be feeling lonely, so I got him a friend.”

“You... what?” he asks like he can’t believe what I just said. I believe plants need friends, just like every other living thing. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that. We have a meeting with Lana at five. It was the only time she could meet us. Don’t be late.”

I crinkle my brows, but he doesn’t see because he’s already turning around. “Ok.” Then he’s gone, walking back toward his desk.

I try to focus on my work, but Kellan’s attitude weighs on me. I don’t want things to be weird between us. Yes, we kissed. But he made it clear that it can’t go further than it did. We have to work together without it being awkward. I take a deep breath and stand, heading toward his office.

His door is closed, so I knock gently. “Come in.”

I walk in but don’t shut the door behind me. Wouldn’t want anyone getting any ideas. “Oh, it’s you,” he says, barely glancing up from his desk.

“Wow, what a welcome.” I take another step toward him. “You ok?”

“Yeah, just busy.” I don’t fail to notice that he doesn’t bother looking at me.

“You seem extra on edge today.”

“I said I’m fine,” he says with a little more force, enough for me to rear back.

“Uh, ok then.”

“Did you need something?” he asks, his tone stiff.

“Um,” I guess I should make up a reason to be here other than I just wanted to make sure he’s ok. “Where is the meeting with Lana at?”

“The Dolphin Room.” Great. The one that’s a wall of windows. I hate that room. Maybe he picked that room because everyone will see us, and he’ll feel confident I’ll keep my distance.

“Got it.” I turn on my heels and leave before he can say anything else. I want to make things not awkward with him, but maybe it’ll be better to wait until he’s ready.

Walking back through the office, I pass Spencer’s desk. He raises an eyebrow at me as if to ask if everything is ok, and I just shrug because I honestly don’t know.

I keep myself busy until the meeting with Lana. I talk with my dad and update him on what I’m working on. I walk up to the front and ask the receptionist if we can order rainbow-colored Post-It notes, to which she promptly tells me we only order boring old yellow, so I make a mental note to order my own. I walk down to the coffee shop below the office and grab a chocolate chip cookie because, apparently, salads don’t fill me up and what is life without some cookies.

By the time I’m back at my desk and have gone through all my emails again, it’s time for the meeting. Most of my colleagues are packing up to leave for the night, but not me. I grab my notebook, laptop, and favorite purple pen and head to the conference room.

Kellan escorts Lana in a few minutes later, and I stand to shake her hand.

“It’s good to see you again, Lana,” I say with a smile.

She shakes my hand and sits on the opposite side of the table from Kellan and me. It doesn’t escape my notice that Kellan has put two whole seats between us.

Kellan gets started. “So, Lana. We’ve got the trial in just a few weeks. We’re at a standstill here because we don’t know who actually did this, and we don’t have the murder weapon. I know we’ve asked you before, but are you absolutely positive you don’t remember anything out of the ordinary that day?”

“Besides the dead body?” she quips.

“Right. Besides the dead body.” He takes her sarcasm in stride.

She leans her head back and rubs her temples. After a few minutes, she looks up. “I really don’t. I mean, I obviously didn’t go traipsing around the backyard after I saw her lying there. So I wouldn’t have really seen anything suspicious.”

“And you don’t think you turned off your doorbell camera that day?”

“I don’t even know how to work that thing. Dax controlled it from an app on his phone. Probably trying to keep tabs on me, which is fucking ironic at this point.” She scoffs and rolls her eyes, and I cough to keep from laughing. “But yeah, I wouldn’t know how to turn it off.”

“And Dax was staying at his business partner Shawn’s house at this point?” I ask, earning a quick glance from Kellan.

“Yeah, I think so. I wasn’t talking to him very often, but I think I remember him telling me he would be at Shawn’s if I ever needed him. Like I would need him for anything I couldn’t find somewhere else.” She laughs at her own joke, and I can’t tell if she’s really the strong woman she portrays herself as or if she’s putting on this bravado to keep herself from getting hurt anymore. I’ve never been married, but I imagine it would feel like the ultimate betrayal to find out your spouse was cheating. I assume she loved this man enough to agree to spend the rest of her life with him, only for him to throw it away, making her question whether she ever really knew him.

“What do you think about Shawn?” I ask.

“Honestly, I don’t really know him. He was always just... there. He kept to himself most of the time, never saying much. Wherever Dax was, Shawn was too. But we never really vibed well together. He was very business oriented and focused on the numbers and shit. Dax was more of the creative one, finding clients and helping mix their songs.”

“Have you talked to him since the whole Tiffany thing?” Out of the corner of my eye, I see Kellan look at me as if to

ask, “Did you just call an affair and murder the ‘Tiffany thing’?”

Lana thinks for a minute and then shakes her head. “Not really. The only times I ever really talked to the guy was when he was trying to get my schedule for my recordings. I ended up recording everything alone or in my home studio after I found out about the affair.”

I nod and look back to Kellan to let him know I’m done asking questions. He doesn’t look mad or annoyed like I expected him to. He just looks like he was patiently waiting.

“Lana, we need to talk about you taking the stand. Have you thought about it at all?”

She shakes her head. “Not really. I figured you’d tell me what you want me to do.”

He gives her a small smile. “I won’t tell you what to do or what not to do. I can, however, offer you my advice to make your own decision. The prosecution will try to paint you as a jealous ex-wife who premeditated the murder of her husband’s lover, presumably to get your husband back.”

“That’s bullshit!”

“I know,” Kellan replies in his calm tone. I don’t know how he does it. “And I think you’re going to be the best one to relay that message. Having you on the stand will give the jurors a chance to understand that you aren’t a woman holding a grudge against her ex-husband. You’re over it. You’ve been over it since the moment you found out he cheated. I think hearing it come from you, with the way you carry yourself, will be powerful for the jury. I haven’t seen any inconsistencies in your story. My advice to you would be to take the stand. You have a few days to make the decision. So think on it, do some research, call or email me any questions you may have, and then let us know what you decide.”

She looks between the two of us, probably hoping we would give her a more definitive answer, before nodding.

Kellan goes over a few more things about the trial with her and what to expect. Even I listen to him to get a feel for what’s

coming. Yes, I've been in court before. I've even sat at the council tables with the attorneys and the clients, but never for a case of this caliber.

Kellan walks Lana through our empty office to the elevators. It's after six, and everyone has already left for the evening. I stay where I am, waiting for Kellan to come back. I've had something on my mind for a while now and need to run it by him.

He walks back in and goes straight to his laptop without saying a word.

"Can we add Shawn to our witness list?" I ask.

He makes eye contact with me for the first time today. "Why?"

"I just have a vibe."

"A vibe," he repeats slowly, flexing his jaw. "I can't question someone based on a vibe, Princess." There's that nickname again. "And he gave the police an alibi."

"I know." I let out an exasperated sigh. "Something was just off with him."

"You literally saw him for two seconds when he stuck his head in the door," he tells me like I don't remember.

"That was enough to get a crazy vibe from him! Trust me, I have a superpower to detect creepy guys. I can always sense when something is off with a man. When I saw him, my creepy man sense was tingling."

Kellan's eyes search my face, and I sit there, letting him. I know my face is giving away a ton of emotion right now. As women, we're always told to follow our intuition. And my intuition keeps pulling towards Shawn. It hasn't let me down yet, so I have to at least bring it up and try.

"You're serious?" he asks

"Yes."

"Alright," he finally tells me.

"Alright?"

“Yeah, I’ll put him on the list. But I’m not questioning him unless you bring me a reason, ok? I can’t tell the jury that we have a bad *vibe*.”

I want to roll my eyes because I know he’s teasing, but I don’t because this is a big deal. “Thank you, Kellan. I won’t let you down.”

“Mm-hmm.” I get ready to leave as he moves his attention back to his laptop, and since he finally seems a little more relaxed than he was earlier, I figure I might as well poke the bear.

“Hey, are we cool?” I ask.

“Why wouldn’t we be?”

“I don’t know. Because we went on a pretend date. We kissed. You hardcore rejected me. And today, you’re acting like someone peed in your Cheerios. I just want to make sure I didn’t do anything to make you uncomfortable. I want to make sure our working relationship is ok.”

He stands from his seat and takes a step toward me. “You think I’m upset because of *you*?”

When he says it like that, I feel a little silly for even asking. “I don’t know. I guess I just wanted to make sure.”

He takes another step toward me. “You frustrate the hell out of me.”

“You’ve got to tell me why, Kellan. I’m not a damn mind reader.”

Another step, and I suck in a breath. “I’m frustrated because I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since you got out of my goddamn car.”

Wait. What? This conversation has taken an unexpected turn. I thought he would be mad that I crossed a line or something. Not that he can’t stop thinking about me.

“What?” I whisper.

He takes another step and is right in front of me, so close I’m sure he can hear my heart pounding. “I’m mad because all

I can think about are these pretty red lips and how much I enjoyed tasting you. How I want to do it again and again. I want to taste you everywhere. I want to know what you feel like. I want to know what sounds you make when I'm inside you because if they sound anything like what I heard kissing you, it'll make me lose my mind."

"Oh." My stomach tightens, and I squeeze my thighs together in a sad attempt to keep myself from falling to my knees in front of him.

"Is that a good enough explanation for you?" The tip of his nose brushes against mine, and his breath tickles my lips.

"What's stopping you?" My question comes out in a breathy whisper because I can't find my voice.

He growls against my lips. "We work together." It sounds like it was physically painful for him to say that.

"So, what? It kinda sounds like you're scared," I push.

He inhales deeply. "You're my boss's daughter and completely off limits."

"I won't tell if you don't." He wants me. I want him. This shouldn't be so complicated. Should it?

"Riley." His hand comes up to the nape of my neck. "Tell me to stop," he whispers in my ear.

"I don't want you to stop." Because I most definitely do *not* want him to stop.

Chapter 14

Kellan

There's only so much I can take before I completely lose all common sense, and it seems Riley Stevens and her damn red lipstick are my kryptonite.

“Do it, Kellan. I want this.” Her voice echoes in my mind, clearing out every single hesitation. My lips close in on hers, and I feel like I can finally breathe again. It's only been forty-eight hours since I last kissed her, but it's felt like an eternity.

She parts her lips for me, allowing me in. We kiss and lick and suck until she's breathless and shaking in my arms. I twist her hair around my fist and pull her head back, exposing her neck. I trail my tongue down her neck before kissing my way back up. She moans when I take her ear lobe in my teeth.

“Kellan.” Hearing my name on her lust-filled lips makes my cock painfully hard.

“Fuck, princess.” I press my hips into her, and she lets out the sweetest little moan I catch with my lips. She leans against the table to steady herself, and I lift her up to sit on it. Her damn skirt hugs her in all the right places and is so tight that I can't get between her legs. I reach down and push the fabric up her legs.

My fingertips make slow circles on her thighs until I'm just inches away from her pussy. I want it so fucking bad, but I know the moment I touch her, there's no going back.

She picks up on my hesitation and pulls away from me. But instead of pushing me off, she shimmies the skirt up her hips, giving me perfect access to her pussy.

My palm cups her pussy, and I can feel how wet she is already. My finger slips past her black lacy underwear and runs up and down her slit.

Fuck me.

She leans back on her forearms, arching her body. She moves her hips with my finger, and it slides knuckle-deep inside her.

Her head falls back with a moan. I add another finger, curling them upward as I press gently on her lower stomach.

“Oh my God,” Riley cries, encouraging me to keep going. Thrusting my fingers in and out, loving her response to me.

Her hips keep moving against my hand, and I know she’s chasing her orgasm. I pull out just as her pussy starts to tighten around my fingers.

“What the fuck, Kellan?” She lifts her head, angry eyes meeting mine. “I was about to come.”

I smirk. “I know. But I told you I wanted to taste you.” I slide my suit jacket off and take my time rolling up my sleeves. She watches my every move, completely on edge from her interrupted orgasm.

I slide her underwear off and stuff it in my pocket before dropping to my knees and positioning myself between her legs. I trail a path of kisses up her thigh until I make full contact with my final destination.

I suck her clit into my mouth, and she arches against me again. I feast on her pussy, licking, sucking, and fucking her every way I can with my tongue. When I get to a spot she loves, she reaches her hand down and holds my head in place. Fuck, I almost come in my pants from this alone. I love it when a woman knows what she wants and takes it.

“I’m going to come, Kellan. You better not fucking stop this time.” I smile against her clit but don’t stop. I add more pressure with my tongue, and before I know it, she’s shaking beneath me and crying out in pleasure. Her thighs squeeze against my head as she rides out her release.

Once her orgasm has washed over her, she relaxes her hold on my head. I think I could spend all damn day between her legs.

“Fuck me, Kellan. Please,” she begs. I lean down to kiss her, knowing she’ll be able to taste herself all over my mouth. She doesn’t care. She kisses me with more fervor than before. My erection presses up against her, and she starts moving her hips, creating friction between us.

She reaches down and unbuttons my pants and pushes them, along with my boxers, down my thighs, freeing my throbbing cock.

“Is this for me?” she asks with a sly smile.

“All for you, princess.” She wraps her hand around me and pumps a few times when I realize I’ve made a monumental mistake. “Shit, I don’t have a condom.” Her hand stops, and I shrug. “I don’t usually fuck women while I’m working.” I start to pull away, but she stops me.

“Are you clean?” she asks. I nod, knowing I am since my tests were all clear at my last physical, and sadly, I can’t even remember the last time I slept with someone. “I’m clean. And I’m on the pill. I’m ok with this if you are.”

Holy shit. This woman.

I don’t wait another second to line myself up with her entrance and push inside. We both moan at the feeling of finally connecting with each other.

Once I’m all the way in, I pull back out and start all over again. My movements are slow, like I’m trying to memorize everything I can about her body. How her eyes look while she watches where we’re joined. The way her pussy squeezes me just right. The way her lips fall open with each little moan that escapes.

I grab her blouse and pull it apart, breaking all the buttons off.

“I liked that shirt, asshole,” she scolds breathlessly. Her eyes are hooded, and she can barely keep them open.

“I don’t give a fuck. I’ll get you a new one.” I pull her bra down, exposing her perfect breasts. On a thrust, I lean down and take her nipple in my mouth, sucking as hard as I can.

“Kellan!” she yells my name, and I’m grateful no one else is in the office. I don’t want her to be quiet, and her screaming my fucking name might be the best thing I’ve ever heard.

“Your pussy is so fucking tight, princess.” I move my hips faster and throw one of her legs over my shoulder to get as deep as possible.

The sounds of my cock and her wet pussy echo through the conference room, and it’s one I never want to forget. Her hand comes between us and starts circling her swollen clit.

“Are you getting greedy? One orgasm wasn’t enough?” I question, even though I want her to have as many orgasms as possible. Pleasing her might be my new favorite thing.

“No. I want to come with you.”

Jesus Christ.

She’s killing me. There’s no way I can last much longer if I have to watch her play with herself while I’m inside her.

“You better hurry the fuck up because I’m about to fill you with every last drop of my cum.”

“I’m ready!” she cries.

I thrust inside her two, then three more times until her pussy walls close around me and milk me dry.

“Oh my God,” Riley says when she finally comes back to reality.

I nod, unable to find my voice. I can’t take my eyes off where our bodies are joined. That was fucking amazing. I’ve never had sex with such an overwhelming need before. It felt like an out-of-body experience, and I already know one time isn’t going to be enough. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get enough of Riley and her smart mouth and sweet pussy.

I pull out of her slowly and notice her watching as I do.

“I guess I should go clean up,” she says softly.

I grab her arm as she starts to stand and whisper in her ear. “Don’t. I like the thought of my cum inside you.”

I see the goosebumps on her arms, and she smiles and tugs her skirt down to cover herself. “You’re dirty, Mr. Winters. I like it.” She kisses me, sucking my bottom lip between her teeth. I put my hand between her legs and push the cum dripping out of her back inside her pussy, then run my finger between her folds, making sure she has every last drop of me.

“You trying for a round two?” I ask when she releases me. Her red lipstick is smudged on her swollen lips, and I can only imagine that most of it is on me.

“I could say the same to you. And I’ll take as many rounds of that as you’ll give me.” I bring my finger to her lips. She opens her mouth and takes my finger inside, sucking it clean. It’s mesmerizing to watch her lips close around my finger and feel her tongue cleaning it off.

Suddenly we hear a door open from somewhere in the office. “Shit!”

She releases my finger, and I yank my pants up, tucking myself back in. Riley pulls her shirt over her chest like a robe since I ripped all the buttons off.

We both look out the window and see the cleaner come into the office with a cart full of supplies. She has headphones on and doesn’t seem to notice us.

Riley exhales with relief and ties her shirt to keep it in place while we gather our things. “We probably shouldn’t fuck in the office again,” I tell her as I grab my suit jacket and follow her out of the conference room.

She raises a brow at me. “So there will be a next time?”

“No fucking way I’ll be able to stay away from you now.” There’s no point in denying it. I can already feel it in my bones that this woman will be the end of me.

“Good. My pussy congratulates you on a job well done.” She leans in and kisses me one more time. “I gotta get home to feed my cat.”

“Didn’t I just do that?” I tease, feeling lighter. My shoulders are relaxed, and I don’t feel the overwhelming stress I normally feel. It’s like she pushed it out of my mind.

“Oh, you got jokes now.” She smiles. “I like this after-sex Kellan. You actually look happy.”

Without a reply from me, she turns on her heels to get her things from her desk.

I head back to my office and sink into my chair, thinking about what just happened. What have I done? I fucked my boss’s daughter, the same boss I’m trying to make partner with, in the conference room that he pays for.

But I can’t stop now. There’s no going back now that we’ve crossed the line. We’ll just have to try really hard not to get caught.

I type out a few emails, but I’m just not in it right now. I want to go home, which is a rarity for me. I like working. I like being busy. I like knowing people can depend on me.

But my body and my mind are fucking tired. I’m ready to get out of here. I pack up my things and make a point to walk by Riley’s cubicle on my way out.

I know she’s already long gone, but I’ll admit, I like seeing her stupid plants and the random things on her desk. It’s cute and so very Riley. It even smells like her over here, a vanilla scent I can’t get enough of.

What is she doing to me?

More importantly, what am I going to do to her?

Chapter 15

Kellan

My apartment feels emptier tonight. I've lived alone for the last ten years, and it's never bothered me. I enjoy not having to worry about another person's space or whose turn it is to clean up. No, I'd much rather have to rely on myself.

But tonight, I would've welcomed some company. Specifically a certain brunette with big brown eyes and bright red lips that haunt my thoughts.

Leaning back against my door, I let my head fall back and my eyes close. I've gotten myself into a huge mess with Riley. I know it. How would Dan and Paul ever be able to take me seriously again if they found out what I did tonight with Riley? Part of me is freaking out because my reputation is everything to me. But another part doesn't care. I did something for me tonight. Riley has been on my mind from the moment I met her. I was craving her, and I wouldn't be able to think clearly until I had her. And now I know one time would never be enough with her.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, bringing me out of my trance. I grab it and see 'Department of Corrections' flash across the screen.

"Hello?" I answer, already knowing who it is.

"Hey, little bro. How's it going?" I exhale and walk to my couch, settling in to talk to my brother.

"It's all right, man. Can't complain." More like I won't complain because he has it so much worse than I do, and I

would feel like a complete jackass for unloading my problems on him.

“Tell me about the date with your boss’s daughter. I’ve been dying to hear about it.” I can practically hear him smiling through the phone. I haven’t heard him this excited since before he got locked up. Even after all these years, I didn’t realize how much he wanted to hear stories from the outside. For the longest time, I felt bad telling him about my life. But more recently, I’ve noticed that he wants me to be happy and live my life. More importantly, he wants me to share it with him so he still feels normal. Like it’s just big brother Kai talking to his little bro.

“Come on. You finally did something with a woman. I want details.”

I laugh. “It was good. I actually had more fun than I thought I would. Her friends were pretty chill. Her ex was annoying, but he didn’t cause too much drama other than a few lingering looks in her direction.”

“And the girl?” If I could see him, I know he’d be wagging his eyebrows at me.

“Riley is... she’s something else entirely.” It’s hard to describe a girl like her. She’s fun and funny and gorgeous and smart. She has a big heart. My thoughts go back to the night of our date. Sitting in her bedroom, watching her model dresses for me. The red one was hot as fuck, but the black one had me itching to touch her. The entire night I wanted to be touching her, and luckily, with the act we were putting on, I could. It felt good being that close to her. And then that kiss—that fucking kiss—pushed me over the edge. Everything about it was perfect. She was perfect.

“Do you have a crush, Kellan?”

I run my hand down my face. “I don’t know, man. I don’t know what this shit is, but it’s messing with my head.”

He laughs. “Definitely a crush. It’s about damn time. So, you guys spent the whole evening together. Did you get a little

something extra for helping her out, if you know what I mean?”

“No. I mean, we kissed, but that was all.”

He sighs into the phone. “Kellan. Come on, man. That was the perfect opportunity.”

“I know. I know. But then tonight...” I trail off, images of her parted red lips moaning my name pop into my head. Her long, lean legs spread wide for me.

“Tonight?” he presses.

“I, well, we had sex.” I don’t know why I’m nervous telling him that. We used to talk about this shit all the time. Kai is the one who walked me through what my first time would be like. He was the one who made sure I knew how to use a condom. And he was there for me after my first heartbreak in high school, making sure I knew that she wasn’t worth my time if she was willing to leave me. He was right because I can’t even remember that chick’s name at this point.

“Tonight? It’s only like eight o’clock. Is she still at your place?”

“Um, no. We actually did it at the office.” I’m met with silence on the other side of the phone. “Hello?” I ask, making sure he’s still there.

He lowers his voice. “You fucked her in your office?”

“Not *my* office.” I pause, a little embarrassed to even say this out loud. “It was a conference room table.”

Silence. And then, he laughs. It’s a real laugh. A laugh I haven’t heard from him in years. It unlocks so many childhood memories for me. Watching movies with him before bed. Playing basketball at the playground down the street from our apartment. Wrestling in the living room until Mom would have to throw water on us to get us to stop. We had so much fun together. He was my best friend. He *is* my best friend. And it kills me every day that he’s stuck in there for something he didn’t do.

“Kellan. I’m not going to lie to you, man. I did not think you had it in you.”

“What?”

“Fucking your boss’s daughter in the place you both work at?” He’s still laughing.

“I know. She was just looking at me, and I lost control. She wears this fucking red lipstick that drives me insane. I can’t stop looking at her mouth when she’s wearing it, which is basically every fucking day.”

“She sounds hot.”

“She is. I think you’d really like her, actually.” They’d probably get along just by cracking jokes with each other. I long for the day I can introduce him to a girl I’m with. Or better yet, he can introduce me to a girl he’s with. I want him to be able to date. I want him to be able to live.

“If she makes you this fucking happy, I already like her. I’m happy you’re actually living your life, Kellan.”

“I know,” I whisper. “It’s just hard to when you’re—”

He cuts me off, knowing what I’m going to say anyway. “I know. But my situation isn’t your problem, ok? At least one of us needs to live life to the fullest. I, for one, am happy for it to be you.”

“Thanks, man. But you know I’ll never stop trying to get you out of there.”

“And I appreciate that. But I’m telling you, it makes me happy to hear you finally found yourself a woman.”

“I don’t know what we are, to be honest.”

“Do you want her to be yours?” That’s the question that’s been on repeat in my head since the first day.

“I don’t know. It’s complicated. She’s my boss’s daughter and my co-worker. I mean, we’re working on a huge case together, and it feels wrong for some reason.” Bringing someone else into my life feels like a huge commitment, even

if it is just sex. I've been on my own for so long. Having to bring someone else into my chaos doesn't feel right.

"You're both grown-ass adults. You guys can make your own choices. And as long as you keep his girl happy, I'm sure her daddy won't mind."

"Yeah, I'm sure he'll love it when he finds out I made her come twice on a table out in the open where anyone could've walked in on us."

"Twice? Damn, I've never been more proud of you." We both laugh. "Hey, I gotta go. My time is almost up. But I'll call again soon, alright? And don't be a pussy. If you want her, make sure she knows it before it's too late."

"Love you, man."

"Love you too, bro." One click later, and the call ends.

I kick my shoes off and sink back into my couch. I'm not going to jump into anything with Riley. Hell, I don't even know if I remember how to be a boyfriend since it's been so damn long. But I'm not going to push her away. I think we work well together both at and out of work.

Hopefully, we're on the same page with this.

I probably should've talked to her about it before I stuck my dick in her, but it's a little too late for that now.

Chapter 16

Riley

I'm early. Me, Riley Stevens, is early to work. No one is more surprised than me. But here I am, setting my stuff at my desk at seven forty-five with a fresh pumpkin spice latte to boot.

I was on cloud nine when I got home last night. Of course, I called Candice on my drive home and gave her the rundown of my little adventure with Kellan. She couldn't believe it, and honestly, neither could I.

I knew he would be good at sex. I mean, he just has this aura about him. He's sexy and confident and smart. Plus, he's got that Big Dick Energy, as Candice says. And I can confirm he knows exactly what to do with a woman's body. Sheesh.

My vag is feeling a little sore this morning, but not sore enough that I would turn down another offer from Mr. Winters.

After I hung up with Candice, I fed Luna and hopped in the shower. I almost didn't do it because I didn't want to wash Kellan's scent off me, but I shook off that thought, realizing it was probably just sex for him, and I can't go all crazy psycho girlfriend on him. I've got to play this cool because I know that we still have to work together even if this doesn't go anywhere. I don't want to be the one to make it awkward.

Taking a sip of my coffee, I look around the office. Even this early, a few people are already here clicking away on their computers. I glance at the conference room where Kellan had

me pinned down on the table and feel my cheeks heat. Never did I think I'd be doing that in this office.

I know my dad is already here because he's always told me he does his best work in the morning and likes to get an early start. Not to mention I saw his car in the parking garage. I walk to his office, not quite ready to dig into my work for the day because, unlike my dad, I work better in the afternoons.

"Hey Dan," I greet him, and it *still* feels weird to call him by his first name.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in..." He glances at the clock on his computer. "Early."

I laugh, and he turns away from his computer to give me his full attention.

"Yeah, Starbucks released the PSL today, so I wanted to make sure I had time to stop and get one before coming to work," I tell him, holding up my cup. I'm a sucker for a seasonal drink.

He scoffs. "I don't know how you drink that stuff."

"Just like this," I tell him and take a big sip, making him laugh.

"How's everything going with work? You liking it here?"

"I love it." I sink down into the seat across from him. "I'm learning so much. I mean, most of my cases are pretty basic right now, but it's still fun to say they're *my* cases, you know?"

"I'll never forget my first case. It was a DUI. Pretty cut and dry. But I'll never forget it because it was the first one I worked by myself."

"It's kind of crazy that I've been dreaming about this for so long, and it's finally here."

"You're going to be a great lawyer. Maybe even better than me," he tells me.

I laugh. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"So, how's everything going on the Lana Johnson case? Kellan going easy on you?" He smiles, and I hope my face

doesn't look as red as it feels. Because Kellan did not go easy on me last night, but I'm a hundred percent sure that's not what my dad is referring to.

"The case is going well, I think. We're trying to put some pieces together to at least create reasonable doubt. I don't know that we're going to be able to say that Lana for sure didn't do it. We seem to be missing a key part that would exonerate her."

"Well, that's how most cases work for us, unfortunately. More often than not, we don't know if our client is innocent. Sometimes it's better if we don't know." He winks at me, and I know it's because there have been a few people he's struggled with defending. I know it weighs on his conscience that he may have gotten guilty people off on charges they should be locked up for. But this is our job. If the client can't be found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, they can't be convicted. We're here to make sure they get due process, and in America, people are innocent until proven guilty. Being a criminal defense attorney is a hard job, but someone has to do it. We also help innocent people clear their names. Dad says that's the feeling that makes everything else worth it.

"I know. Kellan has been a great mentor, though, if you want to call him that," I say with a chuckle. "It's been cool to watch him question people and put everything together."

"He's one of the best on my staff. That kid is going places."

I nod, believing him. I'm excited to see how Kellan is in the courtroom. I'm expecting him to just tear down the prosecution, and I have a feeling he's not going to let me down.

"Oh, your mother wanted me to ask you to come to dinner this week. She said any night, just let her know. She'll make your favorite."

"Mmm, chicken pot pie."

He chuckles and shakes his head. "She does make a mean chicken pot pie."

“I’ll check my schedule and text her.” I sigh and stand up from my chair. “Alright, I guess I’ve wasted enough time. I should get to work now.” I smile at him and then head back to my desk.

I know the moment Kellan walks into the office. There’s something electric about him, like he just exudes confidence. Or maybe my vagina has a Kellan radar now and alerts me when he’s near.

The way my cubicle is situated, I can see everyone who walks into the office, which also means they can see me. Turning slightly, I watch as Kellan, in a navy blue suit and crisp white shirt, walks past the receptionist’s desk and toward me. Other than a slight flick of his eyes in my direction, he doesn’t acknowledge me.

It makes my heart sink, even though I was expecting it. I know we won’t be shouting from the rooftops that we slept together, but a smile would’ve been nice. I can’t let it bother me, though. Two can play at that game.

I start working on a felony drug case that landed on my desk. The guy was arrested with coke in his truck, and they’re charging him with drug possession with intent to distribute. I’m not sure I believe the probable cause the prosecution is using for the search of his truck at a routine traffic stop. Digging into the case file, I lose track of time. The next time I look up, it’s almost time for the weekly staff meeting.

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath. I look around and see all the desks next to me are empty, so everyone must already be in the conference room. Would’ve been nice if someone popped in to remind me.

I grab my notebook and power walk to the conference room. The meeting has already started by the time I walk in. I lift my hand in an apology to my dad, who pretends to ignore the fact that I’m late. I sit in the only empty chair that’s left, which happens to be right next to Kellan.

He doesn’t even look in my direction. And he may not be looking at me, but I’m in the perfect position to look at him. He’s taken his suit jacket off and rolled his sleeves up. I

immediately think about last night when I watched him roll his sleeves up before his mouth made my body explode in pleasure. His hand is resting on the table, and he's leaning back in his chair, looking as laid back as ever.

I look away so no one notices that I'm staring at Kellan and open my notebook. I grab my pen and start doodling like I always do in these meetings. I listen and take a lot of mental notes as everyone talks.

The meeting finishes, and everyone else files out, including my dad, who side-eyes me on his way out, letting me know he's mad I was late. Thankfully, he doesn't stop to reprimand me in front of everyone.

When everyone else is gone, it's like *deja vu* because Kellan and I are sitting in the big room alone. He turns his chair toward me but doesn't say anything. He just looks at me, like he's studying me or something.

"Hey," I say lamely.

"Hi," he replies and stands, his hand deliberately sliding against my thigh and sending a shiver down my spine. Then he leaves without another word.

What am I supposed to think about that?

And how is a single touch making me want to melt onto the floor in front of him?

I'm done for.

Leaving the conference room, I look around the office and see our PI, River, coming out of another senior attorney's office.

Seeing him reminds me that I need to talk to him. I walk over just as he finishes his conversation. He's right next to Kellan's office, but I don't look in. I don't want to appear *too* eager.

"River."

He turns and smiles at me. "Hey, Baby Stevens."

My eyes widen, and I tug him over toward an empty office. “Keep your voice down. And don’t tell anyone else, ok? I don’t want them thinking I got this job because he’s my dad.”

“You think no one else knows?” His brows furrow like he can’t believe no one has figured it out.

“No. Well, Kellan knows because Dad has a big mouth, but no one else. At least, no one has said anything, so I assume they don’t.” As I say it, I start to question myself. I look at my co-workers and wonder if they are just pretending not to know. Maybe they don’t care.

“Anyways, I need a favor.”

“I don’t do favors, Stevens.”

I roll my eyes. “Obviously, we’re going to pay you. It’s about the Lana Johnson case.”

“Alright, what do you need?”

“I want more information on Dax’s partner, Shawn Briggs.”

He tilts his head. “Why? What are you looking for?”

“I don’t know. I just feel like something is off with him. Did he have any issues with Tiffany or Lana or even Dax? Is his alibi legit?”

“You got something on him?”

“Nothing but a hunch. And Kellan explicitly told me he won’t do anything with that. So, I want to bring him something he can use.”

“Alright, Baby Stevens. I’ll see what I can do.”

With an exasperated sigh, I say, “And quit it with that.”

“Calm down. No one heard.” He’s teasing me, and I know it, so I smile and give him a playful shoulder punch. “I’ll get you what you need.”

“Thanks, River.” We walk out of the office, and I hear my name called. I turn and see Kellan staring at me from behind

his desk. His eyes flick from me to River, who doesn't bother stopping. He knows his way around the office, so he doesn't need anyone to walk him out.

I take a few steps into Kellan's office and put my hands on the back of one of the chairs. "Yes, boss?"

"I'm not your boss," he tells me without a hint of humor in his voice.

I lean forward on the chair and lower my voice. "Would you rather me call you Sir?"

His eyes widen with panic before he says, "Only after work hours."

A laugh explodes from me, and Kellan's jaw twitches. "Did you need something?"

"What were you talking to River about?" He looks over my shoulder to the empty hallway.

"Work stuff."

"Mm-hmm." Sounds like Mr. Winters might be jealous. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling.

"You told me you can't work off a vibe, so I'm trying to get something more." He nods but doesn't say anything. "Did you need anything else?"

He stays silent for a minute while he studies my face. "Come to my place tonight." It's more of a command than a question, but it makes my stomach flutter.

"Send me your address," I respond nonchalantly, like I may or may not come. But inside I'm dying because I get to see Kellan's place. I don't know why that's so exciting to me. It's like he's letting me into his world a little more, and I'll take whatever peek he's willing to share.

I turn on my heels and walk out of his office, feeling his eyes on my ass. I sway my hips more than normal, just to give him a show.

Chapter 17

Kellan

There's a knock on my door a few minutes after seven. I know who it is because no one ever visits me, and even though I told her to be here at seven, she doesn't know how to be on time.

"Hey, I brought dinner." She holds up grocery bags as soon as I open the door for her. She changed into leggings and an oversized T-shirt, and I couldn't help but admire how the black fabric molded to every curve.

She walks past me and places the bags on my kitchen counter. When she takes out the uncooked chicken breast, dry pasta, and broccoli, I realize she plans to make dinner.

"You're cooking dinner?" I ask slowly.

"Yep. I thought about picking food up, but I wasn't sure what you wanted. I figured if I made something, you'd feel obligated to eat it no matter what it is." She chuckles to herself as she opens cabinets. She's right too. I would never turn down food someone cooked for me, although no one has cooked for me in over ten years, and the last person was my mom. "Where are your pots and pans?"

"Um, bottom left by the oven." She opens that cabinet and pulls out a pot, presumably for the pasta, and a skillet for the chicken. I sit on the bar stool and watch her move around my kitchen. She chops up the chicken while telling me about her day. She recalls something funny Spencer said while they had lunch today, and I refrain from telling her how much I hate the way he looks at her. She tells me about a drug case she's

working on and asks my opinion, but she doesn't need it. She's already planning to do exactly what I would do. It all feels very normal, like we've done this hundreds of times.

By the time she's finished with dinner, she's talked my ear off, and I've actually enjoyed listening to her. I always thought I was the kind of person who liked being alone. Silence is my comfort zone. But having Riley here is making my empty apartment feel like a home.

"This is a nice place," she comments as she spoons chicken Alfredo onto one of my plates.

"Thanks."

"It could use some sprucing up, though. All your walls are bare." I watch her eyes stop at every empty wall around the living room.

I shake my head, remembering the few glances I took around her place when I picked her up for our "date." "Would you like it to look more like yours? It looked like a box of crayons exploded in there."

"Um, my apartment looks amazing, and maybe next time you can come to my place. I'm sure Luna would love you once she's gotten to know you."

"Yeah... I'm not much of a cat person."

She rolls her eyes as she rounds the kitchen counter, putting a plate in front of me. "Everyone says that, but Luna is the sweetest. There's no way you won't love her."

I don't respond because there's no point in arguing about a cat. Riley sits next to me, and we eat in silence.

"Thanks for dinner." I scoop the last bite into my mouth. "It was really good."

"Ah, well, it's hard to mess up jarred pasta sauce." She laughs.

"No one has ever cooked for me before, besides my mom." I don't know why I tell her this, but I can't stop it from coming out.

She looks at me, studying my face. I want to turn away from her attention, but I don't.

“Really?” I nod. “Well, I'm happy to be the first. And I'll even let you do the dishes.”

I grab both of our empty plates and take them to the kitchen. She watches me clean with her head propped up on her hand. She doesn't say anything, just watches.

But the moment I start the dishwasher, she bites her bottom lip. “That was hot watching you clean everything.”

I walk around the counter and put myself between her legs. “Are you saying that so I'll clean every time you cook?”

“Maybe.” She giggles as I tug her hair back and trail kisses down her neck. When I get to the spot she likes, she lets out a breathy moan that goes straight to my cock.

“I've been dying to be inside you all day,” I whisper against her neck.

She swallows under my lips. “Let's not keep you waiting any longer.”

Our lips lock, and my body feels electrified. I shouldn't want this woman as much as I do, and it actually scares me a little. But it won't stop me, not when it feels this damn good. I haven't felt this good in a long time, and I'm finally going to let myself indulge. No matter how off-limits this is.

I wrap her long legs around my waist and slip my hands under her ass, picking her up off the bar stool. The hallway to my bedroom is short, and it takes no time for me to get there and set her on my bed.

She looks around. “All white. Never would have guessed.” She takes in my all-white bedding before returning her attention to me. She lifts her shirt up over her head after I tug mine off. She unhooks her bra, and I watch it fall to the floor before looking back at her perfect breasts. She stands and slides her leggings off. Her naked body is on full display in front of me, and I freeze like I've never seen a naked woman before.

She smiles and nods toward my gym shorts. I slide them down with my boxer briefs. Her hand reaches out, running down my body—over my chest and down my abs—until she’s wrapping her fist around my hard cock. “You’re so... I have no words,” she says. I know exactly what she means because I feel the same looking at her.

Riley drops to her knees in front of me. She pumps me a few times before looking up at me. “Is this ok?”

I only nod because if I tried to talk right now, I think I would sound like a pre-pubescent teenager. There’s no way I’m turning down a blow job, although I wish she was still wearing her red lipstick because that really does something for me.

She opens her mouth and slides my cock along her tongue. Her lips wrap around me, and I almost come right there. I inhale deeply and try to think about anything besides Riley on her knees, my cock in her mouth.

But I can’t. My eyes will not look away. She pumps me a few more times with her fist still at my base and then goes for it, taking all of me until I hit the back of her throat.

Holy shit.

She does it again, taking me a little further each time. Her free hand reaches up to cup my balls, and I’m not sure how much more I can take. She works me with her hand while her mouth licks and sucks me until I feel like my knees might just give out.

I want her to keep going, but I also want to be inside her again, so I reluctantly grab her face and stop her before I come down her throat.

“On the bed, baby.” Her eyes light up as she does what I say. “I want you on your hands and knees.”

“Yes, sir.” Hearing her call me sir makes me even harder, which I didn’t think was possible.

When her ass is in the air, I slide my face underneath her and lick from front to back. I wrap my arms around her legs

and bring her pussy closer to my face. Close enough that I can fuck her with my tongue until she's trembling in my arms.

Coming up for air, I scoot out from under her and line myself up, ready to fuck her so good she'll be ruined for any man that comes after me. I rub my cock up and down her pussy, collecting all her wetness. "You still good with no condom?"

I know she approved it last time, but I would gladly slip one on if she changes her mind. Even though the thought of filling her up with my cum has been running through my head. I don't even want kids, at least not anytime soon, but damn, if the thought of impregnating this woman doesn't make me extra fucking hard. She's bringing out parts of me I never knew existed.

"Yes. Fuck me, Kellan."

I push into her, and we both cry out. Grabbing onto her hips, I start thrusting into her. "Goddamn, princess."

Her nails dig into my comforter as she tries to steady herself against the force of my hips.

My fingers hold her so tightly that I'm sure she'll have bruises tomorrow, but she doesn't stop me. Her moans actually get louder.

I don't know what makes me do it, but I pull my hand away and smack her ass right before my cock sinks into her again. She cries out, but her pussy squeezes my cock in excitement. "Such a good girl, taking my cock so deep. You'll let me do anything to this beautiful body, won't you?"

"Yes," she whimpers. "Anything you want if it feels this good." My head falls back. She's killing me and has no fucking clue.

"Play with your clit," I order. "I want you to come on my cock before I fill you up."

She whispers, "I'm close," before her hand lets go of my comforter and moves to her clit.

I smack her ass again. "That's it, princess."

Within seconds her walls tighten around me, and she cries out my name as her release takes over. I hold her hips up to keep her from falling as her legs almost give out.

But I'm not done. I don't think I could ever be done with her.

My hips move in a punishing pace. I want to come. I'm ready to come. On one final thrust, I still, emptying inside her.

I rub her ass, cheeks massaging where I see the red mark from my hand. "You make me crazy," I tell her as I slowly pull out of her and watch as my cum drips out. I lay down beside her as her body collapses on the bed.

"If this is you crazy, then I like that I do this to you. I like it a lot," she teases.

She wraps her arm over my chest, fingers roaming blindly on my tattooed shoulder. "Does your tattoo mean anything?"

When people ask, I usually say it's just a design I liked. It's an easy enough answer since it's just roses covering my shoulder and the top of my back. That's what I should tell Riley. But something about her face being nuzzled into my neck and her warm body pressed against mine makes me want to tell her the truth.

"When my brother was an apprentice at his first tattoo shop, I let him practice on me. He did these roses because our mom loved roses. She always thought of them as 'rich-people flowers.' And she was always so excited whenever we had roses in the house."

"That's so cool. Does your brother still tattoo?" My body tenses next to her, and I know she feels it, but her fingers don't stop tracing my shoulder.

"No. He's..."

After a pause too long of me not finishing my sentence, she asks, "He's what, Kellan?"

"He's in prison." Even after ten years of him being in there, it's still hard to say out loud. In fact, I don't think I've

ever actually told anyone he's in prison. I moved shortly after his trial, and no one knew who I was when I came here.

“Do you want to tell me why, or would you rather not talk about it?” I can tell she's not trying to pry, which I appreciate more than she'll ever know. I don't like to talk about what happened with Kai because it pisses me off that I can't do anything to help him.

“He was in Atlanta for some conference, a tattoo thing or something. He came with some other guys from the shop he was working at. They went out that night, got wasted. And he ended up waking up in jail the next morning. They told him some chick identified him as someone involved with an armed robbery.”

“Was he involved?”

“No. He swears up and down he wasn't. He doesn't remember everything that happened, but I can't see Kai doing something like that. He didn't even own a gun. They had nothing on him except the girl who identified him; all she was going on was that he had tattoos covering his arms. He had a shitty lawyer because we couldn't afford anyone better than what the state provided. The guy didn't even try. He took one look at Kai and assumed he was guilty.”

“That's awful. How long is he in for?”

“Fifteen years. He's already served ten. He was twenty-two, barely even an adult. I've spent the past ten years trying to find a way to get him out, to prove he's innocent. But I keep fucking failing—failing him, failing my mom. She won't even talk to me anymore because she thinks that just because I'm a lawyer, I should be able to get him released. Like it doesn't kill me every day that he's in there. He's my best friend.”

Her hand moves to my chest, presumably to calm my beating heart. “I'm so sorry, Kellan. I can't even imagine.”

“Fuck, I didn't mean to unload all that shit on you. I've never talked about it with anyone before.” What is it about her that makes me want to talk to her about everything? I've never

been open with other people. That's probably why I don't have a lot of friends.

She props herself up on her arm. "Thank you for telling me, Kellan. Truly. Thank you for trusting me."

I let out a deep breath, and then she's kissing me. Not the passionate kisses we've been sharing. This is slow and gentle. She sucks gently on my lip, and her tongue runs over where she just sucked until my lips part, and she slides in So. Damn. Slow.

She's thanking me with her mouth. I might just tell her everything about myself if I get a reaction like this after every story.

Chapter 18

Riley

Leaving Kellan's apartment, my fingers fidget, and my mind reels. And not from the second round of orgasms Kellan gave me before I told him I had to get home. I think he was going to ask me to stay, but he held back. And as much as I want to fall asleep in his arms, I'm glad he didn't ask tonight because I'm dying to look up his brother's case.

I've never seen him worked up and open like that. My heart breaks for him. Of course, I didn't tell him that because I know a man like Kellan doesn't want pity from anyone. That's why he keeps everything to himself. But he told me this story. He opened up to me. And I want to see if I can help.

When I get home, even though it's late and I should definitely be in bed, I open my laptop. Luna is curled up beside me, and I search for Kai Winters.

Dozens of articles pop up from ten years ago. Some from when the robbery first happened and a few from the trial and sentencing. The pictures of Kai show me that he looks so much like Kellan. Except for his eyes. Kai has golden brown eyes as opposed to Kellan's blues. Kai also has tattoos completely covering both of his arms.

I read through every article I can find, even though I know they're all biased and what I really need is his case file. The articles tell me the basics so I can piece together a rough story.

There was an armed robbery at a jewelry store in downtown Atlanta. Kai had been out drinking with some of his buddies but got separated at some point. Kai testified that he

was walking down the street when he stumbled across the crime scene, police everywhere. A girl pointed at him, and the next thing he knew, he was handcuffed and in jail.

All the other articles tell me everything Kellan mentioned. He was convicted and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Several pictures from the trial show a younger Kellan and a woman, I assume their mother, sitting behind Kai. In one, all of them are crying, and my heart literally breaks right here, staring at my computer screen. I've never experienced anything like that in my life. The pain Kellan and his mother must have gone through to see Kai convicted of something like that must have been excruciating.

There has to be something that can get Kai released. If Kellan believes his brother didn't do it, then I believe it too, and we have to find a way to get him out.

* * *

The next morning comes way too soon. I spent too much time down a Kai Winters rabbit hole last night. By the time my alarm went off, I'd only gotten four hours of sleep. Today is going to be rough, to say the least. I can't even come home and go straight to bed after work because I told my mom I'd come for dinner.

I make an extra-large cup of coffee and try my best to make myself look alive when I walk into the office five minutes after eight. Yes, I'm late. But I was early yesterday, so it balances out.

Getting to work, I write my to-do list for the day and slowly but surely start checking each item off as I go. I feel more focused today, which is weird, considering how tired I am.

I glance toward Kellan's empty office, wondering where he is. He didn't mention being out today, but he never does, so it's not unusual. Maybe I'm more focused because he's not here to distract me.

After lunch, when I still haven't heard from Kellan, I give in and text him. We hardly ever text unless it's about work. But I just want to make sure he's ok. He shared some heavy stuff with me last night, things I don't think he has ever shared. He might be trying to push me away again.

Riley: You aren't avoiding me are you? :)

I assume I won't hear from him for a while, but my phone vibrates almost immediately.

Kellan: In court today. I should've told you.

Riley: you don't need to tell me anything. I'm just making sure all the orgasms didn't kill you, old man.

Kellan: I'm feeling surprisingly spry today.

I choke down a laugh when I read that text.

Riley: Good! Glad I can help bring you back to life haha. Good luck in court!

Kellan: Thanks.

I put my phone down and resume the email response I'm drafting that starts with a "Per my last email." I hate to be that girl, but some people make it impossible.

My phone vibrates again, and I assume it's Candice or maybe my mom asking when I'll be over, but I see Kellan's name again.

Kellan: I miss seeing your beautiful face today.

I gasp. Did Kellan Winters just text me sweet nothings? Insert Monarch butterflies in my stomach. I flip my camera to selfie mode and snap a picture of myself blowing the camera a kiss. I send it to him before I can change my mind.

Riley: Miss you too

Kellan: That fucking red lipstick. Now I've got a boner, and I have to get back in there.

Riley: I didn't realize you were such a fan of red.

Kellan: I think I'm a fan of anything if it's on you.

I can't stop the grin that spreads across my face. I'm sure I look like a crazy person sitting at my desk, alone and smiling, but I don't care. This man is making me swoon, and I'm going to enjoy it.

* * *

I pull up to my parents' house right at six. My dad is already home, having left the office about a half-hour before I did. I use my key to get in the door. Being a defense attorney means a lot of people are mad at you for defending alleged criminals. It's a dangerous job, so my dad always has the windows and doors locked and several security cameras around the property.

He did all of this when one of his buddies from law school was murdered by someone who wasn't happy with a case verdict. My dad immediately set out to make sure Mom and I were as safe as we could be in our own home.

"Mom, Dad. Your favorite daughter is here," I call out after I shut the door and lock it behind me. The smell of buttery, flaky pastry hits my nose and makes my mouth water. Mom makes the best chicken pot pie. I'm pretty sure I'd pick it for my last meal if I were on death row. That and a big ole cup of sweet tea.

"We don't have many options, now, do we?" Dad yells from the living room. I'm an only child. I've always loved being an only child because I got all of my parents' attention. But I was curious one day and asked Mom why they never had any more kids. She told me they tried at one point, but when she had a few miscarriages, she took that as a sign from the universe that she was only meant to have one perfect daughter. It makes me sad that she couldn't have another baby, but she seems content with her family. My parents have been together for over thirty years and are still so in love. And they have me to dote on, obviously.

Mom comes out from the kitchen to greet me, instantly wrapping me up in a hug. "Hey, baby girl."

“Hey, Mama. Thanks for having me over for dinner.” She releases me from the hug.

“You know I miss you. If I had it my way, you’d still be living here.”

“Oh yes. Everyone loves a woman who still lives with her parents at twenty-seven.”

“I know, I know.” She brushes me off. “I just miss you.”

“I miss you too.” I follow her into the kitchen, sit at the barstools, and watch her finish cooking. We chat about my job a little and how her job has been. She’s been a librarian at the local library for the last twenty years. She doesn’t need to work, but she loves it. And I love that she loves it.

“So, have you been on any dates recently?” She smirks.

“Mooom,” I groan.

“What? You can’t blame me for asking. It’s been months since you and Landon ended things.”

“I know. I’ve been on a few dates.” If you call my super weird and random date with Kellan and the two times we’ve slept together dates. I leave those parts out for my mom’s sanity and because I’m not sure how Dad would react to that information.

“None of them caught your eye?” I try to stop the smile from spreading across my face, but I’m too late, and Mom sees it. “Ah, there is someone.”

“I mean, there is one guy. But it’s not serious yet, so I don’t want to jinx it.”

She laughs. “Alright. I won’t ask for any more details. But when you’re ready, I want to know everything.”

“I promise.” My mom has always been super supportive of me. I tell her everything, and she’s helped me get through some pretty tough heartbreak in the past. But things with Kellan are different. Mainly because he works with Dad, and I don’t know how Dad would feel about me dating, or sleeping with, one of his employees. So I think it’s best if Kellan and I

keep our situation to ourselves for now. At least until we see where this goes.

“Alright, dinner’s ready. Can you grab your dad?” I nod and tell my dad to get his ass in the kitchen for dinner. He laughs and ruffles my hair on his way to the kitchen.

We sit around the circular table that we’ve had since before I can remember. Mom puts the food in the middle, and we all help ourselves.

After dinner, when I’m thoroughly stuffed and have helped clean all the dishes, I ask Dad if I can talk to him in his office.

He flips on his desk lamp and sits back in his big leather chair. I take a seat across the desk in one of the burgundy chairs I used to play around in when I was little. I would sit with him while he worked and ask him question after question. It was fun for me, but looking back, it probably annoyed the hell out of him. Bless his heart; he never asked me to leave or be quiet.

“What’s going on, baby girl?”

I’ve debated all day if I want to talk to my dad about this, but ultimately if I want something to happen, I know I’m going to need his help.

I take a deep breath. “Did you know Kellan’s brother is in prison?”

By the way his brow furrows, I know he didn’t. “No, I don’t think he’s ever mentioned it.” Of course he hasn’t. He’s too stubborn to ask for help.

“Yeah, he mentioned it to me, so obviously, I looked into it.”

“Obviously.” Dad smiles.

“It feels like he may have been wrongfully convicted, and I was wondering if you might be able to help.”

He blows out a heavy breath. “That’s a tough job, Riley.”

“I know, but Kellan really beats himself up about the fact that he can’t seem to find something that will help the case or

get the conviction overturned.”

Dad stares at me for a few long seconds, trying to read something on my face. “Why do you want to do this? I thought you didn’t like him.”

Uh oh. Play it cool, Riley. “Well, I’ve gotten to know him a little more while working on this case. He’s not as terrible as I thought. And you know I can’t pass up an opportunity to help someone.”

“Does Kellan know you’re doing this?”

I shake my head. “I didn’t want to say anything until I knew there was a possibility.” I’m hoping we can make something happen with this case, and Kellan can have his brother back. Surely, he can’t be upset if we’re helping him make progress.

He studies me again before nodding and grabbing his trusty legal pad. “Alright. Take me through what you know.”

Smiling, I unload everything Kellan told me and everything from my internet search. Dad writes notes as I talk and asks a few questions in between.

By the time I leave for the night, I feel a huge weight lifted off my shoulders. Dad is going to help me, which makes me feel more confident that we’ll be able to help Kellan.

And that makes my heart happy.

Chapter 19

Riley

By Friday morning, I'm ready for the weekend. Not like I've got plans, but you know.

I'm up on time to get my favorite seasonal coffee before work and celebrate the fact that it's the end of the week. The walk from the parking garage to the office is short, but I can't stop my mind from wandering with everything bouncing around in there: I only have two weeks to find something on Shawn before Lana's trial starts, I need more information on Kellan's brother's case, and I'm dying to see Kellan again. He's been stuck in court all week and hasn't been by the office, or at least not when I'm there. We've exchanged a few texts, but it's not the same. I'm not trying to be a stage five clinger, but you can't do what we did two nights in a row and then go without for too long. I'm having orgasm withdrawal.

When I turn the corner for the elevator, I stop in my tracks because Kellan is standing there, looking breathtakingly stunning, as always. Every time I see him, I'm always shocked by his handsome features. Everything about him just screams *man*. And I freaking love it.

"Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in," I say, walking up behind him after my legs decide to work again.

He looks over his shoulder at the sound of my voice, and his eyes immediately go to my red lips. "Good morning, gorgeous."

My stomach flutters at the nickname, although I think I'm actually starting to like when he calls me princess. "Is your

case over?”

“Yes.”

I sigh, knowing I’m going to have to pry it out of him.
“And?”

His lips tip upwards just a little. “My client was found not guilty on all counts except a misdemeanor drug charge.”

“That’s awesome, Kellan. People are going to be fearing your name in no time.” I elbow him playfully, and he chuckles.

The doors slide open, and we step into the empty elevator. I press the button, and as soon as the doors close, Kellan presses me against the wall with his body.

It catches me off guard at first, but my body relaxes when I look into his eyes. “I’ve been thinking about these lips for the past three days.”

He doesn’t give me time to respond. His hand cups my head and brings my lips to his. He consumes me, stealing my breath away. I run my free hand through his hair, tugging it as his tongue slides over mine.

When the elevator dings alerting us that we’ve reached our floor, Kellan pulls away from me so fast that I almost lose my balance. I put my hand on the wall to steady myself and catch my breath. Kellan extends his arm, letting me know he wants me to get off first, but we walk side by side through the office, both of us keeping our heads down. He probably has my lipstick all over his mouth, and I can’t imagine how smeared mine is. The lipstick I use is a long-lasting matte shade, but it’s not a miracle worker. It still smudges.

When I get to my desk, I take out my small compact mirror and fix my make-up. I’m only at my desk for a few minutes when Dad walks by and says, “Riley, a word. In my office.”

His tone confuses me, and I try to remember if he talks to my peers like that or if I should be worried that he’s mad at me. Could he have seen what happened in the elevator or our walk of shame through the office? Surely not.

In any case, I follow him into his office.

“Is everything alright?” I ask.

He turns and smiles. “Yeah, I just wanted people to think you were in trouble.” He laughs.

I roll my eyes at him. “Well, it worked. I thought I was in trouble.”

“Did you do something that would get you in trouble?” He narrows his eyes.

“Nope,” I reply, a little too quickly.

“Mm-hmm. Anyway, have a seat.” I do as I’m told. “So, I was able to get the case file for Kai Winters from a friend of mine.”

My eyes light up. “Did you read through it?”

“I did, and I agree that he might be innocent. I’m willing to work on this with you to get him a new trial. Worst case, they tell us no. Best case, he’s exonerated.” I can’t even imagine how much it would mean to Kellan to have his brother back a few years earlier than expected, with nothing on his record.

“Ok, ok.” I scoot to the edge of my seat, dying to look at the case file.

“The first thing you need to do is go talk to Kai. You’ve got to make sure he’s ok with us doing this. And I want you to get his side of the story, then we will compare it to his testimony.”

My body goes still. “You want... me to go talk to him? Are you sure about that?”

“Very sure. This was your idea. No better way to build experience than to jump right in.”

“Yeah, but this is like a big deal. What if I forget to ask something or I mess up?”

He smiles at me. “Then you go back and ask questions again. Do you think I was just great at this when I started? No. I worked really hard to get where I am. I messed up a ton but learned from everything I did.”

“Alright.” I let out a big breath.

Dad tells me what prison Kai is in and that I’ll need to go during visiting hours on the weekend. I take down some notes on my phone, Dad hands me Kai’s case file, and I head back to my desk.

Standing at my desk, I look back at Kellan’s office. His door is open, and he’s typing away at his computer. He has his glasses on again, which makes my stomach flutter. I love those damn things. Anything this man does is attractive, even if it’s something as mundane as typing on a computer. I’m pretty sure I look like a hunched-over gargoyle while I work. Not Kellan. His back is straight as a board, his shirtsleeves are rolled up, exposing just the right amount of forearm, and his lips are parted and moving slightly, almost like he’s reading his words as he types, which is surprisingly cute.

I set the case file on my desk and walk straight to his office. It’s like I’ve got tunnel vision or something and my feet have a mind of their own.

I step into his office and sit in one of his chairs. He stops typing and looks over at me, studying my face.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” he asks.

Before I lose my nerve, I say, “There’s this cute little bar by my apartment. I was thinking about getting a drink there tonight and wanted to know if you wanted to come.”

One side of his lips curves into a half-smile. “Are you asking me on a date, princess?”

“Nope.” I shake my head. “I’m asking you to get a drink with me. Then I’ll ask you back to my place to make me come.”

His eyes go wide, and he glances over my shoulder to make sure no one heard. “I can’t really say no to that.”

I stand, put my hands on his desk, and lean forward, showing just the right amount of cleavage. “Good. I’d hate to have to do it myself again. Pretending it’s you touching me isn’t the same as having the real thing.” I smile and wink and watch his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows.

“Jesus Christ. Are you trying to give me blue balls?”

I run my tongue across my bottom lip, and his eyes follow my movements. “No. Just making sure you’re ready to fill me up later.”

“I’ve been ready since the moment I pulled out of you last time.”

I stand and turn on my heels. Just before I walk out of his office, I look over my shoulder to see him very blatantly staring at my ass. He doesn’t bother to act like he wasn’t, and I fucking love it. I want him to watch me. I want him to want me as much as I want him.

* * *

After a day of going through Kai’s case file, constantly looking over my shoulder to make sure Kellan isn’t coming up behind me and figuring out how to get to the prison and what questions I want to ask when I get there, I’m more than ready to get out of here.

Before I leave for the day, I text Kellan, tell him to meet me at eight, and give him the name of the bar. When I get home, I go into crazy mode to clean up my apartment since Kellan will, fingers crossed, be coming over tonight. The issue is that I like things. I could never be a minimalist, so there’s no way I can make my place look as spotless as his. But I can at least make sure all my clothes are in the laundry basket, and the bed is made.

For drinks, I decide on jeans and a white crop top T-shirt. It’s casual but cute. Perfect for a non-date.

I get to the bar a few minutes late because that’s just who I am at this point and immediately see Kellan waiting for me at a high-top table. He’s in jeans and a black T-shirt and looks sexy as fuck.

He shakes his head when I approach the table. “You’d be late to your own funeral.”

I shrug. “Yeah, probably. I like to make an entrance.” I sit down on the chair across from him.

The server comes by and takes our drink order, and as soon as she’s gone, Kellan starts talking about work.

“Have you heard anything from River?” he asks. He must be anxious to know if Shawn will be a route we can take during the trial.

I shake my head. “Nope. We’re not talking about work tonight.”

He looks at me, confused. “Why not?”

“Because we’re having fun tonight. What would you talk about if you were on a date?”

“I thought this wasn’t a date.” He cocks an eyebrow at me. What a commitment-phobe.

“Hypothetically speaking, if you were on a date, what would you talk about?” He stares at me with a blank expression. “Come on. How would *the* Kellan Winter woo a woman?”

The server drops off my fruity cocktail and Kellan’s beer just in time because he’s looking a little nervous. He takes a big sip of his beer. “I don’t know. It’s been a long time since I’ve been on a date.”

Well, that’s unexpected. But I knew he was a workaholic, so I can see how he doesn’t make time for dating. I can’t say it doesn’t make me happy to know he’s not spending his time with other women. “Alright, well, I’ll start then. I’ll be glad to show you all the dating hacks that have resulted in me being single at twenty-seven.”

He laughs. “Let’s hear them.”

“Well, I’m Riley. I’m a Taurus. Very stubborn. I’m an only child, which means I was spoiled beyond belief growing up and expect the same treatment from any man I date. I’m probably going to end up an old cat lady, which I’m totally fine with. I’m late for everything. I love going to concerts with my best friend, and I’m a Swiftie through and through. I’ve

wanted to be a lawyer for as long as I can remember because I've always looked up to my dad. Oh, and I will never drink Jäger again."

The corner of his mouth tips up in a smile. "Wow. That's a lot to unpack. I have absolutely no idea how you're still single."

"I know. I know. It's crazy," I tease. "Alright, you're up."

"I don't know if I can top that."

"No need to. Just give me a basic rundown so it doesn't feel like I'm sleeping with a stranger."

He chuckles. "Ok. I think I'm a Scorpio, but I have no idea what that really means. I have one brother. I don't plan on ever owning cats. I like to be on time or early for things. I've never been to a concert. I've wanted to be an attorney since I read my first true crime book in high school. And I've had one too many bad nights with tequila."

"Ok, what? You've never been to a concert? That feels like a crime. I'm going to have to find one for us to go to. And I think you might change your mind about cats when you get to know my LuLu. She's the sweetest."

"Yeah. We'll see."

"About the concert or the cat?"

"Both." I nudge my foot into his leg under the table. That perfect smile spreads across his face.

"Ok, so did you play any sports in high school?" I ask, hoping to get a little more out of him.

"Kai and I did wrestling for a while, but that was more for us to get some teenage aggression out."

I want to ask more questions about him and his brother, but I feel like it's a sensitive subject, and I don't want to bring down his mood.

"If you could only bring three things to a deserted island, what would they be?"

He takes a second to answer. “A knife, a water purifier, and a magnifying glass.”

I cock my head to the side. “Why a magnifying glass?”

“To start a fire,” he says like it’s obvious. Which maybe it would be to anyone but me. I’ve never even attempted to camp. “Matches will eventually run out.”

“Wow,” I say slowly. “You are *such* a nerd.”

He gives me a pointed look. “But I’m a nerd who will survive on a deserted island.”

“Yeah, it’s a good thing you’re so hot.”

“I’m glad you think so.” He tilts his chin towards me. “What would you bring?”

“My favorite romance novel, a cute bikini, and lots of lip balm.”

He nods. “Yeah, you’re gonna die.”

We continue drinking and talking until we’ve had one too many drinks, and he gets that hungry look in his eyes that says he could devour me right here on this sticky table.

We close out our tab—he insists on paying even when I offer to split it since it’s definitely *not* a date—and then we head outside.

Where it’s started raining. I love when it rains.

“Did you bring an umbrella?” he asks.

I smile, shaking my head. “Come on.”

I take his hand and pull him into the rain, soaking us both. But who cares? We’re going to be taking these clothes off soon anyway.

“You’re insane,” he calls to me.

“But that’s why you like me, right?”

He tugs me towards him and twirls me right into his arms. “Yeah, it is,” he whispers into my ear. “You’re so beautiful”

My heart beats a little faster as his body sways under the streetlight. He's dancing with me in the rain.

He's. Dancing. With. Me. In. The. Rain.

What romance movie am I in right now?

I smile against his soaking-wet chest. His hand tilts my chin, giving me a clear view of the tiny raindrops clinging to his eyelashes. And then his lips are on mine. Kissing me. Claiming me. Taking my breath away.

And I don't care who sees. In this moment, Kellan is mine. No matter what happens in a few days or weeks or months, I'll remember how I feel right now. Dancing in the rain with this man who makes me feel things I've never felt before. Who challenges my mind and my body.

"How are you so goddamn perfect, princess?" he asks between kisses.

And with that, I start pulling him toward my apartment, where I'll let him strip these wet clothes off me, and I'll throw my feminism out the window and let him take complete control of my body.

Chapter 20

Riley

I wake up wrapped in Kellan's arms. His chest is moving slightly with each breath he takes, and I wish we could stay like this forever, our naked bodies tangled around each other.

But I've got big plans today. Plans I can't talk to Kellan about just yet. I'm going to meet his brother for the first time, and Kellan doesn't know about it. I'm excited and hopeful that Dad and I will be able to help Kai. I can tell how much Kellan loves his brother, and I want to help him bring Kai home.

"Good morning," Kellan mumbles against the top of my head.

"Morning."

"God, I haven't slept that good in a long time," he tells me, his voice husky with sleep.

"Must've been the alcohol and the sex." I move my hips against his leg, and he groans.

"Yeah, that probably had something to do with it." Luna jumps on the bed and squeezes in between us.

"This damn cat."

I scratch behind her ears. "You love her."

"I don't know that we're at that level yet."

I laugh because he actually looks uncomfortable to have Luna so close to him. "Ok, I'm going to make you breakfast," I say, turning to roll out of bed.

But he stops me. “How about I make you breakfast?”

My mouth falls open. “*You* want to make me breakfast?”

He chuckles. “You keep acting like I don’t know how to cook.”

“Do you?” I ask, eyebrows raised.

“I’ve lived on my own for ten years. I know a little.”

“Alright, stud. Have at it. I give you permission to use whatever you need from my kitchen.”

He kisses my forehead and slips out of bed with his naked backside toward me. He slides on his boxers that were discarded quickly last night in our rush to get to bed. I stay under the covers and scroll through my social media.

Within a few minutes, I smell turkey bacon and maple syrup from the kitchen, so I slip on a T-shirt and underwear and follow the scent.

Kellan is standing at the stove, flipping a pancake. He moves like he’s comfortable in the kitchen, which is kinda hot. He finishes the pancakes and plates a few for me with turkey bacon and the maple syrup he’s been simmering to keep warm.

“Color me impressed,” I say when he hands me a plate.

“You haven’t even tried it yet.”

“Presentation is everything.” I cut into a fluffy pancake and can instantly confirm that they taste just as good as they look.

After we eat, Kellan does the dishes while I watch.

“Alright. I should probably head out. I’ve got some work to do.”

“Work? On a Saturday?”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “Yes, this Lana Johnson case is a big one for me. It’s going to be televised and bring a lot of attention to the firm and me. I’ve been tinkering with the language I want to use for my opening statement, but it doesn’t feel quite right yet.”

I nod. “Ok, well, I’m here if you need to use me as a sounding board.” I’m actually grateful he’s busy today. If last night had been an actual date, I would ask him to stay and do something since we had so much fun last night. But as it happens, I’ve got to make a trip to a nearby prison to meet a guy about a thing, and I don’t want to tell Kellan why I can’t hang out.

He comes out of my bedroom dressed in his clothes from last night. They’re wrinkled since they were drenched in rainwater before we tugged them off and threw them around the room.

He kisses me goodbye and assures me he’ll talk to me later. It’s vague because I know he’s not going to call me today, but it could also mean he’ll talk to me at work on Monday. I’m afraid I’m way overthinking this.

As soon as he’s out the door, I’m in my closet grabbing black dress pants and a bright green blazer, a little get-up I like to call my power suit. I pair it with a black blouse and heels that I hate wearing but make me look like ‘you should take me seriously because I mean business.’

I grab a water for the ride and head off toward the prison. It’s about an hour and a half drive from my apartment, and I wonder how often Kellan makes this same trip to see his brother.

Pulling up to the giant prison, the first thing I notice is the fencing with barbed wire at the top. I’ve been to prisons a few times, but that was for observations when I was in law school, and I always had someone with me. My hands are definitely sweating a bit more this time since it’s my first solo trip.

The prison lobby is not very welcoming, but I wouldn’t expect it to be sunshine and rainbows. I sign in and wait while they run a quick background check on me. I wait long enough for my nerves to turn into anxiety. I almost cave, call my Dad, and tell him I can’t do this. But I freeze as I reach for my phone and give myself a pep talk. I can do this. I know I can, but the nerves settle back in until it’s finally my turn to go

through security. The hallway from the lobby to the attorney-client room is filled with bright fluorescent lights.

I sit at the table and wait some more while the guard gets Kai... I think. He just told me to have a seat and then left.

On the other side of the door, I hear keys jingling, causing my back to go straight and my knee to bounce. I inhale quickly, hoping it'll calm my nerves, but it doesn't.

The door opens, and a man in an orange jumpsuit, hands cuffed in front of him, is escorted into the room. It's Kai. I know before he even introduces himself. His facial features are almost identical to Kellan's, except Kai has brown eyes, and his hair is buzzed.

Kai sits across from me, leaving his cuffed, tattoo-covered hands on the table in front of us.

"Knock when you're done," the guard tells me before shutting the door. I nod, but he doesn't stand around for an answer.

I can't find my voice for a moment, but I remind myself that I'm here to help Kellan, and I need to pull on my big girl pants and handle this.

"Kai Winters?" I ask, even though I know it's him.

"The one and only."

"I'm Riley Stevens. I'm an attorney."

Kai's eyes widen, and he sits up in his chair a little. "Wait. Riley Stevens? Hot attorney who wears bright red lipstick?"

"Um, what?" Yes, I'm wearing my usual red lipstick, but he's saying it like he knows me.

He laughs. "I've heard so much about you. Is my brother here too?" He looks around the small room like Kellan could possibly be hiding somewhere. The room is empty except for this table and two chairs.

"Oh, um, no. He's not here. He doesn't actually know I'm here." Kai's face falls a little. "But, wait, what do you mean you've heard about me?"

He smirks. “Kell and I talk about once a week. It sounds like he’s smitten.”

I want to laugh because Kellan smitten would be a sight to see. “I don’t know about all that.”

“Trust me, I’ve been locked up for ten years, and you’re the first woman he’s ever mentioned to me.” I feel my chest heating and hope it doesn’t travel to my face. I can’t believe Kellan, the same Kellan who literally ignored me for the first few weeks I worked with him, is now telling his brother about me.

“I’m glad I’ve made an impression on him, then.”

Kai chuckles. “So, to what do I owe the pleasure of my brother’s woman coming to see me without his knowledge?”

“He told me about your case.” Kai does a slow blink, so I continue explaining. “And I know he’s been trying to get you out of this. But he’s missing something. He has to be. So I’ve asked my dad to help. We want to review your case, put a fresh set of eyes on it, and see if we can do anything to help you.”

Kai stares at me and nods a few times. “Alright. I’m willing to take all the help I can get, but I gotta tell you, I’m outta money.”

“Oh, I wasn’t going to charge.”

His smirk makes another appearance. “You must really like my brother if you’re willing to work for free for his felon of a brother.”

“I do really like your brother. And he believes you’re innocent. It hurts him that you’re in here, and I’m sure you don’t love it either. I want to help you both.”

“Alright, Riley Stevens, what do you need from me?”

Ok. This is happening. I can do this. “I’ve read your case file, but I want to hear it from you. What happened that night?”

He nods. “I was in Atlanta for the weekend for a tattoo convention. When it was over, some of the guys said they

were going out for drinks, so I went along. I had just turned twenty-one and was willing to be wasted at any opportunity. We went bar hopping through the city. I had no idea where I was or how long we'd been out. The details are blurry. At some point, I got separated from most of the group. I was just with my buddy Trent. We were walking down a sidewalk and saw a bunch of police car lights. Naturally, I wanted to be nosey and see what was going on, so I walked over, but Trent wandered off. I stood there trying to figure out what was going on, then this chick was pointing at me. Next thing I know, I'm being cuffed and thrown in a cop car."

"Wait, your friend Trent. He was with you?"

"Yep."

"Did anyone ever interview him?"

He tilts his head to the side as he thinks. "Yeah, but he was fucked up that night and didn't remember much of anything, either. His comments weren't much help. He couldn't remember if I was walking with him or someone else from our group."

Writing this down on my notepad, I release a loud sigh. I reach into my purse and grab the map of Atlanta I printed at the office yesterday. It's a closeup of the area around the jewelry store. "Ok, here's the store." I put an X on it. "Do you know which way you guys may have walked that night?"

He spins the map toward him, and I hand him the pen. It looks uncomfortable to hold a pen while your hands are cuffed. "I was so out of it that night." He looks closer at the map, and his eyes squint to see everything. I probably could have found a better-quality map, but I was worried Kellan would walk up on me and figure out what I was doing.

"Just anything you can remember, " I coax.

"Is this The Painted Pig?" He points to a spot on the map.

"Yes."

"This is where we started." He circles it. "I remember thinking it was a stupid name for a bar."

I chuckle. It is a stupid name, but it's a really fun bar. "Ok, where'd you go next?"

"I think we went across the street." He draws a line. "But I can't remember. Like I said, I had a lot to drink, and it was ten years ago."

"That's ok. At least now I know you started from this end of the neighborhood. Can you walk me through what happened after you were taken to jail?"

He blows out a long breath before he goes over everything he can remember. It's not much, but it's also nothing I didn't know. Everything matches what I read in the case file.

From the sound of it, he ended up with an attorney who was on the brink of retiring and didn't care all that much about the outcome of Kai's case. An eyewitness supposedly saw Kai commit the robbery, so the attorney just kind of gave up.

It's infuriating that there are attorneys out there that do this. An innocent man is locked up because the attorney didn't give a shit. I try my best not to let my anger show on my face. Mask my emotions, right? That's what Kellan taught me.

When he wraps up his story, I ask him to add my number to his approved list of callers so we can discuss any updates I get.

"Thanks, Riley. Thanks for doing this."

I nod. "Of course. I really hope I can help." I stand from the table. "Oh, and if you could not mention this to Kellan just yet? I don't want to get his hopes up or anything, you know?"

"Yeah. I get it. Kellan is a good kid. Well, I guess he's not a kid anymore." Kai lets out a sad laugh. "He's a good man. And he's really into you. He's always been pretty hard-headed, which I'm sure isn't easy. Just..." He pauses, looking me over. "Go easy on him, ok? He's my little brother. I want him to be happy instead of spending his life trying to help me. And I think you can be the one to make him happy."

Be still my heart. "He makes me happy too, Kai." I wish I could give him a hug before I go, but I know it's against the

rules. I smile before knocking on the door to alert the guard that I'm done. "I'll be in touch."

"I look forward to it."

As soon as I'm out of the prison, I put my parents' address into my map app and head straight there to talk to my dad about everything I learned.

Chapter 21

Kellan

Twenty-four hours.

Twenty-four hours until the biggest trial of my life starts. I feel ready. At least as ready as I can feel with everything I have. I can see how the prosecution thinks they have a case, but I'm prepared. I feel like I have the best defense I can have at this point, and I'm confident we're going to introduce some doubt to the jurors.

We got a good group of jurors through jury selection. It was hard to find people who didn't know about this case, but in the end, I think we made the right choices.

I'm pacing in my office, thinking through my opening statement, when Riley knocks on my door and bounces in, scaring the shit out of me.

"Kellan!"

"Jesus Christ. What is wrong with you?" I look her up and down to figure out why she burst into my office like a kid on a sugar high.

"I'm on the phone with River." She takes the phone from her ear and hits the speakerphone button. "Ok, River. Kellan can hear you now. Tell him what you told me."

"What's up, Kellan?"

"Hey, River. What do you have for me?"

"Alright, so Riley asked me to look into that Shawn character. His alibi for the day of the murder is that he was with his mother for the weekend. I re-watched the CCTV

video closest to Lana's house and ran every license plate. One of them came back as belonging to a rental car company. When I talked to their legal rep, they told me it was registered to Shawn for that day. He'd rented it for forty-eight hours but returned it early."

"I knew that guy was a sketch ball," Riley interjects.

"This doesn't necessarily mean anything, but it doesn't look great for him. And at the very least, it introduces another potential killer. Good job, guys. Both of you."

Riley's face beams, and I can't take my eyes off her. We've spent almost every night together the last two weeks. The only exceptions being when she met her friend Candice for drinks and when she had dinner at her parents' house, which she actually seems to do a lot. It's strange for me to see people have such close relationships with their families since mine is complete and total shit. I can't remember the last time I spoke to my mom, and I haven't seen or heard from my dad since he walked out on us when I was a kid. The only family I have is currently locked behind bars and can only talk to me in fifteen-minute increments.

"I gotta run, guys, but hit me up if you need anything else. Good luck with the trial," River says. Riley thanks him before she hangs up her phone.

"I know this doesn't mean he did it, but I still feel in my gut that it's him. When we were in the studio with Dax, there was a sword on the wall, well, a lot of swords, but one was off-center. And it had little black dots all over the handle that could have been blood splatter. It just didn't give me a good feeling."

My jaw clenches. "Why didn't you tell me that earlier? We could've had it tested. The trial starts tomorrow, Riley."

She gives me a pointed look. "I didn't think you would've believed me. You wanted something tangible first, so I got it."

Opening and closing my fist at my side, I take a deep breath. "Sometimes you infuriate the hell out of me."

She fucking smiles. "You kinda like it, though. Don't lie."

“I don’t know. It would be nice to have someone around just to please me.”

“Oh, please. You’d be bored to shit, and you know it. You like me, and you like how off the wall I am. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t keep calling me to come over every night.”

“That’s just because we have mind-blowing sex.”

She leans against my desk and crosses her arms over her chest. “And why do you think we have mind-blowing sex, Kellan? It’s because you like me. It’s because I keep you on your toes. I infuriate you to the point that you can’t stand not being inside me.”

I bite my lower lip because she’s fucking right. Over the past few weeks, I found my mind wandering toward thoughts of her instead of thinking about work like I should be. Everything she does pisses me off and consequently turns me on.

Like right this second, her eyebrow is raised in my direction, and the curve of her hips in that damn skirt tempts me. She’s too delicious for her own damn good.

“I swear to God, Riley.”

“What?” She tilts her head slightly.

“If it wasn’t the middle of the day and we weren’t in a crowded office, I’d be showing you just how much you infuriate me.”

“Ooo.” She pushes off my desk and walks over to me, cupping my dick when she gets close enough. I freeze, but I don’t move her hand. “That sounds like fun. Maybe save it for tonight?” She winks at me and then gives my hardening dick a little squeeze before she turns and walks out of my office.

Watching her go feels like a sin. Her hips, her ass, the heels she wears to prove that she can be smart and drop-dead gorgeous at the same time.

While staring at her, I neglect to notice Dan come out of his office and look in my direction. “Winters. A word.” He walks back into his office.

Shit. Did he just see me checking out his daughter's backside? How do I talk myself out of that one? Now I have to walk across the office and hope my half-boner isn't on full display for everyone to see.

"Sir." I sit down across from Dan.

"Tomorrow is a big day. Are you ready?" he asks.

"As ready as I can be. I think we've got a good defense."

He nods. "Is there anything you need from me? Do you want me to be in court or leave you to it?"

I shake my head. "I've got it. No need to waste your time."

He purses his lips. "I'm sure you don't need me to tell you this, but if you win this, you'll be our main candidate for partner. Something like that at your age and with such a short tenure here is a big deal."

I wasn't sure, but I had certainly hoped that winning this case would get me partner. But hearing him say it just puts that much more pressure on me. "I appreciate you and Paul considering me for this. I hope I won't let you down."

"I'm sure you won't. Now, how's Riley doing?"

I hope he doesn't see the panic in my eyes. Does he know something? Did she say something to him about us? My neck starts to sweat. Clearing my throat, I choke out, "She's fine."

He throws his head back in laughter. "I know my daughter, Winters. She's a handful. I don't think anyone has ever described her as 'fine.'"

"She's definitely a handful." And I'm going to have a handful of her ass later tonight.

"Has she been helping you with the case? Are you showing her the ropes? I've got her on minor cases right now, but I'm hoping to put her on a bigger case soon. You think she's ready?"

I exhale, relaxing a little. Ok, he's talking about work, not any extracurriculars we've been partaking in. "She's doing really well. She knows the right questions to ask. She's got

good instincts. She needs to work on keeping her personal emotions in check sometimes, but she's getting better at it."

He nods. "That sounds like my girl." He pauses. "Thank you for taking her on this case with you. I know you didn't want to do it and only did because I asked you to, but I want her to learn from the best. You've got smarts, kid. You're going places."

"Thank you, sir."

He stares at me a moment, like he has something else to say, but he's not sure if he should. "And Riley is a good girl. She's got a big heart."

I straighten in my seat and nod. I'm not sure he's looking for a response to that, so I don't give one. I know she's got a big heart; now, it seems like Dan might also know that I know.

"Good luck tomorrow. We'll be watching. I'm here if you need me." I thank him again before I stand and head out of his office.

I glance at Riley working away on her laptop. Her brows are crinkled together like she's deep in thought, and it's the cutest thing I've ever seen.

Then I shake my head, wondering when I started thinking that the things she does are cute. I'm in trouble. Riley has changed everything for me. As much as I've been trying to tell myself that this is just about sex, I'm not so sure that it is. I've only been with her for a few weeks, but I already can't imagine life without her. Her not showing up at my door with groceries for dinner, walking around in my T-shirt after she lets me take her in every way I could ever want, or her eyes lighting up when she sees me like I'm something special to her.

Yeah, I'm definitely in trouble.

Chapter 22

Riley

“**O**pen your legs for me, princess,” Kellan’s husky morning voice whispers. I smile without opening my eyes and do what I’m told, spreading myself wide for him. “Good girl.”

He crawls between my legs and lines himself up at my entrance. His hands hold my knees, and he pushes into me so slowly that I think he might be trying to kill me. I arch into him, helping him get to where I want him a little faster. “Someone’s greedy this morning.”

“You can’t wake me up with your cock and expect me to not be greedy.” I finally open my eyes and am met with a wonderful vision of a naked Kellan between my legs. My eyes move to where we’re connected as he finally starts moving.

He moans. “I love that you’re always ready for me. So wet.” He grinds into me, and I purposely squeeze my pussy around him. “Fuuuuck.”

Score one for Riley. I move my hands to my nipples, playing with the sensitive buds like I know Kellan likes. He loves when I touch myself.

His pace quickens, and he finds his rhythm, hitting me in the perfect spot every time. I don’t know how he does it, but he always seems to know exactly what my body wants, what it craves from him.

He grabs my hand, puts one of my fingers in his mouth, and sucks. When he releases it, he tells me, “Rub your clit. Make your pretty pussy come on my cock.”

I do as I'm told, feeling the stimulation from him inside me and from me rubbing my clit. My brain turns to mush as I chase my orgasm.

Kellan pushes my knees forward, thrusting himself even deeper inside me. My eyes squeeze shut, and my head flies back in pleasure. "Oh my God, Kellan. Right there. Right there," I chant.

"Look at me, princess. I want you to look at me when you come on my cock."

Fuck me. That does it. His words push me over the edge. My pussy clenches around him as I come so hard. But my eyes never move from his baby blues that watch me come apart underneath him.

"Do you see what you do to me, Riley? I can't get enough of you. You make me fucking crazy." I smile, knowing he feels that way about me. I make Kellan Winters crazy. We don't usually talk about our feelings. Kellan is always pretty closed off, but when we're together like this, when he's inside me, he gives me little crumbs of hope that maybe he feels something more than what he's leading me to believe. Maybe this is more than just sex and a work friendship where I annoy the hell out of him as much as I can. He hides that he enjoys my company but comes to me almost every night.

He pushes into me one final time before I feel him still inside me, filling me with his release. He pants above me, trying to catch his breath. Slowly, I lower my legs, and he pulls out of me. He watches as his cum drips out of me, reaches between my legs, and uses his finger to rub our mixed releases from my opening to my sensitive clit. He brings his finger to my mouth, and I open, sucking both of us off it. He bites his bottom lip and shakes his head as I do it.

When his finger is good and clean, he pulls it out of my mouth and lowers to kiss me. It's a slow, claiming kiss—my favorite kind of kiss from him.

He pulls away too quickly for my liking and looks at the clock on my nightstand. "Only two hours until we've got to be at the courthouse. I better get going."

He climbs off the bed, and I watch him grab his discarded clothes from the floor. “Hey, what suit are you wearing? Should we color coordinate?” I tease as I start to get up.

He shakes his head. “You would try to show up wearing the same damn thing as me.”

“Not true. You don’t have any color in your wardrobe.”

“Don’t tell me you’re showing up to court wearing the goddamn colors of the rainbow.” He looks my naked body up and down as I pass him on the way to the bathroom.

I shrug. “Maybe I will. Maybe I won’t.”

He grabs my arm and pulls me into his chest. He looks into my eyes, and my breath hitches, his stare intense as he searches my face. With his free hand, he cups my cheek and kisses me.

When he breaks away, he lets go of my arm and tugs his T-shirt over his head. “I’ll see you there.”

I nod. “You’re going to do great, Kellan.”

He tips his chin and grabs his jacket before leaving my apartment, leaving me naked in my bedroom.

I blow out a breath and start getting ready for the day. I know I don’t have much of a role in this trial except to sit next to Kellan at the defense table—maybe refill his water or something—so I’m not as stressed as he is. I’m more excited to see him in his element. I’ve never seen him in action before, but I have a feeling it’ll be breathtaking.

I pick out beige dress pants, a white blouse, and my emerald green blazer. Of course I can’t forget Kellan’s favorite red lipstick. He’ll probably roll his eyes when he sees my green jacket, but I think we need a pop of color on our side, and I just *know* he’s going to be in his signature black.

And he doesn’t disappoint. After I stop for coffee and a breakfast sandwich, I meet Kellan outside the courthouse in the parking deck. He’s wearing a black suit and tie and a dark gray button-down shirt. He looks like the devil himself going into battle with his corresponding scowl.

“You ready?” I ask. He doesn’t answer. He barely even looks at me but grabs my wrist and pulls me into a dark corner of the parking deck, pressing my back against the wall. His thigh pushes in between my legs, and his mouth is on mine. My arms slide around his neck, bringing him closer as his tongue explores my mouth. My hips start moving against his legs. It’s like they have a mind of their own, like the orgasm I had just hours ago wasn’t enough, and I need more. I feel my panties getting wet, but I don’t care. Whenever Kellan is this close to me, my common sense flies out the window. Are we about to walk into court for a huge televised case? Yes. Are my lips going to be swollen from him absolutely claiming me? Also yes. And I couldn’t care less right now.

A car door slams nearby, and Kellan pulls back. “Fuck,” he curses as he looks down where I’m dry-humping his leg. “Now I’m going to have a hard-on in the fucking courtroom.”

I smile. “Let me know if you want me to take care of it. We can sneak into the bathroom before court starts.”

“Jesus Christ. I’ll never get tired of your pussy.” He leans into me and whispers, “Are you wet right now?”

I whisper back, “Drenched.”

“Fuck, princess. I’ve got to stop, or I’ll never make it inside.” He takes a few steps away, and I instantly miss his body heat.

I help him wipe the lipstick off his mouth and quickly re-apply mine before we head in. I walk beside him, trying to match his strides in my power shoes. I kind of want to hold his hand, but he’s never given me any sign that he’s into public displays of affection, and I know we’re still keeping whatever this is between just us. So I settle for swiping my pinky against his. It’s a small movement, almost unnoticeable, but I know he feels it. The corner of his lips tilt up just a tiny bit.

We go through all the required security and are escorted into a room where Lana is waiting for us. Her hair is pulled back into a tight bun, and she’s in a black dress with tan heels.

“Good morning, Lana.” Kellan greets her with a handshake.

“Morning,” she replies, taking his hand and nodding in my direction. The room feels somber, and while I understand the reasoning, it drives me crazy. Lana’s future is on the line here, but this is exciting! We’ve been working for this moment for weeks. We’re ready for this. But Kellan has instructed me multiple times to control my emotions, so I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling.

“We’ve got this, Lana,” Kellan assures her.

“I hope so.” She looks him up and down, and I do my best to ignore the way her eyes linger on his body a little longer than I’d like. Why does he have to be so gorgeous?

“We do. Just remember, the cameras will be on you at all times, so watch your facial expressions.” He’s talking to Lana, but I nod, too, because I’m sure he wants to remind me as well.

Kellan runs down a few more things that will happen, and before I know it, it’s time to go into the courtroom. We make our way to the defense table opposite the room from the jury box. Kellan has Lana sit between the two of us to create a stronger front.

The courtroom fills with spectators and news cameras. My hands start to sweat, but when I look at Kellan, he’s the epitome of calm. He’s looking through his notes, but not like he’s cramming for a test or anything, just like he doesn’t have anything else to do while he waits for the judge and might as well review what we’ve got.

Judge Edwards finally walks in, and we all rise. She goes over some initial court rules, and the trial begins with the prosecution’s opening statements.

The prosecutor is animated and convincing. If I were a juror, I’d probably believe every word he said, but his statements are nowhere near as good as Kellan’s. His opening statements only take half the time as the prosecution. He’s basically laid out how we are going to prove that every piece

of evidence involving Lana is purely circumstantial; there is no way she can be found guilty of murder beyond a reasonable doubt.

Kellan speaks so passionately when he's addressing the jurors. I've never seen him like this. I already know everything he's about to say, but he still makes it feel like I'm hearing it for the first time. It's like watching a beautifully choreographed performance. I have to remind myself that I'm being recorded and my father is probably watching, so I need to close my damn jaw and stop drooling.

When Kellan is finished, he takes his seat next to Lana without looking at either of us. He writes something on his notepad and then sits back to listen to the prosecution's case like he didn't just nail the crap out of his opening statement.

Chapter 23

Riley

The prosecution calls their witnesses for three days. Three days of Kellan being in the zone. Three days of him not calling me to come over after work. He says goodbye and then goes home and works. He doesn't specifically say he's going home to work, but he's a certified workaholic, so I think it's safe to assume that's what he's doing. I haven't pressed him about it because I don't want him to be stressed about this case. This is a big deal for him, and if he needs to go home and replay the day in his head, I'm not going to get in the way.

The prosecution calls their lead detective to the stand first, followed by Tiffany's sister, Tiffany's ex-boyfriend, and a forensic expert.

They have a good case. We wouldn't have made it this far in the process if they didn't. But every time Kellan gets up to do his cross-examination, he gives the jurors at least one thing that might make them question if Lana really murdered Tiffany.

My favorite was when he got to the forensic expert. The guy testified for the prosecution that the victim was killed with a blunt object. Kellan asks, "In your expert opinion, is it possible that the murder weapon could've been the hilt of a sword?"

I feel my eyes widen as the expert thinks the question over. He's asking this because of me. Because of the evidence I brought him and what my gut was telling me. I know we don't

have any solid evidence, but we have enough to question the prosecution's theory.

"Well, yes, if it was a large enough sword with a heavy handle," the witness finally supplies.

"Like, say, a Gladius sword?" Kellan presses.

"Yes, I believe that sword does have a heavy hilt."

"No further questions." Kellan turns back and heads to the table.

He's setting up for something, and it makes me damn proud that I helped with a part of this trial.

It's finally our day to call witnesses. First up is Dax Larson. Douchebag extraordinaire.

Kellan grills Dax about everything, from where he was on the day of the murder to how he still loves Lana and wants her back. I'll give him credit; Dax stays pretty cool and collected. But there are definitely some holes in his story, and I'm pretty sure the jury sees it.

After a quick lunch break after the cross-examination, Kellan calls Shawn to the stand. I almost rub my palms together in excitement when he walks up there. He looks extremely uncomfortable, and his eyes move from the jury to Kellan to the judge. He never looks at Lana.

Kellan starts with simple questions. "Where were you on the morning of the murder?"

Shawn leans toward the microphone. "With my mother."

"And where does your mother live?"

"Athens," Shawn answers.

"Athens is about an hour and a half from your home, right?"

"Yes."

"And you were at your mother's all weekend?"

"Yes," Shawn repeats.

Kellan nods. "Why did you need a rental car that week?"

Shawn looks to the judge and then back to Kellan. “What?” If I’m not mistaken, I hear a slight shake in his voice.

“It appears you had a rental car for a few days the week of the murder. Any particular reason for that?”

“I... oh, yeah. Um, car issues.”

“What kind of car issues?” Kellan cocks his head to the side.

“The check engine light was on.”

“And that was reason enough for you to get a rental car?”

“Yes, my car was in the shop, and I promised my mother I’d come over that weekend.”

“Hmm.” Kellan paces in front of the defense table. “Do you collect anything, Shawn?”

“Yes, I’ve been an avid sword collector since I was a kid.” He gives the judge a small smile, like she cares that he has a weird obsession with swords.

“And where do you keep the swords you’ve collected?”

“Most of them are in the office at the music studio.”

“Do you know much about the swords, or do you just collect them because they make interesting décor?” I bite my cheek to keep from laughing.

“I know quite a lot about them.”

“So you would know which sword has the heaviest handle?”

“Yes, I’d like to think I’d know that.”

Kellan purses his lips and nods. “Do you know Lana well?”

“Um, I know her because she was married to Dax. And she’s one of our biggest clients. I don’t know that she would consider me a friend, though.” I hear Lana huff a small laugh next to me.

“How did you feel about Dax and Lana separating?”

Shawn crinkles his eyebrows together. “I hurt for my friend because he was losing the love of his life.”

“The love of his life, who he was cheating on?”

Shawn shrugs. “People make mistakes.”

Kellan pulls up a time-stamped video of CCTV from an area near Lana’s house. “This video shows the rental car that was registered to you driving near Lana’s house on the morning of the victim’s murder. This is the time when you were supposedly at your mother’s house.” Shawn sits up a little straighter. Kellan zooms in on the video. “Is this you?”

Shawn squints at the blurry screen. “Um, possibly? It’s hard to tell.”

“So, you weren’t at your mother’s that morning?”

“I forgot I came back home that morning for an appointment.”

“Your appointment was near the defendant’s house?”

Shawn swallows. “I think it was in the general area.” His eyes move from Kellan to the jurors. Poor bastard. I *almost* feel bad for him, but at this point, I’m ninety-nine percent sure he killed an innocent woman who did nothing wrong besides fall in love with the wrong man.

“Does Dax ever leave his phone lying around the house?”

“Sometimes.”

“Which would give you access to it, yes?”

“Objection.” The prosecutor interrupts. I’m a little surprised we made it this far without an objection. “Leading.”

Judge Edwards nods. “Sustained.”

Kellan nods. He was hoping he’d get away with it. “That’s alright. I think we’re finished here.”

He walks over to our table, taking his seat next to Lana.

The prosecution declines to cross-examine Shawn, which is smart on their end. They aren’t going to get anything out of him that could help their case.

“We’d like to call the defendant Lana Johnson to the stand,” Kellan announces. Lana takes a deep breath and stands. She walks calmly toward the stand, her heels clicking as she goes. She takes her oath and settles into the seat Shawn just vacated.

“Ms. Johnson, how did you feel when you found out your husband was having an affair?”

“Not great. It’s a terrible feeling finding out someone you trusted has completely betrayed you.”

“Did you and Dax argue about it?”

“Um, not really. I confronted him about it. He apologized and cried and begged a little for me to stay with him.” I want to find Dax in the courtroom to see how he’s reacting to this, but I keep my eyes forward. “But it was too little, too late.”

“Who brought up the topic of divorce?”

“I did. I wasn’t going to stay with someone I couldn’t trust. I deserve better than that.”

“How did Dax react to you asking for a divorce?”

“I didn’t ask him. I told him we were getting divorced. He was upset. He wanted another chance.”

“And you weren’t willing to give him one?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Did you ever meet the victim, Dax’s lover?”

“No, I didn’t. I didn’t even know her name until...”

“Until what, Ms. Johnson?” Kellan presses. I know he wants to just finish the sentence for her, but he can’t.

“Until her body was identified.”

Kellan nods, and I find myself mirroring his movement. “Did she have any reason to be at your house that day?”

“None. Dax had been living somewhere else for a while at that point, so I’m sure she would’ve known that. I had no way of contacting her.”

Kellan asks a few more questions, and the prosecutor stands to cross-examine Lana.

The state asks questions trying to prove that even though Lana didn't seem bothered by getting a divorce, maybe some of her celebrity friends talked her into wanting revenge. It seems a little out of left field, but Lana handles the questioning like a champ and Kellan objects when he feels necessary. She has a ton of practice from all the interviews she does for her job. She doesn't even seem nervous. Her voice doesn't shake. Her hands are resting in her lap. She looks like she's telling the truth—which she is—and we can only hope that the jury notices that.

After a few more ridiculous questions, the prosecutor sits down, and the judge asks us if we have any other witnesses we want to call to the stand.

“The defense rests, Your Honor,” Kellan announces.

“Alright. Closing arguments in the morning,” the judge confirms. She gives the jurors their spiel about not discussing the case with anyone and what time they need to be there tomorrow, and we're all dismissed for the day.

That night, Kellan knocks on my front door for the first time in almost a week. We don't talk about the trial. We don't talk about the fact that he basically ignored me all week. Instead, I feed him a nice dinner of tacos and queso and let him into my bed.

The next day, both sides give their closing statements, and the jury starts their deliberations. Kellan seems confident about the outcome. The three of us are sure we're going to win this, but we have to wait and see what the jury decides.

Waiting has never been my strong suit.

Chapter 24

Kellan

I have a good feeling about this trial.

Everything went exactly how I wanted it to. I don't see how the jury could possibly convict Lana based on the evidence we've provided. Lana was flawless during questioning; her demeanor classy and relaxed. She didn't act like someone who was trying to hide something.

I've been looking forward to the weekend to decompress and try to let myself relax. I can't remember the last time I've done that or even really wanted to do that. Ever since Kai got arrested, I've been working myself to the bone to learn as much as I can—to be the best criminal defense attorney I can—so that I can figure out a way to get him home.

But lately, I haven't even had a chance to look through his file. I've been so wrapped up in my ever-growing caseload that I barely have time to do anything except work on that. I've been a shit brother and a shit son. I don't blame my mother for not speaking to me over the past few years. She has a son who's an attorney but can't do anything to get her other son out of prison for a crime he didn't commit.

I might be a good defense attorney, but I'm a failure as a son and a brother.

It's a hard truth to accept. Especially since it was the three of us against the world after our dad left. Our mom wasn't the best mom, but she provided for us. We had a place to live, food to eat, and each other. It seemed like enough.

But I know better than anyone that one moment can change your life forever. Nothing has been the same since Kai was arrested. Nothing.

Riley has shown me that it's ok to do things for myself. I think she calls it self-care or some shit, but I'm going to call it taking a break. I want to look through Kai's file again, but I also want to sleep in and go for a run and wander through the small bookstore down the street from my place. And I want Riley wrapped up in my sheets.

So you can imagine my disappointment when the first weekend I've set aside for myself is thrown off the rails when Dan Stevens calls me on Saturday morning and asks me to go to lunch.

I can't say no. I *wouldn't* say no.

This could be about my future with the firm, and I wouldn't want to jeopardize that because I wanted a lazy Saturday morning.

We're meeting at a Chili's, which seems odd considering the number of restaurants in our area, but maybe he's a big fan of southwestern-style food.

I walk into the restaurant and look around until I see Dan at a table towards the back. I take a few steps toward him and freeze, realizing he's not alone.

Riley is sitting across from him, laughing at something he's said.

My stomach drops. Does he know about us? Is that what this is about? Did I misread the entire intent of today?

I hate going into situations where I'm unprepared, and this feels like some sort of weird ambush. Forcing my feet to move again, I walk to their table at a much slower pace.

Dan sees me first. He stands and smiles, which I take as a good sign. When I'm close enough, he reaches out his hand for me to shake. I take it and hope he doesn't notice how clammy my palms are right now. "Thanks for meeting us."

I nod and pull out the chair next to Riley. “Of course.” I look between them, but neither says anything. “What’s this about?” I ask slowly, looking for some clue on their face.

“We can’t all just have lunch together?” Riley asks with a smirk.

“We can,” I tell her. “Just feels like there might be something else going on here.” I hold her gaze until she finally looks away.

“Well, we want to talk with you about something,” Dan says.

“What’s going on?” I ask, thoughts flying through my mind. Am I getting fired? Is this how he’s going to make me partner? Is there another case we have to work on together?

“Riley told me about your brother.” My heart stops. I feel the blood drain from my face, and I’m pretty sure I’ve stopped breathing. Out of all the things I thought he would say, this was not one of them. I told her about Kai in private. It was supposed to stay between us.

“Oh,” is all I can think of to say.

“Riley gave me the rundown, and I was able to get a copy of his file. Riley went and spoke with your brother—”

I cut him off, my eyes flying to Riley, who has the audacity to have a smile on her face. “You what?”

Her smile falters at my tone. Good. “I went and spoke with Kai.”

“You met my brother?” It suddenly feels a hundred degrees warmer in this stupid restaurant, and I can’t believe no one has brought us any damn ice water yet.

“Yes, but listen. We have good news.” She tilts her head towards her dad.

I blink slowly before turning my head back to Dan. “We did a little investigating, and the prosecution withheld evidence during your brother’s trial. They based everything on the eyewitness who supposedly identified Kai at the scene. But

they failed to share that they found fingerprints on the register in the store that didn't belong to Kai."

My throat feels dry, the walls feel like they are closing in on me, and I still don't have any goddamn water. How could they figure this out in a few weeks when I've been reviewing these files for years? *Years*. And I missed this. *How did I miss this?* I can't think of any words, but they're looking at me like they expect me to say something. "Ok."

Dan flicks his eyes to Riley before focusing back on me. "This is huge, Kellan," he tells me like I'm not understanding. "With this new evidence, we might be able to get him exonerated or at least a new trial with all the evidence."

I don't say anything. I can't.

"Kellan." Riley touches my shoulder, but I shake her off. Her brows pull together. "Kellan, what's wrong? This is a good thing."

"I need a minute." I stand, my chair shooting out behind me.

"Kellan," Riley tries again.

"I need a fucking minute," I say a little too loudly for a family restaurant. She looks at her dad as I turn and walk away from the table and right out the front door. I get into my car and peel out of my parking spot as fast as I can.

This is all too much.

I drive without realizing I'm driving to the prison. My phone rings several times on the way, Riley's name popping up repeatedly with a picture of her making a ridiculous face while drinking out of a straw. I took that one night we ordered takeout at my place. She laughed so hard when I showed her, so I had to make it her contact photo. I finally have to turn my phone off.

She met my brother.

She *spoke* to my brother.

And didn't fucking tell me.

How long has she been keeping this a secret from me? How long has Kai been keeping this from me? We've talked at least three or four times since I told Riley about him. Did he know what she was trying to do and kept it from me? Did they think I couldn't handle it?

I pull up to the prison and wait an absurd amount of time before I'm finally escorted through security and into the visitation room full of other prisoners meeting with their families. I've only been here a handful of times because it was too hard to see my brother in a place like this. It's easier for me to talk on the phone with him and pretend he's not in here and we're just having a normal conversation.

Kai walks into the room, and a smile breaks out on his face when he sees me, which pisses me off even more. He sits down across the table from me.

"It's good to see you, Kellan."

"You met Riley." It's not a question. I don't bother starting off easy.

"Ah." He nods with realization. "She must've told you the good news. Might be gettin' outta here, man." He knows they found more evidence, which means she called and talked to Kai before telling me what she was doing.

"Why didn't you tell me she came to see you?"

He shrugs. "I don't know, man. She asked me not to. Said she didn't want to get your hopes up."

"And you thought that was ok?" I say through gritted teeth.

"Yeah. I didn't want to get your hopes up, either. I hate that you put so much pressure on yourself because of me. I wanted to see what she could do."

"It wasn't her problem to try to fix, Kai. You're *my* brother. We're in this together. Not Riley."

"Does it really matter that she did this if it means I get another chance?"

I run my fingers through my hair, tugging on the ends. "Yes, it fucking matters."

“Man, I think you need to chill.”

“I can’t *chill*. She went behind my back. Do you know how many opportunities she’s had to tell me what she was doing? How many times you could’ve told me? And then she sits me down with her dad and tells me she’s been going behind my back and that she told her dad the private things I told her?”

“So what, Kel? She was trying to help your miserable ass. All you fucking do is work and be pissed off at the world for what happened to me. You’re taking your own life for granted. At least you found a fucking woman who gives a damn about you. Who cares enough to work extra hard to help your brother because she cares about you.” He lowers his head closer to mine, like he doesn’t want people to hear our conversation. “Do you know what I would do to have a woman like that, Kel? I’m stuck in here with a shit ton of dudes and letters from horny women who think being with a prisoner is a good idea. You got a woman who is hot as fuck, smart, and cares about you. Get your head out of your ass and be grateful she did what she did. Now we might have a chance to be actual brothers again instead of two people talking on the phone for fifteen fucking minutes a week.”

For the second time in one day, my anger causes me to push my chair back and stand. I don’t say anything, just turn and leave, needing to get out of there.

He doesn’t get it. No one gets it.

This was my responsibility. Helping Kai has always been my goal—my sole purpose. And now, the woman I trusted with the most important information about me has taken it away.

She did what I couldn’t.

I’m a fucking failure in every sense of the word.

Chapter 25

Riley

How many times is too many times to call someone before you officially become a stalker? I'm pretty sure I'm almost at the threshold.

Kellan left so fast that you would have thought he was on fire or something. Confused, I put my phone on the table and look from the door to my dad. "I don't understand what just happened."

"I don't know, honey. Maybe he just needs to process what we told him. It's a big deal for him to get his brother back."

"I know. I just..." I pause. I'd gone over every possible scenario in my head for how this could play out. I hoped he would pull me in his arms and kiss me, thanking me for helping. I also considered that he'd be pretty quiet, keeping his emotions bottled up like he normally does, but I thought I'd at least get a smile. One of the rare smiles that light up his whole face. I love those smiles. I had not, in any scenario, considered him getting so mad that he stormed off. Nope, that hasn't crossed my mind at all. "I thought he'd be excited."

My shoulders drop with disappointment. I wanted to do something special for Kellan. I wanted to show him that people care about him and want to help him. But I'm not sure that message got conveyed.

"Hey, don't let him get you down, ok? You did a good thing. Take Kellan out of the equation, and you still found a way to help an innocent man. This is huge, Riley. And I'm so proud of you."

I force a small smile. “Thanks, Dad.”

After a beat of silence, he asks, “So, when are you going to tell me what’s going on between the two of you?”

My eyes widen. “What?”

He smirks. “I wasn’t born yesterday, Riley. I can see the way he looks at you. In fact, I’ve seen him look at you a few too many times if you ask me.”

I feel the heat rush to my cheeks. “Oh, um.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, honey. But I’m here if you want to talk.”

“Thanks. I’m not sure what’s going on between us. We’ve just been having fun.” I cringe at that last part because I know damn well my dad doesn’t want to know about me *having fun*. “I, I like him a lot.” I don’t know that I’ve admitted that to myself yet.

Dad nods. “Kellan is a good kid—a good man. If it was going to happen with anyone at the office, I’m glad it was him.”

I sigh in relief that he’s not mad about this. “He is good.” I look back toward the door Kellan stormed out of. “I wish he would talk to me.”

“He’ll come around. Don’t worry. Your mom is going to have a field day when I tell her I was right.”

I look over at him. “Right about what?”

“About you and Kellan.”

“Oh my God. Y’all talked about it?” I groan.

He shrugs. “I told her I thought something was going on with you two. Now she’s going to make him come over for dinner.”

I throw my arms up. “Well, I don’t know if he’ll even talk to me again after this, let alone sit down to have a meal with my family.”

“I’m his boss. I bet I can convince him.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s what every girl wants. Her dad to convince the guy she likes to spend time with her.”

Dad chuckles. “Don’t worry. I won’t say a word,” he reassures me. “I’m going to reach out to a few people on Monday about Kai’s case. Get a feel for the possibility of getting a new trial.”

I nod and look at the door one more time like Kellan might just rush back through it. “Alright, thanks, Dad.”

“Now, let’s get some food and get out of here. You deserve a relaxing weekend after the trial this week.”

I huff. “I haven’t done anything. Kellan is the one who gets up there and makes magic happen.”

“He does, doesn’t he?” We exchange awkward, sad smiles just as the waiter comes over with water. I’m sure it’s written all over my face how much I care about Kellan and how upset I am that he ran out of here.

Maybe Dad is right and Kellan needs to process everything we told him. I glance down at my phone, but there are zero calls and zero texts.

Sighing, I open the menu.

* * *

Riley: SOS bring vodka

Candice: uh oh. Be there soon

It’s been eight hours since Kellan rushed out of Chili’s without a backward glance. I’ve called him at least twenty times, left several voicemails, and even followed up with texts. I’m in borderline stalker mode right now—just a few calls and texts short of showing up on his doorstep.

I wish he would talk to me and tell me why he’s so upset. I hope he knows that I was genuinely trying to help him.

Never in my life have I been this upset over a boy. I was hurt when Landon and I broke up, and I knew he was leaving

me for someone else I couldn't stand. But I didn't cry. I think I knew it was over before it was actually over. I knew we would never work long-term, and it was just a matter of time before we ended things.

But this feels like a whole different type of hurt. This feels like my heart has been ripped out of my chest.

After lunch, I came back to my apartment, threw on one of Kellan's worn T-shirts that I stole from his apartment, and sat. And sat and sat and sat. Just me and Luna, wasting our Saturday away with a cloud of sadness over us.

I finally gave in and texted Candice when I couldn't stand the emptiness of my apartment for a second longer. Thankfully, she was knocking on my door in no time with a bottle of vodka and a two-liter of store-brand lemon-lime soda. Looks like we're keeping it classy tonight.

"What's going on?" Candice wastes no time heading to my kitchen and grabbing two glasses. She makes drinks that look like they're a way higher vodka-to-mixer ratio than they should be, but I'm not going to complain tonight.

"I think I messed up, but I'm not sure what I did wrong."

"Let me be the judge. Give me the rundown." She hands me my drink, and I tell her everything that's happened, from hooking up with Kellan to learning about his brother to our disastrous meeting at Chili's.

"Um, I don't see how you did anything wrong. It sounds like he's a little off his rocker." She takes a sip of her drink and winces at its strength.

"I just don't understand it. I've called him so many times. I mean, he won't even text me back to let me know he's ok."

"Yeah, you're going to need to stop all that." She moves her finger in a circular motion. "You tried to do something nice. He's clearly upset about it. You've reached out. The ball's in his court now. He needs to come to you."

The alcohol mixed with my emotions from today contributes to the tears forming in my eyes. "I just really like him, Candice. And I'm worried I ruined it."

“*You* did nothing wrong. Seriously, whatever is bothering him is something deeper than what happened today.”

Maybe she’s right, and I need to chill out. Let him cool down. I just wish he would let me know he’s alive. With how angry he was when he left, I’ve been worried about him getting in an accident. I’ve been refreshing all the news sites for stories about recent crashes.

“Cheer up, buttercup. He’ll come around. And if he doesn’t, then he doesn’t deserve you anyway. You did something really great *for him*. And he repaid you by walking out on you. That’s bullshit. Come on. Let’s watch a movie and drink all this cheap-ass vodka.” She grabs my remote and starts flipping through channels until she lands on *The Proposal*. “Look, your favorite movie is on! We can watch Ryan Reynolds and Sandy B fall in love right before our eyes.”

She settles into the couch, taking a large sip of her drink. She’s right; I do love this movie. And it always puts me in a better mood. But even as I watch Betty White chant around a bonfire to Little Jon & The East Side Boyz, I still feel a looming dread hanging over my head.

I glance at my phone again, disappointed with zero alerts on my screen.

He’ll call.

I hope.

Chapter 26

Riley

He doesn't call.
He doesn't text.

I hear nothing from him for almost forty-eight hours. My only saving grace is that I know I'll see him on Monday. No matter how mad he is, there's no way he would miss work.

Thankfully, I'm right. I get to the courthouse early, like *actually* early, not just five minutes early, to wait for him. Technically, the jury jumps straight back into deliberations today, but we have to be close to the courthouse in case we're called. When the jury reaches a verdict, we only have thirty minutes to get back, so I know he'll be here, probably with his laptop, working in one of the meeting rooms.

I wait in the parking garage, hoping to see his dark SUV drive in. I sip my fall-spiced coffee as car after car parks and people walk into the building, but none of them are Kellan. A few people say hello to me, and I hopefully give them a friendly smile back. I'm not sure anything but worry and desperation are on my face right now.

And then finally, FINALLY, I see Kellan pull into the parking garage. I stand straighter and wait for him to get out of his car. I slide my sweaty palm down my black pencil skirt to calm my nerves. I chose a plain white blouse—the only one in my closet—to go with my plain skirt as I wasn't in a very colorful mood this morning. I didn't even bother putting on my lipstick. Although, maybe I should've since I know how much Kellan likes it.

His car turns off, but he doesn't make a move to leave. He sits there for three, four, five deep breaths before finally opening the door and getting out. He's in all black today—black suit, black shirt, black tie—and looks like he means business. Just the sight of him makes my stomach clench.

He grabs his bag, squares his shoulders, and starts walking in my direction. His eyes stay glued to the ground like he's intently watching each of his footsteps.

When he gets close enough, I say, "Hey."

He doesn't say anything back. He doesn't even stop walking. He goes right past me, pushing open the glass door to the elevator lobby.

I groan. He's going to make this difficult. I turn and follow him into the lobby. "Hey, I tried calling you," I state the obvious. There is absolutely no way he missed the fact that I called him so many times.

"If I wanted to talk to you, I would've answered the phone." His voice is deep and low.

"Kellan, I don't understand. Why are you so mad? I thought helping your brother was a good thing."

His head slowly turns to face me, and his eyes pierce through my skin. He takes slow steps toward me until he's just inches from my body.

My breathing picks up like it does whenever he's this close to me. Only usually, he's not this angry. "It was none. Of. Your. Fucking. Business." He enunciates each word slowly.

"What?" I croak, my voice sounding scratchy and hoarse.

"You went behind my back and did something that was none of your fucking business. He's *my* brother. His shit is *my* problem. But you couldn't keep the one thing I told you in confidence to yourself. You blabbed to Daddy about poor little Kellan and his felon brother."

I swallow hard. "What? No. That's not what happened at all." He searches my face like he's done so many times. This time instead of lust, all I see is disgust. "Kellan, I wanted to

help. I wanted to show you that people care about you enough to help you. I did it for you.”

“You’re so fucking naive, Riley. You can’t help everyone. You especially shouldn’t help people who don’t want your fucking help to begin with.” The elevator dings that the doors are about to open. I can only hope no one is on it because when the doors open, they’ll see Kellan and me, toe-to-toe, our faces mere inches from each other.

When the elevator arrives, he takes a few steps backward, keeping his eyes locked on mine. “I did it for you, Kellan. I care about *you*.”

He scoffs, turns, and gets on the elevator. I watch as he reaches out and presses the button for the floor he’s going to, making it very clear that he doesn’t want me to join him. Without even a parting glance, he says, “I didn’t ask you to care about me.”

The doors shut, and I’m left standing there, even more confused than when he stormed out of Chili’s.

After I get myself together, I head to the courtroom. Neither Kellan nor Lana are there, so I guess it’ll just be me waiting for the notice about the jury. Cameras are set up all over the room, but it doesn’t look like any of them are filming. Most of the people are busy on their phones.

This might be the worst part of a trial—the waiting. Everything is up to the jury now, a group of regular people with no knowledge of the law besides rudimentary comprehension. We are basically asking them to pick which side had a better story.

It could take hours or days for them to decide, and we all have to wait. I take out my laptop and work through some emails. I message Maya and Spencer that I won’t be there for lunch again. I’m really missing my lunch dates with them. Then I text Candice and let her know what happened with Kellan. She promptly texts me back several angry face and middle finger emojis. I’d call her, but she’s in the middle of class.

It's been maybe an hour, and I'm already bored when the doors to the courtroom fly open. Everyone collectively moves their attention to the two men who opened the doors, Dax and Shawn. I immediately text Kellan telling him to get in here. I don't know what is about to happen, but it feels important.

Dax has a crazy look in his eyes as he drags Shawn by the arm through the swinging doors right next to my table. Shawn looks terrified. The color is drained from his face, but he holds his head high in a sad attempt to hide his nerves. From my peripheral, Kellan and Lana appear in the doorway with the prosecutor at their side. I stay glued to my seat, unsure of what I should do.

"We need to talk to the judge," Dax says in a frantic voice to the bailiff.

"You need to calm down," the bailiff says, his hand moving to his belt. "What's the matter?"

"We need to talk to the judge. This man has something to say."

The bailiff nods his head at another officer across the room. "Alright, gentleman. Come stand by me. We'll get Judge Edwards." He brings them to the side and does a quick pat-down even though they went through the same security everyone else did.

Judge Edwards walks out looking a little confused, but she doesn't falter when she stands by the bench and looks down at Dax and Shawn.

"What can I help you with, gentlemen?" I look around the room. Everyone has put their phones away, and the cameras are rolling. Kellan and Lana are still in the back of the room. Kellan's eyes flick to mine for a split second, but they're gone before I can blink.

Dax shoves Shawn forward. "Tell her. Tell her what you told me."

Shawn takes a few hesitant steps forward. He exhales loudly before squaring his shoulders and announcing, "I did it. I killed Tiffany."

Gasps fill the room. My jaw drops. I had a feeling he did it, a strong feeling, but I couldn't prove it. But seeing him waltz in here and announcing it like this was not what I expected.

"What did you say?" she asks.

"I killed her," he repeats. "She ruined everything for us. Lana was our biggest client, and she was going to cut us off because Dax couldn't stay away from Tiffany."

"So you thought killing her was going to fix anything? You shithead," Dax scoffs, disgusted by his friend. I kinda feel bad for the guy. Not too much because he was having an affair, but someone he cared about was murdered by someone he trusted. That can't feel good.

Shawn focuses on Dax. "I thought if Tiffany was gone for good, maybe Lana would take you back."

Lana chokes out a laugh by the door. Kellan touches her arm as if to remind her not to say anything.

"Sir," Judge Edwards calls out. "You might want to stop talking if you want any chance of a trial."

"I just wanted things to go back to normal." Shawn drops to his knees in the middle of the courtroom and puts his face in his hands.

"Bailiff, please detain this man."

The bailiff comes up behind Shawn. "Hands behind your back." Shawn does as instructed and is brought to his feet and cuffed.

"I can't believe you did this," Dax calls out to him.

"I did it for us. For the studio!" Shawn yells back as the bailiff pushes him through the door to the jail.

Once he's gone, everyone starts whispering. I'm stunned, looking around to make sure this is really happening.

"Alright, let's all calm down." The judge hits her gavel. "It sounds like this trial is over. I'll speak with the jury and alert them of this development. Lana Johnson, you're free to go."

Lana throws her arms around Kellan to thank him. My jaw clenches when I see his arms move around her waist, hugging her back. I know it's nothing sexual, but seeing him touch another woman makes me feral.

When they release, Lana walks out of the courtroom. Kellan's head turns in my direction, and his piercing blue eyes lock on mine. He's caught me staring at him, and I won't bother trying to hide it. He tips his chin in my direction, acknowledging me for some reason, and then he's gone.

I sink back into my chair. The room empties, but I stay where I am, staring. Thinking.

I sit there until everyone else has left the courtroom, and I'm still sitting here alone. I'm sure Kellan is off somewhere doing interviews. I should be there with him. And while I should be excited because technically, I knew something was off about Shawn and brought it to Kellan's attention, I can't bring myself to celebrate this.

I'm not feeling myself. I woke up hopeful, knowing I'd get a chance to talk to Kellan even if I had to trap him in a hallway somewhere. But our conversation did nothing to make me feel better.

I didn't ask you to care about me.

No, he didn't. But I can't help that my traitorous heart fell in love with someone who wants to shut me out. Who apparently has been using me for my body these past few weeks instead of forming any kind of relationship.

I should've known. I should've protected myself better. And like Kellan said, I should've minded my own fucking business. A single tear drips down my cheek, and I quickly wipe it away.

He gets no more of my tears.

My phone vibrates on the table, and I see my Dad's name on the screen.

"Hey, Dad," I say, trying my best to make sure my voice doesn't shake.

“Baby girl. It was you?”

“What was me?” I ask in confusion.

“You knew it was the business partner.” Um, how does he know that?

“Oh, um, yeah. I mean, I didn’t know for sure. But he gave me a bad vibe.”

He chuckles. “A vibe. You never cease to amaze me. I’m proud of you, honey.”

A small smile forms on my lips. The first one of the day, and it would be my dad making it happen. “Thanks, Dad. But how did you know about that?”

“I watched the interview Kellan just gave to Channel 3. He told the reporter that you brought him the evidence.” He did what now?

“Oh, right,” I answer like I knew Kellan was talking about me on live TV outside.

“I wish we could’ve gotten the jury’s verdict before this guy turned himself in. I’d like to see if Kellan convinced them or not,” Dad says.

“I’m sure he did.” Even heartbroken, I can’t talk badly about the man.

“At least an innocent person didn’t go to jail, and we got the real perp. I hope it gives the victim’s family some closure. Poor girl.”

I nod even though he can’t see me.

“In other news, I’ve gotten some good feedback about Kai’s case. I think we’ll be able to really help him. I’ll let you know when I hear more.”

“Thanks.” I hang up and immediately search for the interview. I find it on Channel 3’s social media page, and Kellan’s beautiful face fills my phone screen.

When the reporter asks him why he added Shawn to the witness list, he replies, “An associate attorney at my firm working with me on this case brought me the evidence, and

she trusted her instinct. It was all her. I just stood up there and asked a few questions.”

There he goes giving me butterflies all over again. He could've lied and told everyone that he was the one who figured it out. He didn't have to mention me at all. He knows I would never publicly call him out for it. Privately, I would one hundred percent call him out, though.

Why is he doing this? Why did he push me away, only to hook me in again with a bit of hope?

I don't finish the interview. I've heard what I needed to, so I gather my things and head for the door.

I know Kellan and Lana are likely still outside the courthouse answering questions, so I make my way to the parking deck and get in my car.

On my way out, I drive past the front steps. Kellan is standing toward the bottom, and I can tell the moment he spots my car because his head is locked in my direction. I watch his eyes follow me from my rearview mirror until I turn completely out of view.

Chapter 27

Riley

We should be celebrating.

I want to be celebrating. Sure, we didn't technically win the case, but our client's name was cleared, and that's what matters.

But I can't seem to pull myself out of bed. I've hit the snooze button at least eight times, even though I'm not sleeping. At this rate, I'm definitely going to be late to work. I gently push Luna off my arm and pull myself out of bed. I've got to get myself together. I'm allowed to be sad. My feelings are valid. But I can't let this consume me. If Kellan doesn't want to talk to me anymore, then fine. It'll break my heart, but I'm strong enough to handle it.

I splash water on my face before doing my make-up and getting dressed. I grab a few slices of leftover pizza to take for lunch and make myself drive to work.

I can't decide if I want to see Kellan or not. He made it clear that I'm not his favorite person, so if I have to move on, it would be easier for me to not see him. But the pang in my stomach tells me I want to see if he's just as distraught as I am.

I'm late to the office, but no one seems to notice or care. Everyone is already deep in the trenches of work.

I set my laptop up and go to the kitchen to put my lunch away. The kitchen is empty except for James filling up his coffee cup.

“Ah, there she is. Heard about the case.”

I shut the refrigerator and face him, trying my best to smile. “Yeah. Didn’t see that coming.”

“I have never heard of something like that happening in a case. And you knew it was him?”

“Oh, well. I didn’t know for sure. I just had a bad feeling about the guy and annoyed Kellan enough that he agreed to question him.”

James chuckles and takes a sip of his coffee. His eyes trail down my outfit, which isn’t anything special today, just some slacks and a peach-colored blouse. But I’m smart enough to know when someone is checking me out, and this guy just made it very obvious. I stand a little straighter and cross my arms across my chest. I’m not in the mood for this today. Thankfully, he seems to pick up on it.

“Good job on the case.” He passes me and heads to his office. It’s right next to Kellan’s office, which is completely dark, meaning he’s not here.

I grab a bottle of water and go back to my desk to try and work, but my head isn’t in it. I do some monotonous tasks before I can sneak off to lunch with Mila and Spencer. I’m hopeful one of them can cheer me up.

As I sit down, Mila asks, “What on earth was going through your mind when that guy confessed?”

I laugh. “My mind was pretty blank in the moment, honestly. I couldn’t believe what he was doing.”

“Did he just march into the courtroom?” I guess the cameras weren’t on until after Dax and Shawn had made their entrance.

“Uh, yeah. Dax shoved the doors open and marched them both up. It was hard to see him in so much pain, you know?”

“Well, yeah. His business partner killed his girl, and he lost Lana Johnson. The guy is down on his luck for sure.”

I nod and take a bite of my pizza. “At least we know who really did it.”

Spencer leans in like he doesn't want anyone to hear his question. "How was Kellan afterward? Was he mad since he didn't technically win the case?"

I hate how my heart beats just a little faster hearing his name. "I'm not sure. He left with Lana after the judge dismissed the case. I haven't talked to him."

Mila's brows crinkle together. "You haven't talked to him? Weren't you working on the case together? You didn't celebrate the end of the trial?"

I shake my head and drop my pizza back onto my paper plate. "Um, no. He's kind of mad at me at the moment."

"Mad at you?" She tilts her head to the side. "Why?"

"It's a personal thing." I don't want to reveal too much, and it's not my business to tell. Kellan has made that very clear. "He thinks I overstepped somewhere, and I just thought I was helping."

"A personal thing?" She and Spencer share a glance. "Are y'all like, together?"

Looking down at my uneaten food, I rip at the crust. "We were... something, I guess. Maybe."

"I knew it." She slaps the table, making me jump.

"Jesus, Mila."

"Sorry." She lowers her voice. "I knew it. I've been here three years, and I've never seen him look as happy as he has the past few weeks." Spencer nods in agreement. "He almost looked approachable."

"He's really not bad when you get to know him."

"He doesn't let people get to know him," Spencer says. He has a valid point.

"How does your dad feel about it?"

My eyes widen. "My... dad?"

"Yeah, Dan. You didn't think we didn't know, did you?" She laughs.

“I, well, yeah? No one said anything about it.”

She shrugged. “That’s because it doesn’t matter. We just figured you didn’t want to talk about it.”

I look to Spencer. “You knew too?”

He nods. “I’m pretty sure everyone knows.”

I shake my head. “I should’ve known.”

“So, how does he feel about you and Kellan?” Mila asks again.

“Surprisingly good. But I’m not sure there is a ‘me and Kellan’ anymore.”

“Well, I, for one, hope y’all work it out,” Spencer says. “We really don’t want him to go back to being angry all the time.”

I can’t help but laugh. We finish our lunch, and I head back to my desk. I look at my phone and debate texting Kellan. But I think I’ve said all I can say. Maybe he’ll come around, maybe he won’t. It’s out of my control at this point.

I glance over at Kellan’s dark office. I know he’s mad, but it’s not like him to miss work. It makes me worry on a whole other level. Is he physically ok? Did he get sick overnight? Was he in an accident? My mind goes down a lot of dark and twisted paths until I see a message on my laptop through our internal messaging system.

It’s almost as if my dad could sense my panic from his office.

Dan: Kellan took the rest of the week off. Didn’t want you to worry.

Riley: Oh, ok. Thanks for letting me know.

Well, at least I know he’s alive now. It’s not usual for Kellan to take time off, but I’m glad he’s taking care of himself.

What if I talk to Kai? Maybe he’ll be able to explain things better to Kellan. I reach for my keys but stop myself, remembering that the whole reason that Kellan is mad is that I

inserted myself into his family life without telling him. He wouldn't appreciate Kai and me buddying up again behind his back.

I slump back down in my chair and sigh. I'm not cut out for this. Getting attached to an emotionally unavailable man seemed fun in the beginning because it's like a challenge. But when the going gets tough, it's hard to figure out how hard to push back.

I'm afraid my fight is coming to an end, and I'm being pushed to the ground.

Chapter 28

Kellan

For the first time in my life, I requested time off work.

After I did interview after interview about the most bizarre ending to a case I've ever worked on, I texted Dan to let him know I needed a few days off. He, of course, said that was fine. I'm sure he won't question me after my little episode at Chili's this weekend.

I drive back to my apartment, knowing damn well I have nothing to do all week except sit and think and stew on how fucking pathetic I am.

Most of my time off is spent cleaning my apartment, hitting the gym, running at a local park, ordering copious amounts of takeout from Riley's favorite restaurants, and watching shitty made-for-TV movies that don't require me to think. I check in with my clients to update them on their cases. And in a moment—ok, moments—of weakness, I even look up Riley's social media to see what she's been doing all week. For someone who usually posts *at least* one story a day, she hasn't posted anything. I even go as far as to click on her best friend's profile and see if she's posted anything with Riley. The only thing I get is a weird video of them clinking glasses at some bar. Riley mentioned that they usually have a cocktail night, but I'd been monopolizing most of her time recently, so she hadn't gone. I don't feel bad about taking all of her time. I do, however, regret ever telling her about Kai. It was none of her business in the first place, and I don't know what possessed me to tell her. I never talk about Kai with anyone. And me opening up about it was definitely not an open

invitation for her to go behind my back and fix something that wasn't hers to fix.

She's probably out at that bar with her fucking red lipstick and tiny little skirt, making men drop to their knees. I grit my teeth just thinking about her with another man. She's not even here and is still on my last nerve. I throw my phone to the floor, unable to think about her anymore.

Jesus Christ. What is happening to me? I run my fingers through my hair and tug on the ends in frustration.

I got too close to her. I trusted her when I shouldn't have. I let my guard down and got distracted. I can't let it happen again.

After four days of not working, I'm tired of staring at the boring white walls of my apartment, and my anger has reached a boiling point. I grab my keys, and for the second time in a week, I make the drive to see my brother. I don't know why I'm going to see him again and don't know what I'll say, but I need to talk to someone. My brother has always been my go-to person.

By the time I'm in the visitation room, I feel like maybe I shouldn't have come. But just as I stand to leave, Kai is escorted in. Sighing, I take my seat again.

Kai sits down across from me. "You know, I've had more visitors in the last two weeks than in the past two years." Fuck. I let my head hang. That's on me. I moved to Georgia to be near him and stopped coming to see him when my life got too busy. I settled on weekly phone calls, but I should've made more of an effort.

"I'm sorry, man."

He chuckles. "Don't be sorry, Kel. I'm the one in this shit hole, not you."

"I should visit more."

He shrugs. "You're busy." He's giving me an excuse and acting like it doesn't bother him. But I know damn well if I was in his shoes, I'd be counting down the days until someone

came to visit me. I've been a shitty brother. "How's your girlfriend?"

I rub my hand down my face and sit back in my chair. "She's not my girlfriend. And we stopped... whatever we were."

"What? Why?"

"She got involved in my business when she shouldn't have."

He nods slowly. "So that's why she was acting weird when she called yesterday."

My eyes fly to his. "She called you?"

"Yeah, don't worry. She didn't say anything about you." He shakes his head. "She's called a few times to give me updates on my case." That's news to me, but I guess her whole involvement in Kai's case was news to me a few days ago, so I shouldn't be surprised. "You know, it is just that—*my* case. You keep acting like it's exclusively yours. Anyone could have picked up my file and reviewed it. I, for one, am glad she did whatever she did because this is the first time in ten years I've had any hope of getting out of here."

I look up at the ceiling tiles to avoid his eyes, the bright lights making my eyes water. "I was supposed to be the one to help you."

"Ah, that's what this is. Your pride is hurt because your girl did something you couldn't." It sounds harsh hearing him say it out loud. *She did something I couldn't.*

"I'm not surprised that she did. She's the smartest person I know. It's just... I've been looking at your case since you got sentenced, and I couldn't find anything. She looked at it for a week with her Dad, and they figured it all out. What was the point of me becoming an attorney and working my ass off to be the best if I can't help my own fucking brother?"

"You did help me. You started sleeping with Riley and mentioned my case to her," he teases. I give him an unimpressed side-eye. I know brothers are supposed to tease each other, but that felt like a stab in the gut. "But really, Kel.

Does it matter? Because of her, we might be able to be around each other again, a real family. I don't give a shit who figured anything out as long as I can hang out with my brother without shackles around my fucking ankles and ten guards watching and making sure I'm not gonna try something. I want to be able to hug you and Mom. I want to live again. And now, I might actually get the chance."

I fist my hands at my sides. He's right. He's fucking right. The only thing I've ever wanted was to get my brother out of here. I shouldn't care how it happens as long as it does.

"You know I haven't been out in the real world in a while, but I feel like it's pretty shitty to end things with your girl because she wants to help your family."

I hit the table with my palm causing multiple guards to look our way. "You think I wanted to end it? I'm fucking in love with her, man." My words surprise me just as much as they surprise Kai. "It scares the shit out of me. I've never had anyone give a shit about me except for you. When I found out what she did and that she did it for me, I didn't know what to think." I put my elbows on the table and bury my head in my palms. This is too much. I've always been good at suppressing my feelings, but everything that was bottled up feels like it's going to explode. I'm angry. I'm sad. I'm terrified. I am so fucking in love with Riley Stevens and her colorful outfits, bubbly personality, constant smile, big heart, and stupid fucking cactus.

Kai chuckles. "Oh, Kel. I never thought I'd see the day that my little brother finally fell in love."

"It sucks," I tell him, looking up to meet his eyes.

He scoffs. "Oh yeah. Must be really hard to have such a beautiful woman who wants to be around you and help you and love you. Poor Kellan." He rolls his eyes at me.

I look at the cinderblock wall next to me. I love Riley. I don't know when it happened, but not being with her this week has been torture. Everything I do, I want to tell her about. I see things everywhere that remind me of her. Her scent still lingers on my sheets, and I can't bring myself to

wash it off. I don't even know this version of myself. This was supposed to be just sex, and somehow, it turned into so much more.

"She wasn't part of my plan," I say quietly.

"Yeah, well, going to prison wasn't part of my plan, but shit happens. At least yours has a happy ending."

"Does it?" I haven't heard from Riley since our little chat on Monday in the courthouse parking deck. I've been so used to being with her every day and night that not having her around has taken a toll on my mindset. "I'm pretty sure I fucked it up with her too."

"Here's a crazy idea. You could try telling her how you feel. Maybe even explain why you freaked the fuck out like a little pussy."

"Wow," I say, deadpan. "You have such a way with words. Do they teach you that in prison English class?"

He smiles a real smile. The kind that reaches all the way up to his eyes. "There's my brother."

Hearing him say that makes a switch go off in my head. I've been so caught up in how betrayed I felt with Riley and Dan going behind my back that I haven't even stopped to think about how exciting this must be for my brother. "You know, I haven't been acting like it, but I am excited that you might get out of here."

"Me too, man. Me too. When I lay in my bunk at night, I've started letting myself think about the first things I want to do when I'm out of here."

"Oh yeah? What's at the top of the list?"

"I want a fucking cheeseburger and fries. The food in here fucking sucks." I lean my head back and laugh.

"Riley knows a bunch of great restaurants. I'll ask her to find the best burger place."

His brows raise. "Does that mean you're going to go to her with your tail between your legs and apologize?"

I nod. “I have to. I love her and can’t believe I didn’t realize it until I pushed her away.”

He smiles. “Well, go get her, man. Good luck, and tell her I said hi.” It’s still weird that Riley and Kai met when I wasn’t there to witness it, but I suck down my pride and nod. “I’ll call you tomorrow to see how it went.”

I leave the prison and drive straight to Riley’s apartment. I don’t know if she’s here, but I’ve got to start somewhere.

Standing outside her building, I follow the brick wall until I see the window I know belongs to her.

My nerves get the better of me, though, and I take a deep breath and walk to the bar we went to all those nights ago.

I’m not good at this apologizing thing. I don’t want to say the wrong thing, and I’m not sure how to express what I’m truly feeling. What if she doesn’t forgive me? What if it’s too late? What if she doesn’t love me? All these questions have been bouncing around in my head since I left Kai.

I find a spot at the crowded bar, and the bartender brings me my drink, refilling it after I down the first one quickly. I’m going to need liquid courage to beg my girl to forgive me for being a complete asshole. That’s right. I’ve decided I’m not above begging. In fact, I think that might be my best option. I can’t promise her that I won’t be an asshole again, but I can beg her to let me be an asshole that loves her and does his best to treat her the way she deserves every damn day.

I pay and head back to Riley’s place with my hands in my pockets. I take a deep breath and open the door to get my girl.

Chapter 29

Riley

It's official: I'm pathetic.

It's a Friday night, and I'm already in my comfy clothes on my couch, settling in for the night. Luna is curled up next to me, purring loudly while I scratch her head.

I've picked a movie to watch when there's a loud pounding on my door. I jump, and Luna stands up, trying to figure out if she should run and hide or if she's safe.

I wait a beat before the knocking sounds again, so I get up and look out the peephole. My heart starts beating in overdrive when I see Kellan.

I unlock the door and open it.

He stands there, his head against the doorframe. His eyes trail my body, taking in the fact that I'm wearing his T-shirt.

He finally meets my eyes and stands up straight. I can see the pain in them.

"Hey," he finally says.

"Hey." We stand in the doorway, staring at each other until Luna rubs against my leg, breaking me out of my trance. "Do you want to come in?"

He nods, walks inside, and takes a seat on my couch. I turn the TV off and sit next to him, leaving a good distance between us. I'm not sure what this conversation is about, so I want to keep a distance for my own sake.

“Um, what’s up?” I ask awkwardly after we’ve sat silently for too long.

“I’m sorry.”

“What?” I ask. I wasn’t expecting an apology from him. In fact, I figured this conversation would go a lot like our last one, where he basically told me I was nothing to him. I realize I’ve been preparing for battle since I opened the door, ready to defend myself and my actions.

He takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Riley. I’ve been acting like an asshole because my pride was hurt.” He stops to swallow. I know this has to be hard for him, but I need to hear what he has to say. Maybe if I were nicer, I’d tell him he doesn’t have to apologize. But I feel like this apology is for both of us now. “I... I feel like a failure.”

My brows come together. “Why?”

“Do you know how long I’ve been looking into my brother’s case? How many times I’ve asked him the same questions over and over again? And then here you come and get it moving again. I was disappointed in myself, and I took it out on you.”

“You were too close to the case. You kept overlooking the small details. It happens.” It’s the truth. I’ve seen my dad get so frustrated over cases. He’d have someone else look at it if he was stuck and be mad at himself for at least twenty-four hours for not figuring something out.

“Not to me.” His eyes meet mine. “But my excuses don’t matter here. I’m here to thank you. Thank you for caring enough to do this for me, for Kai. It means a lot to both of us. He told me to tell you hi, by the way.”

I smile. “I really like your brother.” I met him in the worst circumstances, and he still managed to smile. He made jokes while his hands were cuffed. Not many people could do that, especially after ten years in prison, but he seems to have kept his spirits up.

“He likes you too. He said when he gets out, he wants a cheeseburger. I told him you would find the best one in the

city, and we'd take him there."

My heart speeds up. "You talked to your brother about me?"

"Of course I did." He scoots closer and reaches forward to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. His fingertips gently trace the side of my face sending a shiver down my spine. "You know, I wish I could've been there when my brother met the woman I love. I think that's what hurt me the most."

I think I just hallucinated. Did Kellan Winters just use the 'L' word with me? *Me?* If I could see my face right now, I would probably laugh. I'm sure my cheeks are pink because my whole body feels like it's on fire. My eyes have to be as wide as a damn owl right now.

"Did you just... what?" I blink and shake my head because I must've misheard him.

He smirks because he knows what he's doing to me right now. "I love you, princess. I love that you challenge me. I love that you make me laugh more than anyone I've ever met while simultaneously pissing me off just as much. I love that you have a big heart and genuinely care about people, even an asshole like me. I love that you look like a goddamn rainbow every day because the world needs more people like you. Someone who lights up a room as soon as they walk in. I don't know why the universe decided that we would be perfect for each other, but I can't fight it anymore. You are perfect for me. Through the good and the bad, I want you there with me. I'm sorry I treated you like I did. I'm not good at expressing my emotions, and I honestly didn't know what I was feeling. I've never felt anything like this."

He looks a little embarrassed after his speech, and I would bet my favorite pair of shoes that he's never done this before. It makes me giddy thinking that I'm the one who won over his heart. "I just... wow." He's rendered me speechless, which doesn't happen very often with me. "This is not at all how I thought this night was going to go. I would've gotten more dressed up if I knew I was getting wooed."

He chuckles, his eyes roaming my body. “You couldn’t look any better than you do right now. You wear that shirt better than I ever could.” He pulls my hand up to his lips and places gentle kisses across my knuckles. “I’m sorry I misplaced my anger with you. Please tell me you’ll forgive me.”

All of a sudden, I’m feeling a little feisty. “And what happens if I do forgive you?”

“Then you’ll be mine, and I’ll be yours. We’re meant to be together, and I’m pretty sure you know that.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “You’ll tell my dad that we’re together?”

He sucks in a hesitant breath. “Maybe we could do that together?”

I shake my head, torturing him a little bit. “No, I want you to tell him.” He has no idea that my dad already knows, and I plan on making him sweat it out.

He nods. “Yeah, ok. I’ll tell him.”

“Good. And you’ll come to dinner at my parent’s house and meet my mom.”

“You sure you want to bring me home to Mom?”

“If you plan on sticking around, then yes, I want you to meet my mom.”

He interlaces his fingers with mine and squeezes my hand. “Tell me the day and time, and I’ll be there.”

An uncontrollable smile curves on my face. He’s really serious. He really wants to do this with me.

He scoots close enough to press against my leg. He cups the side of my face, and I lean into it, having missed his touch so damn much. He leans forward and nuzzles his nose against my neck.

“So, you forgive me?” he whispers against my neck, sending chills down my spine.

“Only if you forgive me for going behind your back?” I nearly croak because my mouth has suddenly gone dry.

“You did nothing wrong, princess. There’s nothing to forgive. I’m just not used to people giving a shit about me. I didn’t know what it meant.” He kisses my neck softly, and I lean my head in the opposite direction, opening it up for him. He chuckles against my skin before sucking harder in the spot he just kissed. He continues up to my earlobe, tugging it gently with his teeth and making me moan.

“I’ve missed the sounds you make. They’ve been haunting my dreams all week,” he whispers into my ear.

Holy hell.

He leans his hard body into mine more, pushing me onto the arm of the couch. His lips trail from my ear to my cheek, then my chin. They land on the corner of my mouth, not quite for a full kiss, but enough for me to feel the softness of his lips and make me want more.

I turn my head slightly, catching his full bottom lip between my teeth and sucking it into my mouth. It’s his turn to moan into my mouth. When I release him, he leaves his mouth on top of mine, and the tips of our tongues graze against each other. My pussy clenches at the memory of what else his tongue can do. He brushes against my tongue again before he fully gives in and kisses me. This kiss feels urgent, like he needs me more than anything else. Almost like he’s hated this week just as much as I did.

His hands slide underneath my ass, and he lifts us off the couch. I wrap my legs around him as he carries me to my bedroom. He sits me down on the bed and reaches for the hem of my—well, his—shirt, pulling it over my head and exposing my bare breasts and tiny underwear.

He takes a step back to admire my body. I figure I might as well give him a show, so I put my palms on the bed behind me and lean back, arching my breasts toward him. I spread my legs a little, letting him know he’s welcome there too. His heated gaze makes me feel so beautiful, like I’m the prettiest

thing he's ever seen. I feel my panties dampen just from his look.

“Goddamn, princess. I’m the luckiest man on earth.” He grabs his shirt and pulls it over his head before tossing it on my discarded shirt.

He drops to his knees in front of me and slides my panties off, eyes trained on mine the whole time. Once I’m completely bare for him, he positions himself between my legs and peppers kisses up my thighs until he gets to my apex. He sucks my clit into his mouth, making me buck my hips. I feel him smile against me.

His tongue moves in euphoric circles around my clit, and I moan his name. He slides a finger inside me, curling up to hit the magical spot. His finger and mouth work me simultaneously until I come completely undone in front of him. My body convulses as an orgasm rips through me, taking my breath away.

Kellan doesn't let up until I physically have to push his head off my overstimulated nerves. He stands and takes his jeans and boxer briefs off before once again positioning himself between my legs.

He rubs the tip of his hard cock down my seam, collecting my wetness before positioning himself at my opening and slowly pushing in. His eyes flutter closed as he pushes all the way in, not stopping until he can't go any further. “You take me so good, princess.”

Leaning forward, he grabs my wrists and moves them over my head. He holds them in place while he starts moving his hips, thrusting in and out. His movements are slow and controlled while he watches where we're connected.

He looks up and catches my eyes. “You're mine, princess. Tell me you're mine.”

“I'm yours, Kellan. I've always been yours.” My words seem to spark something inside him because he releases my hands and grabs onto my hips. He moves at a more punishing pace, hitting my G-spot faster and harder with each thrust.

Everything around me is a blur. This past week doesn't matter anymore. What matters is us. Here and now. Our future together. I could never tire of this man and the things he makes me feel.

"I'm going to fill you up. Today and every day from here on out, as long as you'll have me."

"Please, Kellan," I beg. I'm so close and know he is too. He pushes inside me a final time, and my walls squeeze around him as I come, followed by his warm cum spilling inside me.

He lays down on top of me, careful not to squish me as we both catch our breath. He nuzzles into my hair splayed out on the bed, and I keep my arms wrapped around him.

In this moment, everything feels perfect. It feels like we are meant to be here together. Everything we went through was meant to happen so we could end up here, closer together.

"Hey, you know I love you too, right?" I whisper. I never got a chance to tell him earlier, but I love this man with my whole heart.

I feel him smile against my cheek. He slides off me and wraps his arm around my naked body. "Thank you for loving me, Riley. Thank you for not giving up on me while I got my head out of my ass. I don't deserve you."

"Yeah, I am pretty great," I say playfully.

He pokes me in the ribs and makes me laugh. "You little shit."

Chapter 30

Kellan

“**A**re you nervous?”

Fuck yes, I’m nervous, but I’m trying to play it cool. Hopefully, she can’t tell that my hands have had a death grip on the steering wheel the entire drive over here.

“Nah, I’m good.” Lie. I’m freaking out inside. I’ve never met a girl’s family. And I’ve technically already met this family. Dan has been great to me since I started at the firm. He really took me under his wing and helped me become the attorney I am today.

And now I have to look him in the eye and tell him I’m dating his daughter. I have no idea how he’s going to feel about it. I’m pretty sure he likes me, but does he trust me enough to take care of his daughter? I don’t know. I’m honestly not sure that I trust myself with her, but I’m damn well going to spend the rest of my life trying to be the man she deserves.

“You sure? You look a little... sweaty.” I see her scrunch her nose up out of the corner of my eye.

“I’m fine. Just a little out of practice trying to impress people. I’m good at being the asshole, not the good guy that’s good enough for someone’s daughter.”

She laughs. “Don’t worry. I’m sure you can pretend for a few hours.”

I shoot her a look before returning my eyes to the road. I’ve been to her parents’ house before, but it was a few years

ago. Dan had me stop by to grab something to prep for a trial. I remember thinking how nice this neighborhood was as I passed large house after large house. Each one had a nice ass car parked in the driveway and a perfectly manicured lawn.

I've never been one to live above my means, hence my basic apartment and ten-year-old SUV. But this is the life Riley is used to, and I have a feeling I'm going to end up giving her whatever she wants.

I park in the driveway of the Stevens' family home, admiring the structure in front of me. It's a two-story home with a lot of windows which I can only assume equates to a lot of bedrooms. There's a large front porch with rocking chairs out front, and the front door has a wreath with fall-colored leaves. This place just gives off loving family vibes, something I'm definitely not used to.

We get out of the car, and Riley meets me at the path leading to the front door. I take a deep breath and hold my hand out to her. It's been a while since I've had a girlfriend, but I remember that hand-holding is expected. And I kind of want to be holding her hand. Touching her and being close to her eases my anxiety about telling her dad we're together.

She smiles and links her fingers with mine. She leads me up to the front door. Before she unlocks the door, she faces me and steps closer. She leans in and gently kisses my lips, careful not to leave any remnants of her red lipstick on me. If we weren't about to have dinner with her parents, I'd demand she give me a real kiss. But it probably wouldn't look great to show up to dinner with their daughter's lipstick all over my mouth.

She opens the front door and yells, "Mom, Dad! I'm here."

I follow her in, mainly because she's pulling my hand and not giving me much of a choice. I'm hit with the scent of Italian seasoning coming from the kitchen. Dan walks out from the living room in jeans and a college football shirt with a beer in his hand. I've seen him out of the office on a handful of occasions, but it's still strange to see him so casual and relaxed.

He walks until he's a few feet in front of us without saying a word. His eyes fall to where Riley and my hands are linked. Riley squeezes my hand to let me know it's ok, but it doesn't feel like it.

Dan makes eye contact with me, and I hold my breath, scared to move. It feels like minutes pass just staring at each other until finally, he cracks a smile and claps me on the shoulder.

I exhale my relief.

"Ah, shit. I can't say I didn't see this coming," he says with a chuckle.

Riley starts giggling next to me. I look over at her. "What's so funny?"

"He already knew something was going on with us. I just wanted to see how nervous you got," she admits.

I tip my head back in relief. "I guess I deserved that."

She pulls me closer, wrapping her arm around my back. "Sorry. It was cute how tight you were gripping the steering wheel on the way here."

I roll my eyes. "Shut up."

"You're always welcome in the Stevens family, Kellan," Dan interjects. "But if you don't treat my baby girl the way she's supposed to be treated, there will be hell to pay." He gives me a pointed look.

I nod, knowing he's probably talking about when I stormed out of a restaurant as if I was having a fit. "Understood."

He claps his hands together. "Well, alright. Now that that's done with, let's eat."

As if on cue, Mrs. Stevens walks out of the kitchen with an apron tied around her waist. "Kellan, so glad you could make it." I stick my hand out to shake hers, but she surprises me and goes in for a hug. It catches me off guard, so I stand frozen for a second before Riley releases me so I can hug her mom back.

Mrs. Stevens pulls back and smiles before moving on to hug her daughter.

“Hey, Mom. Smells delicious in here.”

“Thanks, honey. I made a ton of food, so I hope y’all are hungry.” She turns and heads back to the kitchen, the three of us following.

I notice the family pictures framed on the wall leading into the kitchen. They make me think of my mom and the family we used to be, the pictures we had around the house. I wonder if she even still has those pictures or if she threw them out when she decided I wasn’t worthy of being her son anymore. I wonder if she still thinks about me.

I shake the thought out of my head. I’m here to be with Riley and her family, not think about how torn apart my own family is.

Mrs. Stevens asks Riley to get everyone drinks before we sit down at the table that’s already set with a giant pan of cheesy lasagna, a plate of garlic bread, and a big bowl of salad. As if on cue, my stomach growls. I ate breakfast this morning, but when Riley told me we were coming here tonight, I got so nervous I couldn’t eat anything else all day.

I sit between Riley and her mom at the circular table and wait until they serve themselves before loading up my plate.

Riley’s mom asks me some basic questions about myself. I hate talking about myself, but I understand that she just wants to know the man her daughter is dating. For the second time tonight, I think about my own mom and wonder if she would ever want to meet Riley. Would they get along? For some reason, I doubt they would. Riley would pretend for my sake, but I don’t think she could ever truly embrace my mother knowing that she cast me out. I don’t even know if I could embrace my mother after that.

Thankfully, the subject turns from me to Riley as her parents tell me funny stories about her as a kid. Like the time she wore her underwear on her head to the store because she thought the two holes were for pigtails. She called it her pigtail

hat. And the time they went bowling, and she accidentally threw the bowling ball too hard and it bounced three lanes over, disrupting a very heated bowling tournament.

By the time we finish eating, I can't remember why I was nervous about coming here. The conversation flowed, and they really made me feel at home. Even Dan doesn't seem the least bit upset that I'm dating his daughter. It's a huge relief because I really look up to him, and I would have been devastated if he were disappointed in me. It wouldn't have stopped me from dating Riley, but it still would've hurt.

Dan and I are on cleaning duty after dinner, and the girls head to the living room to watch TV. I bring the dishes from the table to the kitchen counter while Dan starts washing.

"I don't know if Riley told you yet, but I think we've got a good chance of getting Kai a new trial," Dan tells me over the running water.

"Yeah, she mentioned it. I never did get a chance to thank you for doing all of this. I know I didn't act like it, but I do appreciate it."

"Of course. I have to say, though, I wish you had confided in me about everything before Riley came to me. I hope you know I would've helped you even if Riley wasn't involved. I may be your boss, but I think of our firm as a family. I want everyone to feel like they can talk to me or Paul about anything."

"I know. I just felt ashamed that everyone had such high hopes for me, and I couldn't even get my own damn brother out of prison for something I know he didn't do. I felt pathetic," I admit. I hate talking about my feelings, but I want him to understand why I acted the way I did.

"Trust me. I know the feeling. But sometimes we need fresh eyes to help us see what we're missing."

"Yeah. I see that now."

He nods, and I notice a small smile on his face. "You know Riley really is a special girl."

I chuckle as I dry the pan he just finished scrubbing. “I’ve never met anyone like her.”

“She deserves the world.”

“I plan to give it to her, sir.” He claps a hand on my shoulder.

“Good answer, Winters. Good answer.”

We finish the dishes in silence before we go find the girls. When I walk into the living room, Riley stands and walks over to me. “You ready?” she asks, and I notice her eyes are locked on my lips. The corner of my mouth twitches like it wants to smile, but I keep it locked.

“If you are,” I respond. I know what she wants, and I’m happy to give it to her as soon as we’re home.

Home. I haven’t really felt like I’ve had a home in years. Sure, I have a place to live where I keep all my stuff, but it doesn’t feel like home. In the few months I’ve known Riley, I’ve started feeling things again. *She* feels like home to me. Wherever she is, that’s where I want to be.

I grab her hand, and we walk to my car. She moves to open her door, but I quickly step in front of it to open it for her.

“You know, I can get my own door,” she says as she slides into the front seat.

“I know, Ms. Independent. Just let me have this one thing.”

She rolls her eyes. “Ok, fine.”

I lean down and kiss her before heading to the driver’s seat. “Thanks for taking me tonight.”

“Thanks for coming. My mom loves you, and we already know my dad loves you. So just expect to be invited to a lot more dinners and Stevens’ family outings in the future.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” This time I don’t stop my smile. Everyone tonight made me feel so comfortable and welcome. It’s nice to feel like you might belong to a family, like they genuinely care about you.

“Good. Now take me home and have your way with me,” she teases.

“Yes, ma’am.”

I pull out of the driveway and try not to speed on my back to her apartment to do exactly what my girl asked.

Epilogue

Riley

O *ne Year Later*

His fingers are tapping on his knee over and over again, just like they have been for the last twenty minutes. I've never seen him this nervous. He actually asked *me* to drive today because he didn't think he'd be able to focus on the road. And I get it. Today's the day he's been waiting for eleven years now.

Kai is being released from prison.

Dad, Kellan, and I were able to get him exonerated completely. We pitched all the new evidence to the district attorney and a judge in the county where Kai was convicted. We had new DNA evidence; we found the friend who was with Kai that night and got his side of the story, and the eyewitness said she actually wasn't sure if it was Kai that she saw that night or just the adrenaline from it all.

The judge took our new information and looked through it. She also looked into Kai's behavior in prison, and it turns out he'd been a model prisoner with no strikes on his record. Ultimately, she decided to dismiss the case, exonerating Kai of all liability from the trial.

This is huge. Not only will Kai be released, but he'll have access to state resources to help him get back on his feet. They also owe him a sum of money for being wrongfully convicted.

It might take a while to see any of that money, but I'm hopeful it will help him.

We pull up to the prison a few minutes before noon, when Kai is supposed to be released. I park and move to open my door but notice Kellan isn't moving.

"Are you going to be ok?" I ask. He's been quiet all morning. I think it just hit him that his brother is being released. He'll be able to talk to him whenever he wants, hug him, have dinner with him. All the things he's missed out on for over the last ten years.

"Yeah." He nods his head. "Yeah. Thanks for coming with me."

"I wouldn't miss it." He smiles and leans over to kiss me. I give him a few minutes to take some deep breaths to calm his nerves, and I wait for him to make a move to get out before I do.

We walk hand in hand to the area by the release door, where several guards are already standing. We stand in silence, waiting for the minutes to tick by until, finally, the door opens. Someone who is definitely not Kai walks out and makes his way over to what I assume is his family because they immediately wrap him in a hug.

Kellan cranes his neck to get a better look through the door, but he doesn't need to because Kai is the next one out. His hair is a little longer since the first time I saw him over a year ago. He's wearing a white T-shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes and carrying a small brown paper bag on his side with his belongings from when he was arrested, as well as anything he might have received in the last ten years.

I give Kellan's hand a squeeze and then release it so he can greet his brother. I follow but stay far enough behind to give them their moment.

Kai spots us almost immediately, and a huge smile lights up his face. He opens his arms, inviting Kellan in for a hug, who doesn't hesitate walking right into his brother's arms. I

watch tears fill Kai's eyes and Kellan's shoulders shake. I feel my own eyes start to burn from the tears threatening to fall.

When their embrace finally ends, Kellan turns toward me and wipes his eyes. My heart is so happy for him. I've watched him go through so much for this moment, and I'm glad it's finally here.

"Why the fuck is everyone crying? This is supposed to be a happy day," Kai states as he wipes the tears from his eyes. I laugh because I wouldn't expect anything less from him. I'll never understand how he kept his spirits up in prison, but I'm so glad he did.

"They're happy tears," I explain as he wraps me in a hug. We've only officially met the few times he saw me as his attorney. This time, I'm not his attorney. I'm his little brother's girlfriend.

"I guess you already know my girl, huh?" Kellan asks. He's still upset that he wasn't there the first time I met Kai. He fully understands why I did it, but I think he'll be bitter about it for the rest of our lives.

"How you managed to get the most perfect girl, I'll never know," Kai tells him.

"Oh, stop. You're making me blush," I feign embarrassment.

"For real, Riley. I can never thank you enough for helping me and putting up with this guy." He puts his hand on Kellan's shoulder, and Kellan rolls his eyes. "Alright, let's get out of here. I never want to see this place again." He turns around and flips the bird to the giant building behind us before he slides into the backseat of my car.

"Are you hungry?" I ask as I pull out of the parking lot.

"Starving."

I smile at him through the rearview mirror. "Good. We're going for the best burgers in Atlanta."

He groans. "She's an angel. Kellan, you're dating a goddamn angel. Straight from heaven, isn't she?"

“Dude, you’re going to give her a big head. She already thinks too highly of herself.”

I reach over and playfully hit his shoulder. “Shut up. You just told me last night what a good girl I am.” Visions of a very naked Kellan looking down at me on my knees, taking him as deep as I can down my throat, flash through my mind. My thighs squeeze together in a warning to myself.

Kai’s jaw drops, and his fist comes over his mouth as he says, “Oh, shit.”

“The two of you are going to be giant pains in my ass,” Kellan groans. Kai and I both laugh because he’s probably right.

We update Kai on what we’ve been doing over the last few months: the new apartment we moved into, the pictures Kellan finally let me hang in his office, and the new kitten we adopted. I thought Luna needed a friend since we live in a bigger place, and Kellan and I are gone for most of the day. She’s a cute little thing and mostly white except for a large gray spot circling her cute little face.

And the biggest news is that Kellan was recently asked to become a partner at Stevens and Jensen. It’s a huge deal and a decision he’s not taking lightly. He hasn’t given his formal response yet, but I’m pretty sure he’s going to take it. At least, I hope he does. It’s what he’s been working towards his entire career. He went through a rough time after the Lana Johnson trial and everything with Kai’s case because he felt like he wasn’t a good enough lawyer.

I tried to talk some sense into him, but he really needed a big win in the courtroom. Luckily, he got that a few months after the Lana Johnson trial. He’d worked long and hard on his case, and I was relieved when his client got a not guilty verdict.

We pull up to the burger place I found to have the best burgers in Atlanta after months of research. I can’t even count the number of cheeseburgers I’ve eaten over the past twelve months just to make sure Kai had the best post-prison meal we could get him.

Over burgers and beers, Kai brings up his plans. We haven't asked him, and we weren't planning on it. And we've offered him our spare bedroom for as long as he needs it.

"I'm going to try and find a tattoo parlor to work at, even if I have to apprentice again since it's been so long. Although I did give a few good tats while I was in prison. Not sure they'll take that on my resume, though." He laughs. "But I want to save up to get my own place."

"You know you're welcome to stay with us, Kai. There's no rush," I assure him, and Kellan nods in agreement.

"I know, and I appreciate it. But I've spent the last eleven years sleeping in a tiny cooped-up cell with random dudes. I want to get my own place. I've never lived by myself, and it's something I've been really looking forward to."

"I can understand that." I pop a ketchup-covered french fry into my mouth.

"You have any plans to go see Mom?" Kellan asks. He doesn't talk about his mother often. I was hoping they might try to reconnect after we had some movement on Kai's case, but nothing happened.

"I think she's going to come down here next week. She wanted me to come up there, but I was like, 'with what car, Mom?' But I won't bring her around your place, don't worry."

Kellan just nods and focuses on the food in front of him. I give Kai a sad smile because my heart breaks that their mom pushed Kellan away like this when nothing that happened was his fault.

We finish our food and head to the store to pick up some basic necessities for Kai. I can tell he hates that Kellan is buying all this stuff for him and keeps saying he'll pay him back, but I know Kellan will never take any money from him.

We head to our apartment with full bellies and a ton of Target bags. After we get Kai set in the spare bedroom, I make myself scarce to give them both time to reconnect. I know they have a lot of family stuff to talk about and memories to

unpack. I want to give them that time in private so they can be brothers again.

The next morning is a Saturday, my favorite day because Kellan has pinky-promised me that Saturdays will always be a no-work day.

I roll over in bed and see him already awake and propped up on his pillows, scrolling through his phone.

“Hey, mister. It’s no work Saturday.”

“I’m not working.”

I snuggle up closer to him. “What are you doing then?”

“Nothing,” he says quickly, too quickly, and locks his phone so I can’t see what he’s looking at. Uh. Ok. That’s weird.

“Alright, well, what are we doing today?”

“I’m actually going to take Kai to a few places today. He wants to check out a few tattoo shops in the area.”

I can’t hide my disappointment even though I totally understand that he needs this time with his brother. “Oh, yeah. That’ll be fun.”

He leans down and kisses my forehead before he slides out of bed and heads into the bathroom.

I stare at the ceiling, wondering what I’m going to do today now that I’ll be all alone, when my phone vibrates on the nightstand next to me.

Candice: can you come shopping with me today? I have a wedding next weekend for a coworker and I need a dress!

Riley: haha yes!

Candice: thank you!!! I’ll pick you up around lunchtime.

Riley: see you then

At least now I’ll have something to do today.

I slowly get out of bed and bid Kellan and Kai farewell for the day. I drink coffee and play with the cats while I wait for Candice to pick me up.

At almost exactly noon, she knocks on the door.

“Come on. Let’s eat tacos and then go shopping,” she says excitedly, pulling on my arm to get me out the door.

“Wow, I didn’t realize you were so into tacos.”

“Yep, big fan.”

She drives us to a little downtown area in a nearby city where apparently a new taco joint just opened up. They also happen to have a few boutiques around the main square that she wants to go dress shopping at.

We round the corner of one of the charming little brick buildings in the square that opens into a little courtyard. I look to my left and freeze.

I’m stunned.

Shocked.

Dreaming.

I blink a few slow blinks before everything comes back into focus.

Lights and roses and Kellan.

He’s in a suit, all black, of course, and he’s standing in front of giant light-up letters that say “Marry Me.”

Rose petals are scattered all over the grass.

Candice shoves my shoulder, breaking me out of my trance. I start moving toward Kellan. He’s smiling at me. The sweetest smile. The smile I absolutely love.

When I get up to him, I’m trembling and on the verge of tears.

“What is happening?” I ask in a shaky voice.

“Riley, my princess, you have turned my world upside down. You’ve pulled me out from under the rock I was living under. You’ve shown me what it’s like to be loved.” He lowers

to one knee and opens a small ring box. The box might be small, but the diamond inside is huge. “I couldn’t imagine spending the rest of my life with anyone but you. You’re my person. My partner. Marry me, princess. Make me the luckiest man in the world.”

The tears are definitely streaming down my face now. There’s no stopping them. I know my mascara is running, and I don’t even care.

“Oh my god, yes, Kellan. Yes, of course I’ll marry you. It would be an absolute honor.” He stands and scoops me up in a hug. Through my tears, I say, “I thought you were ditching me on No-Work Saturday.”

“I would never,” he says, kissing me hard. He sets me back down on the ground. “Kai and I have been working on this proposal for a while, but I wanted him to be here for it. We decided we could have two things to celebrate this weekend—Kai’s freedom and our engagement.”

“You’re going to be stuck with me forever now,” I remind him.

He laughs. “That’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

“I love you, Kel. This was the perfect proposal.” I look at Kai and Candice and my parents, who I didn’t notice until now. He’s right; this is the perfect weekend for our proposal. Kellan got his family back and decided to add me to it for life.

I’m so damn happy.

Bonus Epilogue

Want more Kellan and Riley?

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Acknowledgments

This book was so fun for me to write. I wanted to be a lawyer from the first moment I watched Legally Blonde, but when the time came to go to law school, I chickened out. I know I took ALOT of liberties with the justice system in this story, but I hope you enjoyed the story.

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About the Author

D.C. Kile lives in Georgia with her husband and two kids #TwinMom. If she's not writing steamy romance, she's probably reading it. She also enjoys cooking, drinking coffee out of really large coffee cups, and daydreaming about future vacations.

D.C. Kile would love to hear from readers, so be sure to follow along on social media. She can be found on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook @AuthorDCKile.

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